

Mafuza Gasmin, Assistant Professor, Sociology CCH

CHAPTER-II

**Gandhi and Ambedkar
on Untouchability**

CHAPTER-II

Gandhi and Ambedkar on Untouchability

“Almost everyone who knows anything at all about India has heard of the caste-system; almost every outsider and many people in India condemn it or criticize it as a whole. Probably there is hardly anyone left even in India who approves of it in all its present ramifications and developments, though there are undoubtedly many still who accept its basic theory and large numbers of Hindus adhere to it in their lives.”¹

The caste system in India is an integral part of a larger scheme of social organization. Edwin Markham’s poignant words about the brutalised toiler serve to sum up the condition of Indian untouchables:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hope and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world,
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;
Time’s tragedy is in that aching stoop;
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
Cries protest to the powers that made the world,
A protest that is also prophecy.²

Gandhi and Ambedkar are appreciated in India and all over the world for their strength of character, their absolute integrity, honesty and outspokenness, for their fearlessness, great determination and compassion specifically for untouchables. Both of them desired to ameliorate the

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2004, p.263.

² Quoted in Sheshrao Chavan, *Gandhi and Ambedkar – Saviour of Untouchables*, Mumbai: Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan, Author Press, 2001, p. 20.

untouchables from the slavery of centuries although their paths were different. Gandhi wanted to bring reforms and end injustice while Ambedkar demanded rebellion for the annihilation of the caste system itself.

The process of liberation of the lower castes from invisibility to visibility, from a non-human to a human existence, has been taken up by Gandhi and Ambedkar against all odds. This task has not been simple and linear. It is characterized by growth and difficulty. In fact, it has been painful and prolonged. It has been painful because at each stage of their struggle, they are reminded of their lurid past; it has been prolonged because they have to fight against an invisible wall of segregation, supported by religiously sanctioned entrenched attitudes. The attitudes that castism have put in them cannot be jettisoned out of the system at will.³ In Ambedkar's words, "caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of the caste does not therefore mean the destruction of the physical barrier. It means a notional change."⁴

The present chapter is an attempt to study Gandhi and Ambedkar's perspective on caste and untouchability. In this context the focus has been to study their perspective on the origin of the caste system, circumstances that led them to speak against this caste system, their efforts to uplift the depressed classes leading to reservation for the untouchable castes, officially known as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the provisions of the constitution.

The caste structure is stated to be an institution, developed and grown over centuries. In Hutton's words, "Caste as it now is an institution

³ S.D. Kapoor, "B.R. Ambedkar – WEB Dubois and the Process of Liberation" *Economic & Political Weekly*, December 27, 2003, pp. 51-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*

which has grown and developed through many centuries – but since it is so firmly rooted in India, and since it is found nowhere else, it would appear almost certain, on the face of it, that its first beginnings are to be sought in India and not outside.”⁵

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan held that the caste divisions are based on individual temperament which is not unchangeable. In his view there was only one caste during the earlier times. All were either *brahmanas* or all were *shudras*. In a *Smriti* text it was written that through purification one becomes a *brahmana* though born as *shudra*. People were divided into different castes depending on their needs and actions.⁶

Caste has been defined by Risley as, “A collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupations, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor – human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.”⁷

Several theories have been formulated about the origin of caste. While some theories are occupational or racial, others are attributed to colour and to the doctrine of *Karma*. “The question of caste is held to be not of blood but of function” says Nesfield, “for the Indian race is practically same in blood, character and tradition.”⁸ In the *Bhagavat Gita*, Chapter IV, verse 13, Lord Krishna stated:

⁵ J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 182.

⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967, p. 129.

⁷ H.H. Risley, *The People of India*, Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1915, p. 67.

⁸ J.C. Nesfield, *The Caste System in N.W. Provinces and Oudh*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 90.

The order of the four *Varnas* was created by Me according to the different *gunas* and *Karma* of each; yet know that though, therefore, author, thereof, being changeless I am not the author.⁹

The word *varna* should not be mistaken for the English word colour but it might be nearer to the meaning conveyed by the term 'true colour'. *Varna* does not relate to the physical colour or physical appearance but to the mental qualities. The qualities or *gunas* find symbolic expression in terms of colour or *Varna* which is compatible with explanation given in the *Bhagavad Gita*.¹⁰ All the members of the four castes should be treated equally without any distinction or difference. Gandhi had no hesitation in rejecting scriptural authority of a doubtful character if it supported a sinful institution. *Varnashrama* was not a system of watertight compartment, according to him.¹¹

Jawaharlal Nehru has stated in his book *The Discovery of India*, that the coming of the Aryans into India raised new problems – racial and political. Caste was the result of a hard and fast division between Aryans and non-Aryans, the latter again being divided into the Dravidian races and as the aboriginal tribes. The Aryans, to begin with, formed one class and there was hardly any specialization. The word *Arya* comes from a root word meaning to till, and the Aryans as a whole were agriculturists and agriculture was considered a noble occupation. The tiller of the soil functioned also as a priest, soldier or trader, and there was no privileged order of priests. The caste divisions originally were intended to separate the Aryans from non-Aryans, but later as division of functions and specialization increased, the new classes took the form of castes. Indians'

⁹ M.K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavat Gita*, New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1961, p. 123.

¹⁰ T.K.N. Unnithan, *Gandhi and Free India*, Holland: J.B. Wolters, 1956, p. 158.

¹¹ Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence – The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958, pp. 169-170.

success and achievements were on the whole confined to the upper classes and there were very few opportunities for those who were lower down in the scale. Caste became poisonous in the subsequent ages and it is not alone the lower castes who suffered most from it, but the higher castes also. Caste became a weakening factor and the rigidity in the caste structure could also be found paving the way for the rigidity of mind and suppressing the creative energy of the race. Thus, caste permeated every quarter of the Indian society and began to have control over the individual and social behavior affecting the institution of marriage and family ties.¹²

The generally accepted theory is that the social organization of the Indo Aryans was based on *Chaturvarnya*. *Chaturvarnya* meant the division of society into four classes – *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*, based on division of labour and heredity. In the *Rig-Vedic* period, descent or heredity was not a criterion of belonging to a particular *Varna*. Gradually the *Varnas* came to be distinguished, marked off and separated from each other, leading to immobility between the four *Varnas* and disabilities for the fourth *Varna*, the *Shudras*.¹³ Untouchability as a fully developed institution appeared sometime between the third and sixth centuries A.D., when the untouchables came to constitute a fifth category, known variously by terms like *Panchamas*, *Atisudras* or *Chandalas*.¹⁴ Ambedkar opposed this system as thoroughly unscientific, inhibitive and degrading. He strongly criticized it.

Varna is intimately, if not indissolubly, connected with birth, according to Gandhi. The observance of the law of the *Varna* means to

¹² Jawaharlal Nehru, *op. cit.*, pp 81-82.

¹³ P.H. Prabhu, *Hindu Social Organisation*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963, p.284.

¹⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009, p. 342.

follow the path in accordance with the hereditary and traditional calling of the forefathers. The performance of the hereditary functions have to be done as a matter of duty, carrying with the earning of his livelihood. Gandhi accepted the idea of *Varna* for realizing an ideal of egalitarian society which promotes mutual love and cooperation but he refused to accept any sense of distance or subordination or humiliation among the *Varnas*.¹⁵

Gandhi envisaged a casteless, classless and egalitarian society as against the caste ridden society. He attempted to give a rational interpretation of the functions of caste division of the ancient times. Unfortunately, according to him the Indian society has degenerated into caste-ridden social disorder. He pointed out:

Thus, the function of a *Brahmana* is to study and to teach the science of *Brahmana* (or spiritual truth). He performs the function as he cannot do otherwise, as it is the law of his being, that secures him his livelihood, but he will take it as a gift from God. A *Kshatriya* will perform the function of protecting the people in the same spirit, accepting for his livelihood whatever the people can afford to give him. A *Vaishya* will pursue wealth-producing occupations for the welfare of the community, keeping for himself enough for his own maintenance and rendering the balance to the community in one shape or other. A *Shudra* will perform physical labour in the same spirit of service. *Varna* is determined by birth, but can be retained only by observing its obligations. One born of *Brahmana* parents will be called a *Brahmana*, but if his life fails to reveal the attributes of a *Brahmana*, he will have fallen from *Brahmanhood*. On the other hand, one who is born not a *Brahmana* but reveals in his conduct the attributes of a *Brahmana* will be regarded as a

¹⁵ *Harijan*, February 11, 1933, p. 3.

Brahmana, though he will himself disclaim the label.¹⁶

Although, Gandhi was a reformer undoubtedly, he did not like any unnecessary changes in the social patterns and institutions and social experimentation. He gave an impression that he was in defence of caste system in 1920 for he was found to be a conservative as he upheld other matters for radical changes except the phenomenon of the caste because of his profound influence of Hindu philosophy. He supported the principle so long as it was in conformity with *Varnashrama-dharma* but opposed when it degenerated with its evil manifestation of untouchability.

Gandhi's autobiography, which covers his life upto 1921, when he was fifty-two, contains only a few references to untouchables or untouchability. The most striking reference is the story of his insistence on the admission of an untouchable family to the ashram he had established near Ahmedabad in 1915. At the time of his assumption of leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1920, Gandhi made his first strong public statement on untouchability which reflected his dual role as a Mahatma and a politician in Indian life, already apparent at that time. As a politician, Gandhi said: "Swaraj is as unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity."¹⁷ He said, "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born as untouchable so that I may lead a continuous struggle against the oppression and indignities that have been heaped upon these classes of people."¹⁸ As both, a Mahatma and a politician, Gandhi sought to weave the divergent interests in India into a unified opposition to the British, at the same time

¹⁶ *Harijan*, September 28, 1934, pp. 260-261.

¹⁷ *Young India*, December 29, 1920, pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ *Young India*, May 4, 1921, p. 144.

trying to pursue a course of reform without rending the social fabric of Indian society.

Gandhi used the word 'Harijan' or Children of God, for the poor depressed untouchables of India. The word 'Harijan' was first used by the great Saint Narasinha Mehta, a *Nagar Brahman*, who defied the whole community and claimed the 'untouchables' as his own. Gandhi wrote, "The untouchable has toiled, the miled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we are 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 Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sins against them."¹⁹

Gandhi made a clear distinction between a *Harijan* and a *Durjan*. Our own fellow beings have become 'untouchables' because of evil in us. The evil does not lie in them rather it lies in those who have reduced them to a poor miserable beastly life. Those responsible for bringing about this sorry scheme of affairs should repent and atone for their sins. Gandhi made a distinction between the caste system and untouchability and believed that this distinction is not one of degree, but of kind. An 'untouchable' is outside the pale of respectable society. He is hardly treated as a human being. He is an outcaste hurled into an abyss by his fellow-beings occupying the same platform. The difference, therefore, is somewhat analogous to the difference between heaven and hell.²⁰ In his words:

There is one thing more to be remembered about the caste-system. For me, it is not the same as *Varanashrama*. Whilst the caste system is an answer to the social need, *Varnashrama* is based upon the Hindu scriptures. Not so the caste system. While

¹⁹ *Young India*, August 6, 1931, p. 204.

²⁰ *Harijan*, February 11, 1933, p. 4.

there are innumerable castes (some dying out and new ones coming into being), the *Varnas* are, and have always been, four. I am a firm believer in *Varanashram*. I have not hesitated before or now to consider it as a gift of Hinduism to mankind. Acceptance of that *Dharam* is, so far as I have been able to see, a condition of spiritual growth. The four divisions are not a vertical section, but a horizontal plane, on which all stand on a footing of equality, doing the services respectively assigned to them. In the Book of God, the same number of marks are assigned to the *Brahmin* that has done his task as well as to the *Bhangi* who has done likewise.²¹

Gandhi also said that, “The ‘touch-me-not’-ism that disfigures the present day Hinduism is a morbid growth. It only betrays a woodenness of mind, a blind self-conceit. It is abhorrent alike to the spirit of religion and morality.”²² The verses in the *Smritis* about *Shudras* deserve to be summarily rejected as being contrary to the spirit of humanity.²³

Gandhi in South Africa had to suffer much humiliation at the hands of the white ruling class. He found that Indians in South Africa were called ‘coolies’ and he himself became a ‘coolie’ barrister. Indians were ‘untouchables’ in South Africa and suffered all insults much in the same way as the ‘untouchables’ in India suffered at the hands of their own brethren. This, to Gandhi, was a just punishment to Indians in South Africa for their sins in India. In his words: “It can be truly said that there is no difference between these locations and the untouchables’ quarters in India. Just as the Hindus believe that touching *Dhedhs* – or residence in their neighbourhood would lead to pollution, so did the Europeans in the Transvaal believe for all practical purposes that physical contact with the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, April 20, 1934, p. 73.

²³ *Ibid.*, September 28, 1934, pp. 260-261.

Indians or living near them would defile them.”²⁴ He staged a non-violent satyagraha movement there and won for his Indian brethren position of self-respect. After coming back to India he studied the social, economic, political and religious circumstances in the country and had to fight at several fronts.

Gandhi inherited the position of the Congress party on untouchability first recorded in a resolution in 1917 which urged upon the people of India, “the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed upon the depressed classes.”²⁵ According to Gandhi, Hinduism will reach its perfection only when the ‘untouchables’ become not only touchables but thoroughly merged into the main Hindu stream. The problem could not be left to the Harijans. They were too ignorant and suppressed to raise their head or voice. In tackling the problem of untouchability Gandhi did not call upon the untouchables to join in the struggle for the assertion of their human rights. They were even incapable then of doing so. They took their lowly position as having been ordained by God.²⁶

With his gift for symbolism, Gandhi selected the *Bhangi*, a scavenger caste of North India, to represent the problem of untouchability. Gandhi’s abhorrence of untouchability, and his association of such practices with the sweeper caste, appear rooted in childhood experience. Although not mentioned in his autobiography, Gandhi’s reactions to his family’s sweeper at the age of twelve are recorded in an article that he wrote in *Young India*: “A scavenger named Uka, an ‘untouchable’, used to

²⁴ *Satyagrah in South Africa in the Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 3, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968, p. 47.

²⁵ Ramesh Chandra and Sangh Mittra, *The Ambedkar Era*, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 2003, p. 128.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him. If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform ablutions, and though, I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that it should be so. I was a very dutiful and obedient child, and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents, I often had tussles with them on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering contact with Uka as sinful.”²⁷

Uka remained the symbol for untouchables in Gandhi’s mind. Although, Gandhi was not the first to cry out against untouchability, he was the most prominent caste Hindu to proclaim that it was harmful to Hinduism, to make its removal a personal responsibility of the caste Hindus, to keep it before the public eye with passionate oratory and vivid imagery, and to find an organization for service to untouchables. Gandhi’s statements on the evil of untouchability were unequivocal, although his views regarding other caste based practices changed and grew less orthodox with the years.²⁸

Gandhi, in the beginning did not consider the practice of inter-dining and inter-marriage essential for the removal of untouchability. Gradually, he started advocating that inter-dining and inter-marriage were very helpful in removing untouchability and fostering communal harmony. He wrote: “At one time I did say that inter-dining was not essential part of the campaign for the removal of untouchability. Personally, I was for it. Today, I encourage it. Infact, today I even go further.”²⁹ By the change of time, he felt the necessity of inter-dining for removing the social stigma

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁹ *Harijan*, December 8, 1920, p. 4.

attached to some people. He went even further and approved of and recommended inter-caste marriages for the removal of untouchability.

Gandhi believed that if an educated Harijan girl is married to a caste Hindu, the couple should devote themselves to the service of Harijans. In his words, “Even if one Harijan girl marries a caste Hindu with a high character it will do good to both the Harijans and caste Hindus. They will set up a good precedent and if the Harijan girl is really worthy, she will spread her fragrance far and wide and encourage others to copy her example. Society will cease to be scared by such marriages. They will see for themselves that there is nothing wrong in them. If the children born of such a union turn out to be good, they will further help to remove untouchability.”³⁰ As a matter of fact there were few Harijan girls educated enough to be chosen as brides by caste Hindu husbands. There were practically more caste Hindu girls well educated to work amidst the Harijan families. Gandhi advised such girls to select Harijan husbands. He contended that the marriage of a caste Hindu girl to a Harijan is better than that of a Harijan girl to a caste Hindu. “If I had my way I would persuade all caste Hindu girls coming under my influence to select Harijan husbands. That it is most difficult I know from experience. Old prejudices are difficult to shed. One cannot afford to laugh at such prejudices either. They have to be overcome with patience.”³¹ The aim of such marriages, he believed, should not be indulgence as it would defeat the very purpose.

Underlying Gandhi’s change in attitude towards social practices was an unchanging belief in *Varnashramadharma*, the divinely ordained division of society into four groups defined according to duty: *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. Although, Gandhi castigated the Indian

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Harijan*, July 7, 1946, p. 212.

caste system of his day with its superior and inferior divisions, he, however, held to the belief in the traditional ordering of society for the preservation of harmony and the growth of the soul, and with it, traditional duties. In his words, “The Law of *Varna* prescribes that a person should, for his living, follow the lawful occupation of his forefathers, but with the understanding that all occupations are equally honourable.” Gandhi observed, “A scavenger has the same status as a Brahmin.”³²

Gandhi further observed that, “A *Brahman* remains as a *Brahman* even though he dines with his *shudra* brother when he does not leave his duty of sharing his knowledge with others. When a Hindu refuses to dine with another outcaste person with the sense of superiority, then he misrepresents his *dharma*.”³³ Subsequently, he said that he was personally of the opinion that restrictions on inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage do not constitute a part of Hinduism. Gandhi used to encourage and bless the inter-caste marriages. He said that the boys or girls who want to marry, cannot be married at *Sevagram Ashram* where he stays, unless one of the parties is a Harijan. He did not find any problem in this and what all is needed is change of outlook.³⁴ Gandhi gave importance to change of outlook, the state of mind which is important even today to bring any change in the society.

The Indian Constitution guarantees equal treatment for all the people irrespective of caste, creed or religion. Untouchability is abolished by the Constitution of India and enforcement of any restriction, disabilities or limitations on the ground of ‘untouchability’ is an offence punishable by

³² *Young India*, November 17, 1927, pp. 387-388.

³³ *Young India*, October 6, 1921, p. 371.

³⁴ N.K. Bose, *Studies in Gandhism*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1972, p. 268.

law.³⁵ Despite the constitutional provisions the caste system is persisting because the outlook of the people (upper castes) has not changed. So the most important thing today is to re-examine the customs and traditions from the stand-point of social usefulness. Gandhi wrote, "Classless society is the ideal, not merely to be aimed at but to be worked for and in such society, there is no room for classes or communities."³⁶

Ambedkar, who is known as the savior of the untouchables has leveled harsh criticism against the principle of *Chaturvarnya*, as a basis of social organization. According to him it is not only based on division of labour, but it is also a division of labourer into water-tight compartments. *Chaturvarnya* presupposes classification of people into four definite categories. Ambedkar strongly objected to this. In this respect according to Ambedkar, the ideal of *Chaturvarnya* has a close affinity to the platonic ideal of division of society into three classes i.e., Philosopher-king, Soldiers and Artisans. Therefore, he subjects both to the same criticism. According to him, modern science has shown that lumping together of individuals into a few sharply marked off classes is a superficial view of man not worthy of serious consideration. In his opinion, both Plato and the propounders of *Chaturvarnya* fail to recognize the infinite diversities of the active tendencies and the uniqueness of which an individual is capable of. Ambedkar emphasizes the fact that it is impossible to classify people into four definite classes accurately and it is because of this reason that the original four classes have now become four thousand castes.

Ambedkar points to some other defects in the *Chaturvarnya* scheme. The defendant of the caste system say that in it the Shudras are looked upon as the wards and the three other *Varnas* as their guardians. Even if it

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁶ *Harijan*, February 17, 1946, p. 9.

is accepted to be so, this system is neither knave-proof nor fool-proof, he says. He points out that there is no provision in the scheme of *Chaturvarnya* to safeguard the interests of the wards from the misdeeds of the guardians.³⁷ He points out how in India the upper three *Varnas* had agreed to beat down the *Shudra*. The latter was not allowed to acquire wealth, lest he should be independent of the three *Varnas*. He was prohibited from acquiring knowledge lest he should keep a steady vigil regarding his interests. He was prohibited from bearing arms lest he should have the means to rebel against their authority. He says, "That this is the way, the *Shudras* were treated by the *Trya-Varnikas* is evidenced by the laws of Manu." Ambedkar indignantly observes, "There is no code of laws more infamous regarding social rights than the laws of Manu. Any instance from anywhere of social injustice must pale before it."³⁸ Ambedkar has put a pertinent question, in his book, *Annihilation of Caste*, that why one person should depend upon another in the matter of his vital needs. In his view, education and means of defence are needed by every one for his self-preservation. The *Chaturvarnya* scheme forbade both things to the *Shudras*.³⁹

Ambedkar has tried to find out the reason for the *Shudras*' deprivation. He emphasized that the denial of education and the means of defence are the reasons and why the *Shudras* have not rebelled against the system, as there has not been a social revolution in India. The lower classes in India have been completely disabled for direct action on account of the system of *Chaturvarnya*.⁴⁰ Ambedkar pointed out that social war has been

³⁷ P.H. Prabhu, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, Amritsar: Ambedkar School of Thoughts, Katra Jaman Singh, 1944, p. 48.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

raging between the strong and the weak far more violently in Europe than it has ever been in India. Yet, the weak in Europe has had, according to Ambedkar, “In his freedom of military service his physical weapon, in suffrage his political weapon and in education his moral weapon. These three weapons for emancipation were never withheld by the strong from the weak in Europe. All these weapons were, however, denied to the masses in India by *Chaturvarnya*. It is the system which deadens, paralysis and cripples the people from helpful activity.”⁴¹

Thus, he examined the case of *Chaturvarnya*, and finding it totally harmful denounced it totally. In it, he found no hope for the emancipation of the *shudras*, which was the main aim of his life.

According to Ambedkar, the people of India, composed of *Aryans*, *Dravidians*, *Scythians* and *Mongolians*, in due course of time, and after inevitable conflicts, settled down as peaceful neighbours. Through constant contact and mutual intercourse they evolved a common culture that superseded their distinctive cultures. Thus, there is cultural homogeneity, though, ethnically the Indians may be heterogenous. It is because of this fundamental cultural unity and homogeneity that caste becomes a difficult problem. “If the Hindu society were a mere federation of mutually exclusive units, the matter would be simple enough. But caste is the parcelling of an already homogenous unit and the explanation of the genesis of caste is an explanation of this process of parcelling.”⁴²

Nesfield, according to Ambedkar, dwells on the absence of dining with those outside the caste as one of its characteristics. Ambedkar accepts the newness of the point. Yet he insists that Nesfield here has mistaken the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴² B.R. Ambedkar, “Caste in India, their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,” *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XLI, May 1917, p. 81.

effect for the cause. According to Ambedkar: “Caste being a self-enclosed unit naturally limits social intercourse including dining etc., to members within it. Consequently, this absence of messing with outsiders is not due to positive prohibitions, but is a natural result of caste, i.e. exclusiveness. No doubt this absence of messing, originally due to exclusiveness, acquired the prohibitory character of a religious injunction, but it may be regarded as a later growth.”⁴³

Ambedkar believes that the essence of caste is absence of inter-marriage and endogamy. Endogamy is the clue for Ambedkar to solve the problem of the genesis of caste. He emphasizes that “caste in India means an artificial chopping off, of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.”⁴⁴ Thus, he regards endogamy to be a characteristic peculiar to caste as also a key to the understanding of its genesis and mechanism.

According to Ambedkar, “no civilized society of today presents more survivals of primitive times as does the Indian society. One of these primitive survivals is the custom of exogamy.... Regarding the people of India, the law of exogamy is a positive injunction even today.”⁴⁵ He refers to the law of matrimony in India, which centres round the principles of exogamy, for it is not that *Sapindas* (blood-kins) cannot marry but a marriage even between the *Sagotras* is regarded as a sacrilege.... The various *gotras* of India are and have been exogamous, and so are the other groups with totemic organization. So for the people of India, in Ambedkar’s opinion, exogamy is a creed and none dare infringe it, so much so that inspite of the endogamy of the castes within them, exogamy

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

is strictly observed. Moreover, there are more rigorous penalties for violating exogamy than for endogamy.⁴⁶ Thus, Ambedkar comes to the conclusion that, “with exogamy as the rule there could be no castes, for exogamy means fusion. But we have castes, consequently in the final analysis the creation of castes, so far as India is concerned, means the super imposition of endogamy over exogamy.”⁴⁷

Ambedkar has explained how new castes were created and this process continued. According to him the sub-division of a society is quite natural, but the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open door character of the class-system and have become self-enclosed units called ‘castes’. According to Ambedkar, the question is, were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close them of their own accord. His submission is that there is a double line of answer. Some closed the door, others found it closed against them. The one is a psychological interpretation and the other is mechanistic but they are complementary and both are necessary to explain the phenomena of caste-formation in its entirety. Ambedkar has explained his theory as follows:

I will first take up the psychological interpretation. The question we have to answer in this connection is, why did these sub-divisions or classes, industrial, religious or otherwise, become self-enclosed or endogamous? My answer is because the Brahmins were so. Endogamy or the closed-door system, was a fashion in the Hindu society. As it had originated from the Brahmin caste, it was whole-heartedly initiated by all the non-Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who in their turn become endogamous castes. It was “the insertion of imitation” that caught all

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

these sub-divisions or their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes.⁴⁸

Ambedkar points out, this is because of ex-communication following violation of caste-rules. As a form of punishment there is really little to choose between ex-communication and death. A caste is ever ready to take advantage of the helplessness of a man and insist upon complete conformity to its code in letter and in spirit. According to him:

A caste can easily organize itself into a conspiracy to make the life of a reformer a hell. Such a nefarious act as an attempt to ex-communicate a person for daring to act. Contrary to the rules of caste should be made an offence punishable in law. But as it is, even law gives each caste an autonomy to regulate its membership and punish dissenters with ex-communication, caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reformers and for killing all reforms.⁴⁹

There is a deliberate attempt by the Hindus, according to Ambedkar, to prevent the lower castes, within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes. He holds an opinion different from Professor M.N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritisation. According to the latter, "the caste-system is far from a rigid system, in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movements have always been possible and specially so in the middle-regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able in a generation or two to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism and by sanskritizing its rituals and pantheons."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ G.S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation*, Bombay: Popular Books Depot, 1961, p. 175.

⁴⁹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 35.

⁵⁰ A.P. Baranabas and S.C. Mehta, *Caste in Changing India*, New Delhi: The Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1965, p. 18.

The Brahmin's primary concern, is to protect "his interests" against those of the non-Brahmins," Ambedkar states. Moreover, "... the existence of caste and caste consciousness has served to keep the memory of past feuds between castes green and has prevented solidarity...."⁵¹ This damages national patriotism and a feeling of All India unity in Ambedkar's opinion.

The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus has been simply deplorable, according to Ambedkar. Caste has killed public spirit, destroyed the sense of public charity, and made public opinion impossible. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. The capacity to appreciate merits in a man apart from his caste does not exist in a Hindu. There is appreciation of virtue but only when the man is a fellow caste-man. "... The whole morality is as bad as tribal morality. My caste man, right or wrong, my caste-man, good or bad..."⁵² The evil effects of caste have been fully brought out by Ambedkar, in the above assessment by him.

Ambedkar, thus, was disgusted with the evil effects of the caste system on the Hindus and their social life. Ambedkar lamented that there are people who do not agree that the caste-system is all bad and such people put up defences of the system and Ambedkar by his strong arguments tried to bring them round to his point of view, that the caste-system has been the bane of India and the Hindus.

Ambedkar stated that the defenders of caste may say that it is based on the economic principle of division of labour which promotes efficiency and fosters specialization. However, he levelled strong criticism against

⁵¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, p. 37.

⁵² *Ibid.*

this view. He considers that Hindu society is a myth. There is no Hindu consciousness but only caste consciousness. It has promoted anti-social spirit, created segregation and exclusiveness, prevented fellow-feeling and common consciousness, as discussed earlier. Therefore, caste cannot be defended this way either, according to Ambedkar.

Gandhi and Ambedkar had an exchange of views on the problems of caste and attempted to find out if they could work jointly in the direction of removing these evils. In the year 1936, in the issues of *Harijan* there was an exchange of views between Gandhi and Ambedkar on three concepts – *chaturvarnya*, caste and untouchability. They wanted to find out if they could go together so far as caste and untouchability were concerned. It all started when Gandhi asked Ambedkar to send a message to be published in the first issue of '*Harijan*'. Ambedkar sent the message which started the controversy between the two champions of the untouchables' cause. The message was that, "The outcaste is the bye-product of the caste-system. There will be the outcaste as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the out caste except the destruction of the caste system. Nothing can help to save the Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of Hindu faith of this vicious and odious dogma."⁵³ Gandhi had in the same place, given his attitude towards the caste system. It is in direct contrast to the views Ambedkar held on the subject. Gandhi said:

I do not believe the caste-system even as distinguished from *Varnashram* to be an odious and vicious dogma. It has its limitations and defects but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability and, if it is a bye-product of the caste-

⁵³ M.K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1958, p.318.

system, it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body or weeds of a crop. It is wrong to destroy caste because of an ugly growth in it, or of a crop because of the weeds. The out-casteness in the sense we understand it, is an excess to be removed if the whole system is not to perish.⁵⁴

Gandhi further wrote, “If, however, *Varnashram* even then looks an ugly thing, then the whole of the Hindu society will fight for it. For this campaign against untouchability is not one of compulsion but of conversion,” and Gandhi expressed a pious hope, “I hope that we shall all find ourselves in the same camp. Should it prove otherwise, it will be time enough to consider how and by whom *Varnashram* is to be fought.”⁵⁵ This debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar about their views on caste and untouchability is the testimony of deep differences about the problems of the depressed classes between the two great persons.

Gandhi had a great faith in class system. He did not accept the class system of Manu against upliftment of down-trodden or social equality. In his opinion, for eradicating the untouchability, it is not essential to end the caste system as mentioned earlier. All people busy in their parent’s profession are equal. This was the point where Ambedkar opposed Gandhi to a greater extent. He argued that without destroying the caste system there can be no upliftment of the untouchables.

Ambedkar, although, criticized Gandhi’s views about the upliftment of the down-trodden, however, it was Gandhi, who had prepared a sympathetic environment for untouchables of Hindu society through which the consciousness of the down-trodden created by Ambedkar had got a place for social adjustment. It was only this reason that the movement of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

the depressed classes went ahead without a big and casual social disintegration.

Ambedkar based his social reforms on certain basis. According to him there should be one and only one standard book of Hindu religion, acceptable to all Hindus and recognized by all Hindus. All other religious books such as the *Vedas*, *Shastras* and *Puranas* should not be treated as sacred and authoritative and the preaching of any doctrine, religious or social, contained in these books should be penalized. Priesthood must cease to be hereditary and there must be an examination to get entitled to be a priest and the person who wants to be a priest must hold a *Sanad*. No ceremony performed by a priest who does not hold a *Sanad* shall be deemed to be valid in law and it should be made penal for a person who had no *Sanad* to officiate as a priest. A priest should be a servant of the state and should be subject to disciplinary action by the state in matters of his morals, beliefs and worship. The number of priests should be limited by law according to the requirements of the state – the priestly class must be brought under control by legislation. It will prevent it from doing mischief and from misguiding people. It will democratize it by throwing it open to everyone. It will certainly help to kill Brahmanism and will also help to kill caste, which is nothing but Brahmanism incarnate. Brahminism is the poison which has spoiled Hinduism. You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill Brahmanism.”⁵⁶ Ambedkar mainly wanted to kill *Brahmanism*.

About the courage and heroism of social reformers, Ambedkar observed, “Most people do not realize that society can practice tyranny and oppression against an individual in a far greater degree than a government

⁵⁶ S.R. Sharma, *Life and Works of B.R. Ambedkar*, Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2006, pp. 252-253.

can.... What punishment in the Penal Code is comparable in its magnitude and its severity to ex-communication? Who has greater courage, the social reformer who challenges society and invites upon himself ex-communication, or the political prisoner who challenges government and incurs sentence of a few years 'imprisonment'."⁵⁷ For him society is more tyrannical than the government.

Ambedkar was quite indignant at the remarks about the depressed classes made by political leaders, like Annie Besant, who in her article "The Uplift of the Depressed Classes," which appeared in *Indian Review*, of February 1909, said:

Hence, as elsewhere, education is the cover by which we may hope to raise them, but a difficulty arises at the outset, for one class of the community, moved by a noble feeling of compassion and benevolence, but not adding thereto a careful and detailed consideration of the conditions, demands for the children of the Pariah community admission to the schools frequented by the higher classes, and charges with lack of brotherhood those who are not in favour of this policy. It becomes, therefore, necessary to ask whether brotherhood is to mean levelling down, and whether it is usual in a family to treat the elder children and the babies in exactly the same way. It is a zeal not according to knowledge and not according to nature. We have to raise the depressed classes to a similar level of physical purity, not to drag down the clean to the level of the dirty, and until this is done, close association is undesirable.⁵⁸

It was probably this kind of opinion which did hurt the ego of Ambedkar. Annie Besant thought that the depressed classes should be educated in separate schools because their first necessity was good cleaning and good feeding rather than education. In schools where high

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-254.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

class family boys studied, they were well-cleaned and well-fed from their homes and thus the objective of educating the depressed classes could not be realized in such schools. Besides, she felt that there was the danger of the boys studying with them catching infectious diseases, especially of the eye.⁵⁹ Even after more than one century of the debate the same argument is given today regarding reservation of twenty five percent seats for children from the poor families in the elite schools under Right to Education Act (RTE) suggesting that mindset of the people, which is a pre-requisite for egalitarian society, has not changed.

Ambedkar, since he blamed Hinduism for social inequality, he believed in conversion of religion. He went on to say, “To reform the Hindu society is not our aim. We want independence and that is our aim.... When by religious conversion, we can obtain our independence why should we fight the battle for the Hindu society’s reform? Our movement for the removal of untouchability has for its purpose not the reform of the Hindu society, but that of social equality for the untouchables. And it is equally true that this social equality is not to be realized unless you change your religion.”⁶⁰ Gandhi reacted by saying, “The great wrong under which he has labored and perhaps the bitter experiences that he has undergone have, for the movement, warped his judgement... I do not mind the untouchables, if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity....”⁶¹

His ideas about the struggle between Yavani Sanskriti (Muslim Culture) and Hindu Sanskriti (Hindu culture) had been consistent right from 1927 till 1947. Ambedkar continuously built up a theorem that the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

contradictions in the freedom movement were in fact the contradictions of the Hindu and Muslim cultures. He further stated that in this struggle if Hindus wanted status quo – to continue their dominant position over the Muslims – they had to keep the untouchables in their fold. He frightened the Hindus that if the untouchables embraced Islam, the Hindu culture would be vanquished.⁶² He cautioned that the caste system among the Hindus would destroy the foundation of their unity. He wrote that the caste system gave birth to communal differences, which further alienated one caste from the other and kept them grooming their own parochial interests at the cost of others. This unjustifiable practice created distrust among them eventually leading to a strange situation that people remained contented only under the foreign ruler.⁶³

Ambedkar analysed the process of Hindu Rashtra degeneration. The caste system set forth many difficulties for the downtrodden and pushed them in the asylum of the foreigners. Without the support of the *Mahar*, *Mang* and other low castes and Muslims the British were not in a position to run this country. Ambedkar pointed out that the reason of the existence of caste system was not in its merits but the only thing that the foreigners did not crush it down.⁶⁴

Through the 1930s and 1940s, Ambedkar wrote a series of tracts excoriating Gandhi and Gandhism. The two men met several times, but could not reconcile their differences. In 1932, the British government awarded separate electorates for untouchables. Gandhi refused to tolerate what he called a division of Hindu society, which would be perpetrated

⁶² M.F. Ganjare, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkaranchi Bhashane*, Vol. 5, Nagpur: Ashok Prakashan, 1976, p. 12 in V.K. Vakil, *Gandhi-Ambedkar Dispute – An Analytical Study*, New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1991, p. 44.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

with the grant of Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for the untouchables. Gandhi declared that he would resist it with his life. "I say, it is not a proper claim which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the untouchables. It will create a division in Hinduism."⁶⁵

The conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of the separate electorates for the untouchables and the depressed classes illustrated the two contrasting perspectives which fundamentally altered the nature of political participation by the Scheduled Castes and tribes in British India and its aftermath. Once the separate electorate for the Muslims was conceded by the Congress while accepting the 1935 Government of India Act, Ambedkar argued, on behalf of the *dalits*, that they must be allowed to constitute a separate electorate and elect their own representatives to the central and provincial legislatures. He further defended the claim by saying that, since voting was severely restricted by property and educational qualifications, the geographically highly disparate depressed classes were unlikely to have any influence in the decision-making process. So the solution lay in a separate electorate for them. Ambedkar held the view that untouchables were absolutely separate from Hinduism and hence he tried 'to find a solution to their problem through political separatism.'⁶⁶

Further in an unambiguous way, Ambedkar brought out the economic dimension of untouchability by stating that:

The system of untouchability is a gold mine to the Hindus. In it the 240 millions of Hindus have 60

⁶⁵ S.R. Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁶⁶ Judith Brown, "The Mahatma and Modern India," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3-4, 1969, p. 331.

millions of Untouchables to serve as their retinue to enable the Hindus to maintain pomp and ceremony and to cultivate a feeling of pride and dignity befitting a master class, which cannot be fostered and sustained unless there is beneath it a servile class., to look down upon., In it the 240 millions of Hindus have 60 millions of Untouchables to be used as forced labourers.... in it the 240 millions of Hindus have 60 millions of untouchables to do the dirty work of scavengers and sweepers which the Hindu is debarred by his religion to do and which must be done by non-Hindus who could be no other than Untouchables. In it the 240 millions of Hindus have 60 millions of Untouchables who can be kept to lower jobs.... In it the 240 millions of Hindus have the 60 millions of Untouchables who can be used as shock-absorbers in slumps and dead-weights in booms, for in slumps, it is the Untouchables who is fired first and the Hindu is fired last and in booms the Hindu is employed first and the Untouchables is employed last. [So, untouchability is not a religious] but an economic system which is worst than slavery.⁶⁷

Gandhi did not appreciate Ambedkar's demand, and declined to accept that the untouchables were a community separate from the Hindus. He was instead prepared to offer reserved seats for them in general constituencies. For him, the matter was highly 'religious', as he stated: 'for me the question of these classes is predominantly moral and religious. The political aspect, important though it is', he further added, 'dwindles into insignificance compared to the moral and religious issue'.⁶⁸ He reacted strongly when a charge was labeled that the upper-caste Congress leaders could never properly represent the untouchables. When his attention was drawn to the Congress acceptance of the 1932 Communal Award, Gandhi insisted that, unlike the question of religious minorities, the issue of

⁶⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi and Emancipation of Untouchables*, Jullandhar: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1943, pp. 196-197.

⁶⁸ Gandhi's Press Statement, *Harijan*, June 10, 1933.

untouchability was a matter internal to Hinduism and had to be resolved within it.

Gandhi went on a fast rather than approve the demand for a separate electorate for the depressed classes. Gandhi, who was in Yervada prison in Poona, began the fast on 20 September and ended it on 24 September only once Ambedkar agreed to accept the reservation of seats for *dalits* within the caste-Hindu constituencies.⁶⁹ An agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar, known as the Poona Pact, was signed in 1932⁷⁰ and the depressed classes were given a substantial number of reserved seats but within the Hindu electorate.⁷¹

The Poona Pact represented a victory for Gandhi as it was accepted that untouchability was ‘a social’ and not ‘a political problem’; and that it was a problem of Hindu religion and not of the Hindu economy. However, as a result of this the backward classes, later classified as the scheduled castes, were placed in the 1935 Government of India Act on the centre-stage of Indian politics with an identity of their own.⁷² The Congress leadership after this pact formally accorded a legitimate space to the *dalits* who had so far remained peripheral to the struggle for freedom.

With the initiation of Gandhi, Anti-Untouchability League, was founded on September 30, 1932, which on December 9, 1932, was converted into the ‘Harijan Sevak Sangh’. It was to work for the social,

⁶⁹ Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar – Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962, pp. 215-216.

⁷⁰ M.S. Gore, *The Social Content of an Ideology: Ambedkar’s Political and Social Thought*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993, pp. 136-139.

⁷¹ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed. and compiled), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997, p. 148.

⁷² A.K. Narain and D.C. Ahir (eds.), *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism Social Change*, Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1944, pp. 129-145.

economic and educational development of the untouchables. Ambedkar alleged that his disciples were not given help by the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Madan Mohan Malviya tried to refute Ambedkar's allegation and said that all the beneficiaries of the Harijan Sevak Sangh were the disciples of Ambedkar and had as bitter feelings about the *Savarna* Hindus as had Ambedkar.⁷³ He believed that the Harijan Sevak Sangh should have a battalion of the social workers to support the untouchables. Ambedkar did not believe that the *Savarn* Hindus would undergo a gradual change.

Ambedkar became established as a prominent depressed class leader on a national platform. Reservation of seats for castes became statutorily entrenched through a consensus based on negotiations between representatives of castes and this eventually made its way into independent India's Constitution. When *dalits* emerged as a politically significant constituency under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, justice and freedom also acquired new connotations. Ambedkar provided a new conception of emancipator politics. By freedom he did not mean freedom from colonial power but just freedom by ameliorating the conditions of those outside the Hindu fold.

Ambedkar gave a new doctrinal basis to Hindu society, that was in consonance with ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. He wanted that the values of Democracy should be part of the everyday life of the Hindu society. He, therefore, advocated a total radical change in outlook as the first step towards the establishment of a truly democratic society in India. For Ambedkar the individual had to become the basic unit of an egalitarian society, with castes as collective bodies serving only as temporary means of advancing his politics of equality.

⁷³ B.R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables?*, Bombay: Thacker & Co. Ltd., 1945, p. 128.

Gandhi, too, was a protagonist of radical changes in Indian society. He too advocated a transformation in the individual and in the society of which he was an integral part. As far as the individual was concerned, Gandhi set the example himself, and his reformed life was dedicated to the cause of bringing about similar changes in Indian society. Therefore, the major change he suggested was aimed at the purification of society. What he desired was the eradication of all social evils and the re-establishment of old values based on non-violent and just means.

Gandhi, however, did not approve of any change in the values he accepted, in his fundamental principles of truth and non-violence. The Hindu religious scriptures and philosophic doctrines provided him with a system of values. All Gandhi did was to accept these and try to transform his mental structure and the social system in accordance with them by means of his own will power. The uniqueness of his character lies in the fact that once he chose these values he tried to adhere to them with determination, though in practice he had to apply them with discretion and flexibility.

Ambedkar not only as a highly educated untouchable to whom pity was anathema, but also as a Maharashtrian reformer, found Gandhi's general ideology unappealing. The Maharashtrian urban intelligentsia's attitude toward Gandhian reform describes the milieu in which Ambedkar worked: "They disdained Gandhi's traditional outlook and modes of behavior. They considered his philosophy outdated and rejected his program, which was based primarily on a concern for the rural masses. In

any case, they had no interest in a drab reform program which could neither stimulate their intellect nor excite them to revolutionary action.”⁷⁴

Ambedkar published a book in 1945, entitled *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables*. The title of the book itself suggests that in it he has singled out the person and the party which he considered to be his main political and personal adversary. Ambedkar in this book has tried to enumerate the reasons that led to Gandhi’s failure with respect to the campaign against untouchability. The first reason that he has quoted is that his campaign has failed because Hindus to whom he made his appeal for the removal of untouchability did not respond because Gandhi was looked upon as an apostle of *Swaraj*. His anti-untouchability campaign was looked upon as a fad, therefore, the Hindus responded to his political biddings and not to his social or religious preachings.

The second reason was that Gandhi did not wish to antagonize the Hindus even if such antagonism in the form of launching a campaign of *Satyagraha* or a fast was necessary to carry out his anti-untouchability programme. According to Ambedkar Gandhi merely contented himself with sermons on untouchability. Gandhi’s programme for removal of untouchability was merely words not followed by any action.

The third reason is that Gandhi did not want the untouchables to organize and be strong because of the fear that they might become independent of the Hindus and their ranks. It is in this context Ambedkar was sceptical of the activities of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. In his opinion the whole object of the Sangh was to create a slave mentality among the untouchables towards their Hindu masters. Gandhi, because of this object

⁷⁴ Ram Joshi, “Maharashtra,” in Myron Weiner (ed.), *State Politics in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, pp. 194-195.

did not wish to hand over the Sangh to the control and management of the untouchables.⁷⁵ Ambedkar has asked in the book, “Can Mr. Gandhi be called a liberator of the Untouchables? Does this not show that Mr. Gandhi is more anxious to tighten the tie which binds the untouchables to the apron strings of the Hindus than to free them from the thralldom of the Hindus?”⁷⁶

Ambedkar, because of his distrust of Gandhi, sought to articulate an alternative political ideology by challenging the very foundation of the Hindu nationalist movement. One of the most significant arguments that Ambedkar made against Hinduism was that caste and untouchability struck at its foundation and made it inherently divisive.

Ambedkar in his book, *Annihilation of caste*, has put forward a question that how Hindu social order can be reformed and how caste can be abolished. In this context, he has discussed various options such as the abolition of the sub-castes, inter-caste dinners, inter-marriage but is sceptical that these measures would be successful in killing the spirit and the consciousness of caste. The notion of caste according to him has been inculcated by Hindu religion taught by the *Shastras*. Therefore, the real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the *Shastras*.⁷⁷ In his words:

Reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including Mr. Gandhi, do not seem to realize that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated upon their conduct, until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the *Shastras* on which their conduct is founded... It is no use seeking refuge

⁷⁵ Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010, pp. 220-227.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-210.

in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the Shastras do not say what they are believed to say, grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the Shastras have been understood by the people. You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority, as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion – the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste. Will you show that courage?⁷⁸

The Congress prepared the Temple Entry Bill 1933 for the removal of untouchability. Ambedkar pointed out some drawbacks in it, because it was not unequivocally accepted that banning temple entry to the untouchables was something to abhor. Ambedkar realized that temple entry was not a key to solve the problems of the untouchables. He was convinced that the Congress had no programme for the untouchables after the temple entry. Ambedkar wanted egalitarian Hinduism. It needed intensive religious reforms which would result in the annihilation of four varnas. Ambedkar called Gandhi's religious reforms deceptive. Gandhi planned a programme for opening Guruvayur (Kerla) Krishna temple for the untouchables but left it.

Both Gandhi as well as Ambedkar had a vision of equality, but for Ambedkar equality meant not equal status of the *Varnas*, but equal social, political and economic opportunity for all. He worked to make the untouchables aware of their debased condition as well as the common interests that could promote the unity needed for the development of effective organizations and mass action. It is because of these reasons that Ambedkar advocated a separatist policy accentuating caste distinctions at an initial stage. His ultimate aim was to create a society in which caste

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-220.

identities would be insignificant. This dream of Ambedkar however, has not been fulfilled.

The matrix of caste and communities in postcolonial India, is under constant re-evaluation as new minorities have been emerging from within traditional ones and manipulating for a constitutional minority status. This trend of Indian politics has come into confrontation with the constitutional principle of a ceiling of 50% of reservations established by the Supreme Court. There has been persistent debate over affirmative action demanded by castes and communities. This has brought to the landscape of postcolonial discourses of power the fragility of the constitutional consensus on the development nation state.

Varna Vyavastha for Gandhi, is natural and affords greater opportunities than other arrangements for self-realization and social harmony. Gandhi believed that every man is born with certain definite limitations which he cannot overcome. From a careful observation of these limitations, the law of *Varna* was deduced. Thus, Gandhi considered the *Varna* institution as integral part of Hindu religion and even goes on to characterize it as the invention of *dharma*, the result of a continuous search for the truth. On the other hand, Ambedkar leveled harsh criticism against *Chaturvarnya*, as a basis of social organization.

Gandhi and Ambedkar's aim was same – the abolition of untouchability from Indian society. But they adopted different techniques for the abolition of this evil. Gandhi viewed the problem of untouchability as basically a religious and spiritual one. He saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as “a sacred ritual self-purification” as he considered the untouchables as an integral part of the collective Hindu self. Gandhi was quite sure in his mind that untouchability would be removed,

when majority of Hindus realized that it was a crime against God and were ashamed of it. On the other hand, Ambedkar belonging to the group of untouchables, who had faced the problem of untouchability himself, wanted to annihilate the caste system and was of the firm belief that untouchability would be removed only by the force of law. So he made constructive programme for eradication of untouchability from Indian society.

The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar had their roots in their respective world views to which they were deeply committed and bound and which they articulated in their thinking and action. The world view in this context means that how did they approach the issue of reconciliation between the individual good and the good of the community. In this context Gandhi is ideologically committed to the spiritual perspective and his ideas are dialectically constituted in the context of foreign rule and his simultaneously launched movements against the atrocious social structures, customs, norms and values in the Indian society justified in the name of India's age old traditions. Ambedkar, on the other hand is committed to the secular perspective. One of the major defining characteristic of the secular perspective is, "the absorption of divine reality within human experience" and "the secular assertion of human independence from all divine connection."⁷⁹ This suggests that man is capable of recreating the conditions of his own existence and this is possible through the radical transformation of the society. It is in this context that for Ambedkar, as undisputed leader of the untouchables, their socio-economic emancipation was his priority.

⁷⁹ David Walsh, *Introduction to Eric Voegelin History of Political Ideas: The Later Middle Ages*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998, Vol. 3, p. 17.

Ambedkar evolved through his own experience of discrimination, right from his childhood till his death and it is because of these discriminations that he explored and employed a variety of strategies to scrutinize and annihilate the caste system. In the beginning he worked hard to reform the untouchables within a wider Hindu society and later turned to politics in the 1930s realizing the ineffectiveness of the former.

Ambedkar's relationship with Gandhi was based on latter's approach to caste and to the freedom movement. Gandhi was against Ambedkar's attempts at extricating the untouchables from the Hindu framework mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, because he focused on reforming the Hindu Society in such a way that it would give equal respect to all castes and secondly, because he wanted to put up a unified opposition against the British rule. He did not want to weaken Hindu society by dividing it into various sub-castes. Ambedkar's focus on the other hand was on dalits who according to him were the worst victims of the multifaceted oppression of British imperialism, feudal system and *Brahmanism*. His aim was the annihilation of caste leading to the ultimate goal of liberty, equality and fraternity and for this he realized the necessity of political power. Yet, in spite of their different approaches to ridding India of untouchability, each helped to significantly weaken the hold of Hindu orthodoxy and as a consequence strengthened the social and political status of the untouchables.