

**COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON CASTE:
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR**

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CASTE : A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR."
submitted by Mr. RAKESH THAKUR in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY to this University
has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other University.
This is his original work. We recommend this dissertation to be placed before the
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*for
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Introduction

Introduction.

Gandhi and Ambedkar, undoubtedly the two colossi of this century, apart from being worshipped in India, are demi-gods to some as well as an anathema to others.

For followers, to outdo each other, on their hero's birth and death anniversaries, from street processions to futile rhetorical discussions in seminars and conferences, is a never-ending tussle. A deluge of books written on them in a state of reverence, to articles in popular magazines and highbrow academic journals, letters to the editors, naming and renaming of alleys, streets, crossroads, roads, mohallas, town parks, government buildings, universities, railway stations, orphanages, and all that they can name and rename, only aggravates the situation. The various trusts and societies operating under their name have very little to do with their ideology. For the two groups, it is a game of one upmanship. From ward councillors to politicians of national stature, the proficiency in this game is quite natural and obvious. It is a game of opportunities to consolidate vote banks - one step ahead, two steps back.

To begin with, this dissertation is a humble effort to debunk the above efforts and charged activities of the followers on the respective sides, as sociology and hero-worship do not go together. Moreover, instead of being in a state of reverence and stupor, the task of the sociologist is to critically examine the

facets of charisma, and to tease out objectively, the facts inherent in their paradigms.

But more is involved than a mere series of generalities. Without fail it can be said that their contributions, apart, from being unique, were rooted in the vocabulary of the Indian tradition. Moreover, their hopes and forebodings for India are still fearfully relevant, till date. All the issues that Gandhi and Ambedkar wrestled with, in general and the caste question in particular - are still haunting the imagination of scholars and laymen alike. Thus, the case for a new effort to rediscover and reassess their work, in context of 'caste' question, in this dissertation. Moreover it is their life long engaging concern with altering the socio-economic conditions of the majority of the masses -- a common point of departure for both Gandhi and Ambedkar, that spurs me to undertake this study.

In the first two chapters of this dissertation, an attempt will be made, rather carefully to define what each one of them (Gandhi and Ambedkar) were aiming at, and to clearly map out the trajectory of their theoretical understanding of the caste question and the problem of untouchability. In the concluding chapter, one of the efforts would be to assess as to how far their aspirations carry permanent value. In practical terms, how fruitful has been their effort is for all of us to see and analyse. At this juncture the problem of perspective

raises its head. To be more specific, which framework would one adopt to analyse their approach to the caste system.

Needless to say, from womb to tomb man lives with a perspective and an identity. From the process of childhood socialisation, to the cultural milieu in which one is born, to the academic training that one undergoes and personal experiences lived - all do have an immense impact on one's mindset.

Thus are born various shades of believers in ideologies of - Hindutva, Dalit, Gandhian, Marxist, Ambedkar etc. The shift or leaning towards various paradigm - *functionalist, conflict theorist, Marxist, positivists*, etc. is too an outcome of the same. But, the problem arises, when all these different hues become a close monologue and leave no room for a dialogue. This not only stifles new inquiries and the discipline itself, in the end but also produces oft-hackneyed debates.

In the first two chapters, the trajectory of their understanding towards caste question and the problem of untouchability is mapped out in detail.

The crux of the argument in the chapter on Gandhi is that he gave an extremely broadbased and a never-felt before urgency to the purification and revitalisation of Hinduism. He reshaped and redefined time honoured concepts - the caste system and the problem of untouchability being two prominent ones.

Gandhi approved the system of social and functional division, but he did not approve of the degenerated caste system which, in his view, was the very antithesis and perversion of the original idea of varnashrama-dharma. When unjust social distinctions became attributed to differences of 'divine' origin and when the inequitable stratification of society received religious sanctions, then a system of divinely ordained '*superior*' and '*inferior*' beings had emerged. Gandhi proclaimed the view that such a rigid caste system based on right by birth had to be abolished since it was contrary to basic, elementary, moral and religious principles and was positively harmful to the spiritual and moral growth of nation. To Gandhi, the loss of the functionality of the four orders of varnashrama led to numerous rigid caste groups which eventually led to the development of the notion of touchability. Although Gandhi favoured stratification of the four order caste system, he was categorically against untouchability in any form or fashion. The close approximation between his methods on the one hand and culture, modes of thought, feelings of the people and their economic and technological resources, on the other, makes him a social inventor par excellence. He was aware of the fact that in any society there is an organic rate of change peculiar to it at that stage. His knowledge guided him to determine the rate at which he applied and pushed reform. Moreover, whenever he proposed a reform, he created an effective organisation to accomplish it.

Thus, through a distinctly community based Indian perspective, he highlighted some of the disturbing features of the caste system, detected its internal contradictions and explored an alternative to it.

Whereas for Gandhi, the evolution of his views on caste system went from being orthodox to liberal, for Ambedkar, it was an attempt, initially to look for a space within the Hindu framework itself. Dejected and angry, he looked to other religious frameworks like Sikhism, Christianity and Islam, but to no avail. He finally found solace in Buddhism. Ambedkar was a rebel who brought in a new paradigm of social democracy, annihilating caste, the root evil. Another important, perception Ambedkar highlighted, was the difference between social reformers who strove to alleviate Hindu injustices and the dynamic rebels who advocated abolition of the caste system itself. The clarion call of battle to wipe out the scourge of casteism was Ambedkar's strategy. Annihilation of caste had a broader dimension than mere removal of the distinction between Brahmins and Bhangis. It was the ideological imperative of the practical unity of man and the solidarity of humanity without which fraternity was a rhetorical futility. Ambedkar, with the power of a campaigner, and the perceptiveness of a dialectical activist, made a great contribution to the application of democracy in its social dimension to the squalid disparities and inequalities that obtained in the society. The cry was

not for reforms here and there, but for a radical restructuring, a revolutionary end to caste domination.

The third chapter traces an epic dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar which revolves around the historical Round Table Conferences, the Communal award and the Poona Pact. Despite the acrimonious tenor of the debate, what is obvious is that India needed both Gandhi and Ambedkar, if progress was to make any headway.

Though it would be wrong to hold Gandhi and Ambedkar accountable for what had happened in the struggle for liberation of the down-trodden. However, there can be little doubt that their impact was significant. Put together, both did raise many an issue within the socio-political context and framework of the Indian society. Such complexity seems to condense in the twin persona of theirs.

The concluding chapter outlines their legacy to the caste question in general and untouchability in particular. The legacy, indeed, is multifaceted and riven with contradictions. New tensions and challenges will emerge between castes and political alliances based on caste.

To my mind, Gandhi and Ambedkar, despite their contradictions had firmly planted the problem on the national agenda. In their own life time, in their own way, with or without followers. Both relentlessly voiced

concern, though the tone and tenor were different. Finally, even though both ended up colouring the human canvas on an identical theme, both their strokes and styles were distinct and very much their own.

But that is far from saying that on the Gandhi Ambedkar dialogue on caste, last word has yet been said.

Chapter I

A STUDY OF GANDHIAN CONCEPTION OF INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

To many, the Gandhian understanding of caste has an air of paradox about it. Whereas on one hand, he stoutly defends the four fold social divisions of the Hindu social order, in the sense of “varnashrama dharma”, on the other, he denounces the practice of untouchability with great vehemence. Hazy as it might seem but it is this triumphant paradox of abolition of untouchability, through a reinterpretation of Hinduism which continues to haunt the imagination of scholars and laymen alike.

Before delving deep into the discussion, it is imperative to note that Gandhi's views on caste changed considerably during his lifetime. Perhaps because of this they have been the subject of considerable, many a times, acrimonious debates. Gandhi's conception of caste can be best described as undergoing a rational evolution, moving gradually from an orthodox stance in 1920s to more liberal views in the 1930s, and culminating in a radical position at the end of his life .

To begin with, it was the distinction between caste and varna, and the subsequent idealization of varnashrama dharma as an order of equality and

harmony which eventually provided the basis of his approach to the caste problem, as distinguished from the problem of untouchability.

Moreover, for Gandhi, caste had nothing to do with religion.

It was a later excrescence on what had originally been basically the principles of division of labour of duties. While accepting some form of social stratification system for the benefit of the total functioning of the society, Gandhi favoured the stratification system as depicted by the Hindu tradition of having four orders. To Gandhi, the social stratification system had its limitation but “there is nothing sinful about it”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. III, 1961, P. 193) Gandhi’s social stratification system was characterised by “four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, and each as necessary for the whole society”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. III, 1961, p.193) The four divisions served as the functional distinctions based on the different abilities of various members of society, and preserved the stability of social life. Such social divisions ought to be regarded as natural in society, with no notions of superiority or inferiority. (*Gandhi*, Vol. XIII, 1964, p. 301,522)

THE NOTION OF “TWICE-BORN”

To understand fully the implications of Gandhi’s treatment of the organisation of four orders, it is necessary to examine the traditional attitude

towards caste in India. It was the distinction between the “twice born” and “once born” which formed the bedrock for the institution of caste system. The most striking observation of this notion of “twice born” and “once born” is that it implies some form of ranking.

To be brief, the view of caste which dominates both popular representations by Hindu themselves and descriptions by outside observers runs something like this.

- (1) The Hindu world is made up of a number of castes.
- (2) Castes are closed social groups : One may only marry within one’s caste and the offspring of such marriage belong to the caste of their parents. In this way the system is perpetuated ad infinitum.
- (3) Castes are hierarchically ranked on a purity-pollution scale according to their traditional occupations.

The above three line theory’s most striking observation about caste organised communities is that Brahmans enjoy the highest status, untouchables have the lowest status, and all other castes are in between. Adherents of the above three line theory argue that even if it does not explain everything, it explains this “fact”, the polarisation of Brahman and untouchable, more adequately than any of the alternative theories which have been proposed. (*Quigley, .1993*)

Coming back to the notion of twice born, it can be put very simply, the appellation of twice-born means that they were entitled to study the

Vedas and invested with a sacred thread at puberty (The *Upanayana Samskara* - One of the important Rites of passage for the Hindu male among the twice-born) which is a symbol of re-birth. Three classes of twice born are distinguished :

- the Brahmins, who upheld the cultural order and fulfilled sacred functions.
- the Kshatriyas, who maintained the political order and performed military functions and
- the Vaishyas, who maintained the economic order and performed the necessary functions of agriculture.

The once born are the non-Aryans and are classified as Shudras, who represent domestic servants approximating the position of slaves. They were not permitted to hear the Vedas, let alone study them. Outside this four-fold division of society fall the “out-castes” who performed menial tasks or scavenging and cleaning human waste. (*Vyas*, 1991)

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE TRADITIONAL HINDU SOCIAL ORDER

To elaborate further, it can be ascertained that India's four main social divisions - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, had taken shape during the Aryan conquest and were functional, with a religious sanction. The word varna translated “caste” in this case, literally means

“colour”. The first Shudras or workers were probably dark Dravidians, whom the light skinned Aryans enslaved. The Vaishyas were the Aryan rank and file, the Kshatriyas their nobles, the Brahmins their priests. Inter marriage (hypogamy not hypergamy), discouraged but not prevented, reduced the contrast of colour, without destroying the structure. It was at the upper levels that functionalism began to fail. Brahmins and Kshatriyas struggled for ascendancy, and the Brahmins won the battle. When it died away they spread out into other fields besides ritual and scholarships. Kshatriyas had ceased to carry their former weight as an aristocracy, and men of other castes were encroaching on their preserves. The difference based solely on colour had lost its erstwhile significance. To do the Brahmins justice, they were something better than vulgar exploiters. But they enjoyed their scripturally ordained status and had a vested interest in social stability. Hence they not only upheld the caste hierarchy as sacred, even though it had lost a point, but allowed sub-divisions within it, making it more elaborate and rigid. This process went on through numerous generations. For a Gandhi, or an Ambedkar, or a Tagore, or a British Sahib, the effective reality was not the varna pattern but a patchwork of sub-castes which were more than a thousand and almost countless. Some were occupational changes. Some, however, were tribal or cultic, out of touch with the functional principle entirely. Each sub-caste had a sort of

autonomy and disciplinary power over its members (hence Gandhi's troubles with his own Modh Bania brethren). But the vitality was all inward. The sub-castes were hereditary, inbred and exclusive. Every member was held to have been born into it as the just result of conduct in former existence. His dharma or duty was to live according to the rules of his sub-caste. To wander was to become unclean. The system kept the society divided, and through rituals and taboos, imposed a stability that was near paralysis. Orthodox Hinduism not only supplied the mystique but closed the door on change. The sacred books, which hallowed the caste scheme in its simpler ancient form, were interpreted as hallowing the degenerate muddle it had become. The Brahmans fostered the fragmentation rather than solidarity. Even the esprit de corps which the sub-castes possessed could be prevented to turn them against each other, a weakness that bedevil Indian political scene till date. Outside all the sub-castes, were the swarms of untouchables without status of any kind. They most probably were descended from tribes which had been absorbed economically but not socially. Untouchables had to do the nastier work, and were supposed to pollute caste Hindus, who refused to allow them in the temples, share common drinking water sources, bathing ghats etc. The bulk of the converts to Islam had been drawn (understandably) from this part of the populace.

(*Ashe*, 1968)

Thus one can see that caste was originally related to functional distinctions within the Aryan society. Differences of colour and culture may have initially played a part in distinguishing the Aryan from the non-Aryans as there were references of Aryavarna and dasavarna, where varna had the connotation of colour, but the distinctions were primarily functional. Later distinctions ceased to be simply functional and were related to birth. These social divisions related to functional distinctions were considered to be of divine origin. The Gita echoes this divine origin when it attributes the four order caste system to God, but at the same time emphasises that the distinctions are functional and not from birth - “ the four-fold order was created by Me according to the divisions of inherent qualities and capacities of the individuals”. (*Gandhi*, Hingorani(ed.) 1962, p. 7)

GANDHIAN RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Thus for Gandhi, the revival of four-order social organisation became a prime concern. Inherent to the concern was the challenge to the traditional, rigid and orthodox teaching concerning the caste system. By questioning the rigidity and inflexibility of the caste system, Gandhi was on the way to rock the very foundation of the caste system. In Gandhi's understanding it was the duty aspect rather than the ranking aspect which provided a functional legitimacy to the caste system. Gandhi defended the four fold social division in the sense of varnashrama

dharna, that is, in the sense that there were certain social functions or duties which were related to one's order or status in society. He approved of a society with functional distinctions based on the different abilities of different members as a way of preserving the stability of social life. Individuals were expected to develop hereditary skills, and thereby follow the vocations of forefathers as a matter of course. Gandhi assumed that a person might inherit the natural tendencies and particular characteristics necessary to enable him to follow the same vocation as his fore-fathers. One form of occupation should not be considered superior or inferior to another. The law of varna, he explained, resulted from a realistic appraisal of the fact that men are not born equal, in the sense, that they do not all have same abilities. Some are born with definite limitations which they cannot be expected to overcome. The law of varna ensures that each person is provided with a sphere of activity which establishes a place in society and guarantees that labours are rewarded. In this sense the law of varna was good and it was Gandhi's conviction that the ideal social order would evolve only when the implications of the law were fully understood. He also maintained that the acceptance of hereditary calling would necessary limit or preclude the development of ambition and serve instead to release surplus energy for spiritual development. (*Gandhi*, Vol. XIX, 1966)

Gandhi's ideas of the four-order social organisation had neither a superiority-inferiority notion nor any unnecessary competition for

achieving that superior status. While addressing constructive program workers he was asked the question ;

“What then is your ideal social order ?”

Gandhi answered :

“Every man is born in the world with certain natural tendencies. Every person is born with certain definite limitations which he cannot overcome. From a careful observation of those limitations, the law of varna (four orders) was deduced. It established certain spheres of action for certain people with certain tendencies. This avoided all unworthy competition. While recognising limitations, the law of varna admitted no distinctions of high and low : On the one hand, it guaranteed to each the fruits of his labours and on the other, it prevented him from pressing upon his neighbour. This great law has been degraded and has fallen into disrepute. But my conviction is that an ideal social order will only be evolved when the implications of this law are fully understood and given effect to... By constant striving we have to enrich the inheritance left to us. This law determines the duties of man. Right follow from a due performance of duties”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. IV, 1961, p. 17)

As he reviewed his constructive programme, it began to acquire a deeper coherence. He began to see it as a method of rebuilding the nation “from the bottom upwards” (his own words) to a point where a transformed society would be ready to march behind its leaders. This would be in essence a Non-violent society. Thus a “Non-violent society would be free from enmity of religions.... Whence, Hindu Muslim friendship. It would be free from the injustice of one sex towards the other.... Whence, the emancipation of women. It would be free from the cruelties of perverted

caste.... Whence, no untouchability. It would be free from despotism of wealth.... Whence, most of the Gandhian economic policy. The idea of a Non-violent society helped Gandhi to clarify his thinking and carry it further. It helped him, for instance in making up his mind about caste in general". (Ashe, 1968, p.241)

While condemning the crazy tangle of sub-castes, and the taboos that went with it, he could see the merits of functionalism in the original four. A social division of labour was surely right, so long as it was a harmony, not a tyranny. Therefore he felt no need to challenge Karma and Dharma, as embodied in what he preferred to call the four divisions; but restored some lustre to a horribly tarnished ideal. The work of the non-violent society would be unity in diversity; not fusion, but mutual respect. This was his proclaimed hope for India as a nation. The bottom-upward revolution would be in effect, Satyagraha going on all the time. Satisfied that he had a policy which gave scope for his convictions he began expounding it in *Young India* and *Navjivan*, and training another legion of shock troops to implement it.

"For his village audiences he hit on a visual aid. Holding up his left hand with fingers out-spread, he would check them off with his right fore finger. This is equality for untouchables; this is spinning; this is keeping off drinks and drugs; this is Hindu-Muslim friendship; this is equality for women. And the wrist is non-violence". (Ashe, 1968, p. 243)

Although Gandhi firmly believed in reviving the functional orders of Hindu traditions and reducing the enormous number of castes

through merger, he was against the use of violent means. When asked the question “If you are so keen upon reviving varnashrama why do you not favour violence as the quickest means?” Gandhi firmly denied the use of violence to reorder the society :

“Surely the question does not arise. Definition and performance of duties rules out violence altogether. Violence becomes imperative when an attempt is made to assert rights without any reference to duties”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. IV, 1961, p.17)

To Gandhi, the functional stratification system is a “universal law.... In Hindustan it is seen as a law of spiritual economics”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. II ,1961, p.283)

The four-order organises duties, obligations, and functions defined by our ancestors, who saw that if they were to give the best part of their lives to God and to the world, and not to themselves they must recognise that it is the law of heredity. It is a law designed to set free man’s energy for the higher pursuits of life.

(*Tendulkar*, Vol. II, 1961, p.283)

Gandhi summed up his idea of revival of the four order functional social organisation and removal of the rigidity and number of caste as follows:

- “(1) I believe in varnashram of the Vedas which in my opinion, is based on absolute equality of status, notwithstanding the passages to the contrary in the Smiritis and else where.
- (2) Every word of the printed works passing muster as the shashtras is not, in my opinion, a revelation.

- (3) The interpretation of accepted texts has undergone evolution and is capable of indefinite evolution, even as the human intellect and heart are.
- (4) Nothing in the shastras which is manifestly contrary to universal truths and morals can stand.
- (5) Nothing in the Shashtras which is capable of being reasoned can stand if it is in conflict with reason..
- (6) Varnashram of the shastras is today non-existent in practice.
- (7) The present caste system is the very antithesis of varna. The sooner public opinion abolishes it the better.
- (8) In Varnashrama there was and should be no prohibition of inter-marriage or inter-dining. Prohibition is of change of one's hereditary occupation for purposes of gain. The existing practice is, therefore, doubly wrong in that it has set up cruel restrictions about inter-dining and inter-marriage and tolerates anarchy about choice of occupation.
- (9) Though there is no prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dining, in Varnashrama, there can be no compulsion. It must be left to the unfettered choice of the individual, as to where he or she will marry or dine. If the law of varnashrama is observed, there would naturally be a tendency, so far as marriage is concerned, for people to restrict the marital relations to their own varna.
- (10) There is no such thing as untouchability in the shastras.
- (11) The most effective, the quickest, and the most unobtrusive way to destroy caste is for reformers to begin the practice with themselves and where necessary, take the consequences of social boycott". (*Tendulkar*, Vol. IV, 1961 p.42)

Thus, Gandhi wanted the revival of the Vedic stratification system of four-orders functional organisation.

AN ANALYSIS OF GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

For a more focused analysis of Gandhi's concept of social stratification, the five components—(1) social differentiation, (2) relation among the various stratas (3) institutionalisation (4) legitimacy and (5) consequences, can be of immense help. (Vyas, 1991)

Social Differentiation :- In Gandhian perception social differentiation is akin to human nature. For Gandhi, it is imperative for societal need to have division of labour in terms of functional necessity as well as “spiritual economics”, (Tendulkar, Vol II. 1961. P. 283) for the benefit of all. For Gandhi, social differentiation of Hindu caste system was not merely an inert, lifeless institution, but a living one and has been functioning according to its own laws. “Our society”, he declared, “was organised according to Varna-Vyavastha (division by vocation) for the purpose of self-control, or self denial. It is a vain effort to replace this structure by a single community”. (Gandhi, Vol. XIII, 1964, p.30)

“Human differentiation is inborn which leads to social differentiation, Gandhi believed. Moreover, he also believed that from a careful observation of human differentiation and their limitations, our ancestors have deduced the law of division of labour which, in turn, has



produced the four-order stratification system”. (Vyas, 1991,p.54) So his conviction was that “an ideal social order will only be evolved when the implication of this law (law of social differentiation) is fully understood and given effect to”. (Tendulkar, Vol. IV, 1961 p.13)

Relation among Stratas :-“Relations among stratas, to Gandhi, implies division of labour which is essential for the stability and organisation of society”. (Vyas, 1991, p.54) “The four divisions of Hindu social order are functional for society. The Brahman imparts Knowledge, the Kshatriya has power to protect, the Vaishya has commercial ability, and the Shudra has strength for bodily labour. However, all of these varnas are equally important and none is superior to the other”. (Tendulkar, Vol.II, 1961, p.283) Gandhi implied that division of labour is necessary and functional for the society as humans are different from each other but, at the same time, he refused to accept that social inequality necessarily grows out of this process. To Gandhi, the stratification system “ has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority”. (Tendulkar, Vol.II,1961, p.283) So it should not produce inequality by itself. Thus for Gandhi, social stratification, in true sense, is devoid of social inequality. To him social inequality is the outcome of misrepresentation in the stratification system. “He says the ‘hideous caricature’ of four orders is responsible for the air of superiority that the so called Brahman and Kshatriya assumes and the status of inherited inferiority the poor rot submissively recognises as his deserved lot in life”. (Tendulkar, vol.II,1961, p.283) For Gandhi, it is the functional relations between stratas which necessitate and give importance and recognition to all kinds of labour which is necessary “if Indian society is to make real progress along peaceful lines”.

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(*Tendulkar*, Vol. III ,1961, p.308) And the order that claims superiority and pride themselves upon their special qualities, falls because stratification of four orders implies relations of self restraints and economy of energy.

Institutionalisation :- For the purpose of this study, institutionalisation is the ranking of positions in terms of a layered hierarchy. It also involves the normative pattern for the establishment of such ranking. For Gandhi the mechanism operating underneath the normative pattern are the established traditions of heredity. Gandhi uses the doctrine of heredity as an armour to defend the social stratification system. The four divisions, to him, define a man's calling which is essential for social organisation. However, he maintains that it is against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status or assign to another lower status. To him, all of different levels of stratification are born to serve a Brahmin with his knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability, and a Shudra with his bodily labour. The only aspect of the pattern of social stratification he was against was untouchability because "it is the product not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it". (*Tendulkar*, Vol. III,1961, p. 193)

However, in Gandhi's social thought, it is incorrect to assume that a Brahmin is absolved from bodily labour or the duty of protecting himself from others. Birth makes a Brahman predominantly a man of knowledge, the fittest by training and heredity to impart it to others. There is nothing to prevent Shudra

from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes, only he will best serve with his body, and need not envy others their special qualities for service. This is exactly how the varna system was in the Vedic time when functions were regarded hereditary but exceptions were freely allowed. Thus the institution of varna-vyavastha, to Gandhi, implied “self restraint, conservation, and economy of energy”. (*Gandhi* Vol. XXI, 1966, p. 247) And, “while condemning the crazy tangles of sub castes, and the taboos that went with it, he could see the merit of functionalism in the original four orders of social organisation”. (*Ashe*, 1968, p. 242)

Legitimacy :- Apart from being natural and essential, the divisions of society, as a system of stratification were “a universal law” for Gandhi. It was obligatory for every individual to follow this law. The customs and traditions as integral part of different stratas are viewed by Gandhi as a “law discovered by our ancestors”, and “a law of heredity”. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. II, 1961, p.283) Gandhi tried to legitimise one’s social position in a society by emphasising ancestral obligations and by constantly striving to enrich inheritance. This law determines the duties of man. Rights follow from a due performance of duties. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. II, 1961, p. 283)

In Gandhi’s opinion, varnashrama dharma (social organisation of duties and obligations) is inherent in human nature; Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science. Varnashrama dharma is attached from womb to tomb. A man cannot change his varna by choice. Non-adherence to one’s varna is

to disregard the law of heredity. To Gandhi, "recognition of the stratification is a recognition of a scientific fact whether 'we know it or not'. And if all of us followed this law of varna, we would be set free for exploring those vast fields where by and where through we can know God". (*Tendulkar*, 1961, p. 283)

To Gandhi, though, varnashrama dharma is not affected by rules of inter-dining or inter-marriage, Hinduism does most emphatically discourage these practices. This discouragement of inter-dining and inter-marriage among the stratas, to Gandhi, shows the value attached to self restraint in Hinduism. By restricting a Hindu man's choice of a bride for his son to a particular strata or group he exercises rare-self restraint. The prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dining is a must for a rapid evolution of the soul. Thus Gandhi is trying to provide legitimacy to social stratification through moral and religious values. While acknowledging the prohibition in terms of social relations among stratas, he vehemently rejects the system of untouchability because it is not within the four order stratification system. He could not conceive of the practice of keeping certain groups of people out of this system. To him, it amounts to total prohibition of any social interaction. So, "if untouchability is an integral part of Hinduism, the latter is a spent bullet," he declared. (*Tendulkar*, Vol. IV, 1961 p. 99)

To Gandhi, the law of heredity is an eternal law; any attempt to alter it will lead to utter confusion. He defended and justified the four orders caste system with the doctrine of heredity because the system did not base itself

upon the distinction of wealth and possessions. He justified the stratification system of society into four orders as an extension of the principle of the family. The family and the stratification system were governed by blood and heredity. As a devout Hindu Gandhi believed in Vedas and all the Hindu scriptures. This led him to believe in the legitimacy of four orders organisation as a divine law of heredity. (Vyas, 1991)

Consequences :- To Gandhi, the division of society into stratas define man's calling, but do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The divisions define duties, but do not confer any privileges.

For Gandhi, stratification signified self-restraint and conservation as well as the economy of energy. He refers to the functions and effects of caste stratification system : "the vast organisation of caste answered not only the religious wants of the community but it answered its political needs too". (Gandhi, Vol. XIII, 1964, p.3) In one speech Gandhi says : "I have devoted much thought to the subject of the caste system, and come to the conclusion that Hindu society cannot dispense with it, that it lives on because of discipline of caste. Societies all over the world are organised on the principle of caste or varnashrama, that is divisions of society into classes on the basis of vocations. Our society was organised in this manner for the purpose of self control". (Gandhi, Vol. XIII, 1964)

Gandhi believed that caste stratification system contained the seeds of Swaraj (self-rule) and that it could carry out social reform. For this reason

he was opposed to the movements for the destruction of the caste system. He favoured dining and marriage restrictions between stratas as this would maintain the social organisation of four orders. He believed, in his mystic way, that the process of eating was as unclean as excretion. He maintained : "Prohibition of marriage with any one not belonging to one's community promotes self-control and is conducive to happiness in all circumstances... The caste system has struck such deep roots in India that, I think, it will be far more advisable to try to improve it rather than uproot it. The more numerous the communities, the better it would be". (*Gandhi*, Vol. XIII, 1964) To Gandhi, this law of heredity was useful. He explains this usefulness as that "if people follow the law of heredity for their order, they reincarnate in the same or higher order". (*Gandhi*, Vol. XIX, 1966, p. 85) To him, division of people into stratas was the best possible adjustment for social stability and progress. It was a system of culture. Since Gandhi saw the four-orders social stratification system as a law of heredity and as a way of preserving the stability of social life, he did not favour social mobility from one strata to another to avoid unnecessary competition. Moreover, for Gandhi such a mobility is not a necessity because "each order is complementary of the other and each necessary for the whole society". (*Tendulkar*, Vol. III, 1961, p. 193)

Regarding the negative consequences of social stratification, Gandhi did not refer to inequality, exploitation, and monopoly of resources

because of distorted presentation of stratification system by vested interests of society.

For Gandhi when a practice was found to be both against reason and in defiance of man's moral sense, he had no hesitation in denouncing it. The clearest case of this was his denunciation of untouchability.

EVOLUTION OF GANDHI'S VIEWS ON THE CASTE QUESTION

At this juncture, an analysis of his changing views on caste should be examined, because they would reveal so much about his whole approach to social reform and religion in general and to the untouchability question in particular. A major social reform that concerned Gandhi was the injustice in the institution of caste and untouchability. By 1933, Gandhi had come to state his purpose plainly :

“It is the whole of Hinduism that has to be purified and purged. What I am aiming at.. is the greatest reform of the age”. (*Gandhi, CWMG, 50, p.352*)

But this was Gandhi writing in 1933 : such a direct challenge to traditional Hindu norms, especially regarding the institution of caste, was not evident in his pronouncements of 15 years earlier.

In South Africa, as early as 1909, Gandhi had publicly decried the caste system for its inequalities : its ‘hypocritical distinctions of high and low’

and 'caste tyranny' which had made India "turn [her] back on truth and embrace falsehood". (*Gandhi*, CWMG, 9, p. 180-1)

But however much Gandhi condemned the inequality of castes in South Africa, shortly after he returned to India, the emphasis fell on the generally beneficial aspects of caste, and a strong defence of it for its "wonderful powers of organisation". (*Gandhi* as quoted in Andrews, 1931, p. 123)

It is on the basis of his remark on caste in the five year period, from 1916-1921, that he acquired the reputation of orthodoxy ; and "certainly it is true that at this time he was most sensitive to that community of opinion". (*Dalton*, 1993, p. 49) "Caste prohibitions on inter dining and inter marriage are upheld, since they foster self control ; and the system itself is regarded as a beneficial, 'natural institution". (*Gandhi*, CWMG, Vol. XIII, p. 301-303) Gradually the term varnashrama dharma is used more frequently, still it is indicative of this early undeveloped stage of his views that caste and varnashrama dharma are used together with no attempt to distinguish between them. (*Gandhi*, CWMG, Vol. XIII, p. 325,352)

Thus what becomes apparent at this point is that Gandhi was in search for an approach to caste that will allow him to reform it effectively from within, without achieving the orthodox. The remark that he makes at this time on the issue of inter-caste marriage is suggestive of his attitude ; he advises that a beginning should be made with inter marriage not among different varnas but among members of different sub-castes.

This would satisfy the “most ardent reformers as a first step and enable men like Pandit Malaviya (an orthodox Hindu) to support it”. (*Gandhi, CWMG, Vol. XV, p. 122-3*)

The remark signals the approach taken for almost another decade, an approach which continues to sanction prohibitions on intermarriage and inter dining, but gradually builds varnashrama into a social ideal independent of caste. It was only after 1919, when Gandhi had gained the stature of a national leader, his pronouncements on caste acquired a more sure tone. In December 1920, he distinguishes between “the four divisions” and the “sub-castes” and declares that the caste ideal is the right path to social harmony. (*Writing in Young India ; 8th December 1920*)

“I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescence. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. The enumerative sub castes are some times a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is a fusion the better. The silent destruction and reconstruction of sub castes have ever gone on and are bound to continue. Social pressure and public opinion can be trusted to deal with the problem. But I am certainly against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions. The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority, and so far as there is any such question arising, the tendency should undoubtedly be checked. But there appears to be no valid reason for ending the system because of its abuse. It lends itself easily to reformation. The spirit of democracy, which is fast spreading throughout India, and the rest of the world, will, without a shadow of doubt, purge the institution

of the idea of predominance and subordination. The spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms. It requires change of the heart". (*Gandhi*, 1964, p. 12-13)

Writing in October 1921, Gandhi reinforces the distinction between the four divisions and caste, and now, significantly, he begins to use the term varnashrama quite consistently with a view to the orthodox. He maintains his support of restriction on inter dining and inter marriage, for Hinduism "does most emphatically discourage inter dining and inter marriage between divisions' in the interests of "restraint". Writing in *Young India*, 6th Oct. 1921 on varnashrama dharma, he goes so far as to say that 'prohibition against inter marriage and inter dining is essential for a rapid evolution of the soul'. This seems to have been an extreme statement which he was later forced to qualify. 'But', he continues, now playing to his other audience 'this self-denial is no test of varna. A Brahman may remain a Brahman, though he may dine with Shudras....' 'The four divisions define a man's calling, they do not restrict or regulate social inter course'." (*Gandhi*, 1962, p. 34-35)

The Gandhian technique is in full swing. On the one hand, he holds that since man's varna is as the orthodox contend, inherited, 'I do not believe that inter-dining or even inter-marriage necessarily deprives a man of his status that birth has given him.' (Although immoral conduct may do so). On the other hand, the two key pillars of caste, "roti vyavahar" (inter-dining) and "beti vyavahar" (inter-marriage), are neatly separated from the concept of varnashrama. It is precisely on this basis that Gandhi can argue, six years later, 'Varna has

nothing to do with caste. Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of varna. It is this travesty of varna that has degraded Hinduism and India. This unambiguous indictment of caste had begun as early as January 1926, and as caste comes under an increasingly scathing attack, the idea of varna-dharma moves in to fill the vacuum, replacing one traditional concept with another. The admixture of continuity and innovation which always characterised his style is evident in this passage, which he wrote in Harijan, on 4th April 1936- a statement which offers an outstanding example of Gandhi's use of language:

“When we have come to our own when we have cleansed ourselves we may have the four varnas according to the way in which we can express the best in us. But varna then will invest one with higher responsibility and duties. Those who will impart knowledge in a spirit of service will be called Brahmans. They will assume no superior airs but will be true servants of society. When equality of status or rights is ended every one of us will be equal. I do not know, however, when we shall be able to revive true varna dharma. Its real revival would mean true democracy”

Gandhi is thus able to urge on the orthodox a “democratic ideal derived from the classical Indian tradition, while he opposes as ‘excrescence’ those caste practices which he has separated from varna dharma. Thus, it is in this initial decade (1916-26) following his return from South Africa, that Gandhi constantly evokes in his writing and speeches, the crucial distinction between the caste system and

varnashrama dharma. Throughout this decade, it should be stressed that Gandhi was under constant attack from Hindu conservatives, regarding his understanding of caste system in general, and reform of untouchability in particular.

The last two decades of his career (1927-47) represent a progressive movement towards a radical view of caste. In September and October of 1927, Gandhi made two noteworthy speeches on varnashrama dharma at Tagore and Trivandrum where the orthodox elements were formidable. The emphasis in both the speeches is on social equality, justified, with an appeal to the traditional concept of advaita. The caste system's most vicious feature, he argues, is that it has upheld the idea of inherited superiority, and this is inconsistent with the spirit of Hinduism in general and the ideal of varnashrama dharma in particular. There is nothing in common between varnashrama dharma and caste.

“You would be entitled to say that this is not how varnashrama is understood in these days. I have myself said time without number that varnashrama as it is at present understood and practised is a monstrous parody of the original, but in order to demolish this distortion let us not seek to demolish the original. And if you say that the idealistic varnashrama which I have placed before you is quite all right you have admitted all that I like you to admit. I would also urge on you to believe with me that no nation, no individual, can possibly live without proper ideals. And if you believe with me in the idealistic varnashrama, you will also strive with me to reach that ideal so far as may be”. (*Gandhi*, *Young India*, 29th September 1927, and *Young India*, 20th October 1927: 1950, p.321-25)

Thus it is obvious that Gandhi's idealism is tempered with an element of practicality in his search for a truthful conception of caste.

By 1932, Gandhi, instead of supporting caste restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining is highly critical about them. These restrictions for Gandhi are a hurdle to Hindu society in its growth. Writing in 1935 on this issue under the title, "Caste must go", he insists that 'in Varnashrama there was and should be no prohibition of inter-marriage and inter-dining. His views on inter-marriage, once loosened, culminated in the announcement of 1946 that couples cannot be married at Sewagram unless one of the party is Harijan.

Despite his progressive view, Gandhi still retains an element of orthodox. This relates to his view of the hereditary nature of varna. Writing in Young India, 20 October 1927, he explains 'Varna means the following on the part of us all the hereditary traditional calling of our fore fathers, in so far as the traditional calling is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics, and this only for the purpose of earning one's livelihood.'

This position is never controverted, although it is qualified by his assertion that in the perfect social order all men would be Harijans. Whether considered with or without this qualification, however, the view still significantly manifests his dominant concern for social harmony. An egalitarian society, he believed, in which no one was oppressed or driven to envy by the privileged status of another, would foster a co-operative spirit; provided, that is

that each individual accepted his father's vocation 'for the purpose of earning one's livelihood'. Then no energy would be wasted in a competitive pursuit of material gain, it would be turned instead into some form of social service.

REFORMING THE CASTE SYSTEM----THE GANDHIAN WAY

Writing in Harijan, 6th March 1937, he declares 'the law of varna is the antithesis of competition which kills'. Weaving these two beliefs in equality and heredity together, he writes in Harijan, 28th September 1934, of organic conception of the harmonious social order:

'The four varnas have been compared in the Vedas to the four members of the body and no simile could be happier. If they are members of one body, how can one be superior or inferior to another?

If the members of the body had the power of expression and each of them were to say that it was higher and better than the rest, the body would go to pieces. Even so, our body politic, the body of humanity, would go to pieces, if it were to perpetuate the canker of superiority or inferiority. It is this canker that is at the root of the various ills of our time, especially class wars and civil strifes. It should not be difficult for even the meanest understanding to see that these wars and strifes could not be ended except by the observance of the law of varna. For it

ordains that every one shall fulfil the law of one's being by doing in a spirit of duty and service that to which one is born'.

Viewing Gandhi's activities as a reformer of the caste system over this entire period, the most striking change might appear in his attitude towards orthodoxy. In 1924 he urges the leaders of the Vykom satyagraha 'not to overawe the orthodox,' this in a campaign against untouchability that had, in fact, the most modest and limited of aims. When this is compared with Gandhi in those final hours, dauntlessly throwing down the gauntlet before an enraged orthodoxy, the transformation seems complete. Yet on reflection, what is most remarkable is not how much Gandhi himself changed, but indeed, in such a period of history, how he managed to remain in purpose, strength and method, so fundamentally constant. (Dalton, 1993)

Nowhere are these aspects of Gandhi's constancy more evident than in his advocacy of the Constructive Programme, through which he wishes to forge a spirit of harmony in three major areas of Indian society : between the untouchables and caste Hindus, the Hindus and Muslims, and the villages and the growing urban areas. In each of these areas, he felt that untouchability had left its ugly stain. 'The monster of untouchability had pitted 'caste against caste, and religion against religion'. And 'for the city-dweller, the villagers have become untouchables'. If the central purpose of his life and thought is clearly revealed anywhere, then it is in his view of the broader implications of untouchability.

Writing in Harijan, on 10th February 1946, ‘The ulcer of untouchability has gone so deep down that it seems to pervade our life. Hence the unreal differences : Brahmana and non-Brahmana, provinces and provinces, religion and religion. Why should we not all be children of one Indian family and, further, of one human family ? Are we not like branches of the same tree ?’

He writes of his vision, in Harijan, 16th February 1934.

‘I, for one, shall not be satisfied’, he concludes, ‘until, as the result of this movement (against untouchability), we have arrived at heart unity amongst all the different races and communities inhabiting this land...’

This, if anything, was Gandhi’s message to Independent India.

Perhaps, the Gandhian approach to the question of untouchability which has been abandoned by radical dalits in recent past would once again show a method which would focus on development from below and self-help in the true sense of the word.

SUMMING UP

To sum up, the Gandhian conception of the caste system, one can regard the following point as significant.

Gandhi defended the varnashrama dharma which was the traditional Hindu social order with the four fold division of the entire social fabric. While advocating the revival of the varnashrama dharma, Gandhi, at the same time, strongly denounced untouchability calling for its abolition.

To understand his conception of the Indian caste system, one has to comprehensively look at his changing perspective, from an orthodox one in 1920s to a liberal one in the 1930s and which finally ended in a radical viewpoint.

If one is to begin at the beginning, the evolution of the caste needs to be looked on into as well Gandhi made a clear cut distinction between caste and varna where caste had nothing to do with religion. According to Gandhi some form of stratification is desirable for the stability of any social order. The revival of the traditional four fold order of India which was functional in nature, with no notion of superiority or inferiority was what Gandhi aimed at.

The notion of 'twice-born' or Dwija caste is important, for this ultimately established the hideous practice of untouchability. The twice borns who comprised Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas had to undergo the sacred thread ceremony while the Shudras were deprived of this. Strict adherence to endogamy further made the hierarchical divisions all the more rigid and the purity-pollution scale begin to operate. With this untouchability was here to stay.

Caste of varna, initially, connoted the colour distinction. Later with Brahmans gaining ascendancy, the whole structure became closed and rigid with the functions of each caste acquiring hereditary relations.

Varnashrama dharma with its four fold division, according to Gandhi, takes into account the particular abilities of individual. All are not born equal and this should ascertain their functions. If such a hereditary functional division is maintained, it would limit unnecessary competition thus establishing harmony in the society. Everyone would be guaranteed a place where rights and duties would go hand in hand, with no privileges to anyone what so ever. This would also encourage self-restraint and promote conservation and economic energy.

This had to be achieved in a non-violent manner and would be a Satyagraha for rebuilding the nation. Thus, harmony would be established between Hindus and Muslims, women's emancipation would result and there would be no despotism.

Inter-marriage and inter-dining should not be prohibited but could be encouraged to promote self-restraint. Thus, individuals could be free for the higher pursuits of life.

Gandhi's entire conception is remarkable. In spite of the changes that his view underwent, he remained constant throughout in purpose, strength and method.

His laudable Constructive Programme envisaged untouchability in its broadest implications. It aimed at establishing harmony between untouchables and caste Hindus, Muslims and Hindus, and the villages and growing urban areas.

Thus, his vision was of a harmonious India, with complete eradication of untouchability of any kind whatsoever.

Chapter II

Ambedkar's Understanding of the Indian Caste System

On October 3, 1954, All-India Radio broadcasted a speech of Dr. Ambedkar in the series, "My personal Philosophy" —

Every man should have a philosophy of life, for everyone must have a standard by which to measure his conduct. And philosophy is nothing but a standard by which to measure. Negatively, reject the Hindu social philosophy propounded in Bhagvad Geeta based, as it is, on the Triguna of the Sankhya philosophy, which is, in my judgement, a cruel perversion of the philosophy of *Vapila*, and which had made the caste system and the system of graded inequality the law of Hindu social life. Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words, liberty, equality and fraternity.....

My philosophy has a mission. I have to do the work of conversion: for, I have to make the followers of Triguna theory to give it up and accept mine. Indians today are governed by two different ideologies. Their political ideal set out in the preamble to the constitution affirms a life of liberty, equality and fraternity. Their social ideal embodied in their religion denies them".

(Keer, 1971, p. 458-459)

In many ways, the analysis of caste system is central to Ambedkar's sociology of Indian society. A critical examination of the Hindu social order, social stratification (i.e. the structure of inequality in Indian society), in general and the caste system in particular, is the basic point of departure in most of his writings.

To outline a broad framework of Hindu social order as understood by Ambedkar, it would be necessary to begin with his three unpublished papers: two on the Hindu social order—

(a) its essential features

(b) its unique features and

(c) the third on the symbols of Hinduism. (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol.III, p. 95-148)

In the very first essay, Ambedkar counterpoises the Hindu social order with a projected “free” social order based on the principles of French Revolution: the inviolability of the individual and liberty, equality and fraternity Ambedkar said,

“These two tenets of a free social order are integrally connected. They are inseparable.... Once the sacredness of human personality is admitted, the necessity of liberty, equality and fraternity must also be admitted as the proper climate for the development of human personality.” (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol. III, p.99)

The very purpose of undertaking this discussion, by Ambedkar, on the basic values of liberty was to question whether the Hindu social order had a clear focus on how the Hindu social order, which had caste and varna typology at its core, was a total negation of the value of individual worth and of the necessary conditions of liberty, equality and fraternity for individual fulfilment:

“The Hindu social order does not recognise the individual as a centre of social purpose... The unit of Hindu society is the class or varna, to use the Hindu technical name

or class. In the Hindu social order, there is no room for individual merit and consideration of individual justice". (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol.III, p. 99)

In stark contrast to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, according to Ambedkar, the Hindu social order was based on the principles of graded inequality, fixity of occupations and fixation of people within their respective classes. Ambedkar described the Hindu social order as "a ladder of castes placed one above the other, together representing an ascending scale of hatred and a descending scale of contempt". (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol.III, p.105)

THE DYNAMICS OF CASTE AND CLASS

"To sum up, the Hindu social order is an order based on classes and not on individuals. It is an order in which classes are graded one above the other. It is an order in which the status and functions of the classes are determined and fixed. The Hindu social order is a rigid order. No matter what changes take place in the relative position of an individual, his social status as a member of the class he is born in, in relation to another person belonging to another class, shall in no way be affected. The first shall never become the last. The last shall never become the first."(*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol.III, P.115)

What is noteworthy is that this incisive statement on the centrality of 'class' in the Indian system of stratification stands out from the usual sociological preoccupation with the caste phenomenon. (*Gore*, 1993) Thus, for Ambedkar, it was only in the Hindu social order that the individual's position in the class, and the class position in the hierarchy, were sanctified and reinforced by religious sanctions. *Ambedkar*,

repeatedly and in different contexts, used the concept of “class” to describe the Hindu social hierarchy. This position is most clearly articulated in his essay, ‘The House that Hindus have Built’ (*Ambedkar*, 1989, Vol. V, p.145) The main burden of this paper is that though caste was different from class, the caste system- though not an individual caste—also recognised a class system. Yet Ambedkar at no point minimises the role of caste. For him, caste was a highly organised social group and fixed the status of a person.

“In fact, aside from adding ‘caste’ to ‘class’ and ‘Brahmanism’ to ‘Capitalism’ there were surprising similarities between the basic assumption of Ambedkar and leftists. In a situation in which communists and socialists alike took no official note of caste in the pre-independence period, and simply assumed that radicalism required an explanation of all social problems in terms of their ‘class’ content, Ambedkar of course strongly insisted on the addition of ‘caste’ and ‘Brahmanism’ as crucial social realities. Yet in doing so, he like most of his later followers, accepted some crucial assumptions of the ‘class framework.’ (*Omvedt*, 1994, p. 227-228)

As Ambedkar later acknowledges, “what remains of Karl Marx is a residue of fire, small but very important. The residue in my view consists of four items:

- (i) The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origins of the world,
- (ii) That there is a conflict of interest between class and class,
- (iii) That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation,

(iv) That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of the private property.” (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol.III, p.444)

Thus, what is unique to Ambedkar’s view point is, that for all his emphasis on the static and rigid nature of caste; Ambedkar, surprisingly, also makes an attempt to understand caste as a dynamic phenomenon. Moreover he sees a unified class-caste system with concentric circles of caste within the wider category of class so that “castes are divided into different classes of caste”. Primarily he identifies two lines of cleavage : Regenerate (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya) vs Unregenerate classes (Shudras) and Savarna vs Avarna, ie. Caste vs non-caste Hindus.

Yet, it is essential to point out at this juncture, that Ambedkar’s understanding of the term ‘class’ with reference to caste groups in the Hindu social hierarchy was quite different from its usage in industrialised western societies. For sociologists the term class is used to indicate a relatively open hierarchy wherein individuals can rise and fall in social status based on the criteria of ‘achievement’ and thus, the phenomenon of mobility - upward and downward, can be observed. But, for Ambedkar, the term ‘class’ in Indian context was another level of differentiation within caste hierarchy, with no scope for social mobility. It is this inflexibility of the Hindu social structure, coupled with absence of channels of social mobility within it that completed Ambedkar’s unique treatment of caste-class dynamics. The word ‘class’, for Ambedkar, served to emphasise the relative

proximity of bunches of castes in relation to caste groups above or below them. As Gore points out, “it did not signify ‘class’ in the economic or Marxist sense, differentiating relationships between groups in the production process.” (Gore, 1993, p. 265)

“ Present day sociologists, familiar with the process of ‘Sanskritisation’ and ‘westernisation’ can cite instances of upward mobility of groups and individuals even within the restrictive Hindu social order, but they would readily concede that these instances are still few and do not indicate a major shift in the system of stratification.” (Gore, 1993, p. 265)

Though it should be pointed out, that fifty years after independence, due to various processes - Sanskritisation, Westernisation, Modernisation, level of Education, policy of protective discrimination, safeguarding of civil rights of one and all, enforcement of law, empowerment of people at the grassroot level and etc. - underplaying in society at various levels, mobility has been induced even in the seemingly rigid Hindu framework. Hence, the myth of the caste system as a completely closed system stands busted. This is more pronounced in urban areas than in rural areas. Thus, for Ambedkar, the Hindu social order had both the elements of caste and class to it.

“The relationship between the ideas of caste and class has been a matter of lively controversy. Some say that caste is analogous to class. Others hold that the idea of caste is fundamentally opposed to that of class.....Although caste is different from and opposed to the notion of class, yet the caste system as distinguished from caste-recognises a class system which is some what different from the graded status.....Just as the Hindus are divided into so many castes, castes are divided into different classes of castes. The Hindu is caste conscious. He is also

class conscious. Whether he is caste conscious or class conscious depends upon the caste with which he comes into conflict. If the caste with which he comes into conflict is a caste within the class to which he belongs he is caste conscious. If the caste is outside the class to which he belongs he is class conscious. Any one who needs any evidence on this point may study the Non-Brahmin movement in the Madras and Bombay presidency. Such a study will leave no doubt that to the Hindu, caste periphery is as real as class periphery and caste consciousness is as real as class consciousness." (*Ambedkar*, 1989, Vol. V, p.163-164)

Thus, Ambedkar minces no words to show that while savarna Non-Brahmans resented the privileges of the Brahmans, they were unwilling to surrender their own privileges with reference to the untouchables or even obliterate the distinction between them. The distinction, till date, is strictly adhered to, more pronouncedly- "beti-vyavahar". But it should be pointed out, that in today's urban India, the stress on "roti-vyavahar" (inter-dining) based on caste lines has blurred to a great extent. The political mobilisation, inter and intra, along caste lines has given caste a more urbane and secular outlook.

THE MECHANISM OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

In his essay on the "The Hindu Social order - its Unique Features," (*Ambedkar*, 1987, Vol. III, p. 116-124), Ambedkar outlines the mechanism which sustains the iniquitous Hindu social order. He identifies three mechanisms :

- (a) the use of a religious sanction, making the social order seem divinely ordained and hence not open to abrogation, amendment or even criticism ;
- (b) making the Brahman into a superman worthy of worship by the rest ;
and
- (c) forestalling the possibility of rebellion by denying the rest, access to knowledge in general, and sacred knowledge in particular. (*Gore, 1993*)

For Ambedkar, the rejection of Hindu philosophy of life and society is complete, as it negates the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity to be active and useful values of life. The Hindu philosophy stands for the class interests of the first three varnas and is vitiated by the language of inequality and discrimination. Hindu philosophy, is in stark contradiction vis-à-vis. The “social humanism” of Ambedkar. The basic element of Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy may be said to be (i) liberty, equality, and fraternity, (ii) education, organisation and agitation, and (iii) the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. (*Jatava, 1993*)

As Ambedkar points out, that without fraternity, liberty and equality are no better than coats of paint. So to achieve fraternity, it is very much essential to forget the caste-differences. In India, it is difficult to reach the goal of achieving fraternity, because the caste phenomenon is deeply rooted in the Indian culture. So efforts should be made towards achieving fraternity. Then only India will be a nation in the social and psychological sense of the word. Thus

Ambedkar's cry was not for reforms, but for a radical restructuring, a revolutionary end to caste domination.

It was the stratification as the dominant principle of the caste system, providing legitimacy to the deprivation and exploitation of the helpless and the lowly, that was central to Ambedkar's understanding about caste system. Ambedkar went deep in to the examination of the Hindu religious-cum-social system. Without fail, he understood that it was the principle of graded inequality that was central to the caste system. Except the rigidity obvious at the extremes, each caste is inferior and superior at the same time in relation to another caste. This ensured the functioning of the system, because if the higher caste enforced the norms of its superiority over another, that caste in turn enforced its own superiority over those further down the hierarchy. Within this general hierarchical organisation, Ambedkar first pointed to the bunching of groups of castes into broader strata - the Brahmans, the other 'twice-borns', the Shudras and the at-Shudras. (*Gore, 1993*).

REFORMULATING THE CASTE QUESTION

His academic interest in the caste question can be traced back to a paper he read in a graduate Anthropology Seminar at Colombia University, New York, in 1916 at twenty five years of age in U.S.A. What is remarkable about this paper, is that the bitterness which characterised his later writings is totally

absent in this academic exercise. In this paper, his prime focus was on the origin of the caste system. Still the perception of the inequity of the caste system does not escape his gaze. The paper outlines, 'the genesis, mechanism and spread of the caste system'.

Ambedkar noted that India was a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians and Scythians. They all elbowed their entry into the country by fighting with their predecessors and after a stomach full of it, settled down as peaceful neighbours. Through constant contact and mutual intercourse they evolved a common culture that superseded their distinctive cultures. He conceded that there was no thorough amalgamation of the various stocks that made up the people of India, but argued that amalgamation could not be the sole criterion of homogeneity. He said that all people were heterogeneous. What was important was a unity of culture, and that India had '....I venture to say that there is no country that can rival the Indian peninsula with respect of the unity of its culture'. It was because of this homogeneity that it became a problem to explain caste. For, the Hindu society was not a federation of mutually exclusive units. If that were so, caste would be easy to explain. "But caste is a parcelling of an already homogenous unit, and the explanation of caste is the explanation of this process of parcelling. Thus, Ambedkar defined the problem in a new and specific way Caste was not a result of diverse people who were inadequately integrated. It was a phenomenon which had resulted from the division of people who were otherwise

culturally homogeneous. This perspective totally negates a racial or ethnic explanation of caste. It would probably be true to assert that race or ethnicity does not wholly explain varna and caste difference, but later work by Ghurye makes it difficult to totally dissociate the two. (Gore,1993)

Essentially, in this paper of Ambedkar, two dominant themes are pursued: one, that India was culturally homogenous, and two, that the basis of caste was the endogamy of the Brahmins, which was adopted in turn by the Non-Brahmins. Reviewing the definitions of caste as given by Senart, Nesfield, Risley and Ketkar he arrived at his own understanding, different from these scholars. Substantiating his views on the origin of caste, Ambedkar criticised theories which stressed on the colour and occupational factor. It was the practice of endogamy as espoused by Brahmins, which created caste through initiation and excommunication. Writing in 1916, Ambedkar questioned the central tendency in 'Senart' theory. For Ambedkar it was fallacious on the *part* of Senart to regard "population" as the central fact of caste. Yet, in his own later writings, *Ambedkar* was to regard the association between priest, purity and pollution as critically important in understanding. The notion of ritual distance and, of course, of untouchability, which are associated with caste.

He found fault with Nesfield's emphasis on non-commensality as not the cause but the effect of the caste system. "Caste, being a self enclosed unit naturally limits social intercourse, including messing, etc., to members within

it". He found nothing of special note in Risley's discussion of caste, but regarded Ketkar's definition of caste worthy of careful attention. Ketkar identified two characteristics of caste, viz., the limitation of membership to persons born within the caste group and prohibition of marriage outside the group. It was, Ketkar's appreciation of the fact that caste was a system involving other castes, that won the approval of Ambedkar. Ambedkar's own explanation of emergence of a caste system was that it was the result of the super imposition of endogamy over exogamy. In this he recognised that every social group had rules that defined the limits within which members of a group must marry, as also the minimal relationship within which marriages must not occur. Ambedkar seemed to suggest that the caste system was the result of different ethnic groups, despite their cultural homogeneity, placing greater emphasis on the limits beyond which its members may not marry than on the limits within which they must not marry. What led to this over emphasis on endogamy ? Ambedkar had no satisfactory answer. (Gore,1983)

Ambedkar's "demographic theory about the danger posed by surplus men or surplus women to caste and therefore the strict enforcement of endogamous norms by the prohibition of widow remarriage and the encouragement of Sati-pratha, really explains nothing. Since men were allowed to have more than one wife, surplus women could have been absorbed by polygyny. If polygyny or polyandry were forbidden, the reason for endogamy could not have been surplus men or surplus women. His other explanation of endogamous regulation is that the Brahmans considered themselves superior and wanted to establish themselves as an exclusive

entity. If this were so, it would suggest that the sentiment of group superiority, racial, ethnic or religion, had already established itself. That would then better explain the emergence of caste and caste endogamy. It was the Brahmans who introduced the idea that the varnas were created by God, and if Brahmans practised endogamy to maintain purity then the basis of caste had already come into existence". (*Gore*,1983, p. 269-270)

Ambedkar explained the spread of caste system in the following way :

“At some time in the history of Hindu, the priestly class, socially detached itself from the rest of the body of people and through a closed door policy became a caste by itself. The other classes being subject to the law of social division of labour underwent differentiation, some into large, others into very minute groups. The Vaishya and Shudra classes were the original inchoate plasma, which formed the sources of the numerous caste of today. As the military occupation does not very easily lend itself to very minute subdivisions, the Kshtriya class could have differentiated into soldiers and administration. This subdivision of society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about this subdivision is that they have lost the open door character of the class system and have become self closed units called castes.” (*Ambedkar*, Vol. I, 1989, p. 18)

So for Ambedkar, it was the Brahmins who took the initiative to form themselves into a separate endogamous group-caste, and others followed suit. They did so of their own volition. To explain the process through which other castes followed, Ambedkar propounded his theory of ‘The infection of imitation’. He said that the propensity to imitate was a deep seated one and need not be deemed an inadequate explanation for the formation of various castes in India.

Elaborating on the nuances of his theory further and quoting Gabriel Tarde in its support, Ambedkar pointed out that human groups tended to imitate those superior to them in status. "The condition for imitation, on according to this standard authority are: (1) that the source of imitation must enjoy prestige in the group and (2) that there must be 'numerous and daily relations' among members of a group. Thus the Brahmans were imitated by the rest." (*Ambedkar* Vol.I, 1989, p.19) Thus, for Ambedkar, caste formation in India is a process of imitation of higher by the lower. Gore in his criticism of Ambedkar points out that Ambedkar misses on the fact that his explanation depended on the prior existence of a status hierarchy, even a loose one, of ethnic or occupational groups. (*Gore*, 1993.)

Moreover a parallel can be drawn between Ambedkar's hypothesis about the infection of imitation and M.N Srinivas's concept of Sanskritisation.

While the initial formation of caste groups was explained by the concept of the infection of imitation, Ambedkar characterised the later proliferation of caste as the "mechanistic process of the formation of caste". "It is mechanistic because it is inevitable. That this line of approach, as well as the psychological one, to the explanation of the subject has escaped my predecessors is entirely due to the fact that they have conceived caste as a unit by itself and not as one within a system of caste". (*Ambedkar*, Vol.I, 1989, p. 20)

Elaborating his theory further, he wrote, “there is no such thing as a caste: there are always castes. To illustrate my meaning: while making themselves in to a caste, the Brahmins by virtue of this, created non-Brahmin caste; or to express it in my own way, while closing themselves in, they closed others out” (*Ambedkar* Vol.I, 1989, p. 20) Coming to the end of the paper he summarises his main points “European students of caste have unduly emphasised the role of colour in the caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the caste problem. But nothing can be farther from the truth, and Dr. Ketkar is correct when he insists that All the princes whether they belonged to the so-called Aryan race or the so called Dravidian race, were Aryas.... The colour of the skin had long ceased to be a matter of importance. Again, they have mistaken mere description for explanation and fought over them as though they were theories of origin. There are occupational, religious etc., castes, it is true, but it is by no means an explanation of the origin of caste....My study of the caste problem involves four main points :

- (1) that, in spite of the composite make up of the Hindu population, there is a deep cultural unity;
- (2) that caste is a parcelling into bits of a larger cultural unit;
- (3) that there was one caste to start with, and
- (4) that classes have become castes through imitation and excommunication.” (*Ambedkar*, Vol. I, 1989, p.22)

Gore points out that the theory of imitation is not sufficient to explain the emergence of other caste groups. Moreover, to cite the effort of the Brahmins to distance themselves from the rest as the prime factor that set off the chain reaction of caste formation, seems a somewhat inadequate explanation by itself. The priestly class in every ancient culture sought to establish a distinct

identity for itself, but did not seem to have insisted on endogamy. Moreover caste cannot be reduced down to a hierarchical category. It also implies a community with its own identity. Not uncommonly, it is the search for identity in heterogeneous environment that has led to new caste formation. (Gore, 1993)

In another essay, 'The Rock on which it is Built', (Ambedkar, Vol.V, 1989) Ambedkar highlighted the significance of the religious sanction which supported the caste system.

“That the Religious Sanction is the highest sanction which an institution or a belief can have to support and sustain it, is beyond question.... To appreciate this it is necessary to note that the source of authority behind the Religious Sanction is two-fold. In the first, place what is religious is also social. To quote Prof. Durkheim, ‘the really religious beliefs are always common to a determined group, which makes a profession of adhering to them and of practising the rites connected with them. They are not merely received individually by all the members of this group; they are something belonging to the group, and they make its unity. The individuals who compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith In the second place, what is religious is sacral. To quote Durkheim again : ‘All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic; they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred ...Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things while rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comfort himself in the presence of these sacred objects’. From this it will be clear that the social, religious and sacral beliefs are closely knit. Religious is social though all that is social is not

religious . Sacral is social though all that is social is not sacral. On the other hand the religious is both social and sacral". (*Ambedkar*, Vol. V,1989, p. 179-180)

Thus, for Ambedkar, the sacred source or authority behind religious sanction came primarily from the individual himself and only secondarily from the group. This was a noteworthy peculiarity of the sacred source of religious sanction. It prepared the individual to uphold religious beliefs - independently of pressure from the group. The sacred inspired in the individual the sentiment of reverence and deference. One should probably add that it is the sacred nature of caste sanction that accounts for the guilt felt in transcending caste norms. This internalisation often makes group pressure unnecessary. Finally, Ambedkar said, 'The Hindus are the only people in the world whose social order - the relation of man to man - is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate... That is what has given caste its abiding strength to defy the ravages "and the onslaughts of time.

In Ambedkar's eye the blame lay squarely on the Brahmans in providing religious sanctity to the varna - jati system of stratification. In his two monographs, "Who were the Shudras?" and "The Untouchables : who were they and why they became untouchables"? He argues that the Brahmans played an active role in the degradation of the Shudras and the avarnas. Both the works have a historical orientation and throw a critical light on the problem of the caste as the inhibitory and controlling element in the social organisation and structure. The

defect of the Indian social structure was immobility which was institutionalised as the divine dispensation, leading to decay and atrophy. Ambedkar examines the problem in the light of historical evidence and shows how the caste became the fundamental criterion of social action.

For the Indian historical content, Dr. Ambedkar shows how the desire for monopoly of social control made the priest the most powerful factor in social control. The caste as a sociological institution resembles a Corporation in which the Board of Directors never changed. It was the law of status which classified man according to their birth and it was fixed and static; ability was not recognised as the means to cross the class barriers. In theory, and in practice, the caste is the opposite of liberty, anti-thesis of equality and negation of humanity as it postulates the capacity for thinking incidental to the gift of reason for the chosen few, distinguished by the marks of their pedigree and not by the degrees of excellence evidenced in the free exercise of reason or conscience. The philosophy of the sacred texts, in general, discouraged the free exercise of reason with the result that the authority of the sacred texts became unquestioned and truth became a datum and not a problem. This was the cause of intellectual atrophy and social stagnation. "The Untouchables", a sequel to the work on Shudras, makes a critical assessment of the Indian social system. Ambedkar is critical of the Indian social system because it did not foster the spirit of critical inquiry.

THE BRAHMAN SHUDRA DICHOTOMY

Ambedkar summarised his argument about the 'fall' of the Shudras in the preface to, "Who were the Shudras" (*Ambedkar*, Vol. VII, 1990)

Briefly stated the main tenants are :

- (a) that the Shudras were one of the Aryan communities belonging to the solar race;
- (b) that the Shudras were, in fact, not even a separate varna; they belonged to the rank of Kshatriyas in the Indo-Aryan society;
- (c) that there were continuous feuds between the Shudras kings and the Brahmans in which the Brahmans were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities (the conflict was partially because the Shudras did not accept the sanctity of the Vedas);
- (d) that, as a result, their hatred towards Shudras, generated by the tyrannies and oppression imposed upon them by the Shudra kings, the Brahmans refused to perform the upanayana ceremonies of the Shudras;
- (e) that it was this denial of upanayana that led ultimately to the social degradation of the Shudras, and they fell below the rank of the Kshatriyas and even the Vaishyas; and
- (f) thus, they became the fourth varna.

Thus, in the eyes of Ambedkar the Brahmins were the real culprit behind the degradation of the Shudra, Kshatriyas from the second to the fourth rung of the hierarchy. Ambedkar's theory of the gradual degradation of the Vaishyas and the Shudras over time had also been propounded by Prof. P.V. Kane in the history of the Dharmshastras, though the substantive reconstruction of the process and cause of this degradation was new in Ambedkar (*Gore, 1993*).

In Ambedkar's view, the untouchables were erstwhile 'broken men', small groups from defeated tribes who wandered from place to place before coming to settle on the out skirts of the established village communities.

Over a period of many years they got integrated into the economy of the villages as ill-paid, dependent land labour, but were never allowed to get socially integrated into the village community. They remained outsiders. Their degradation and the attribution of pollution to them were the result of their being followers of Buddhism. While their religious affiliation accounted for the hatred the Brahmins felt for them, their meat eating, nay even beef eating, and their occupation of flaying dead animals, led to their being considered 'polluted' and hence untouchables.

EVOLUTION OF AMBEDKAR'S VIEW ON CASTE QUESTION

Between 1916, when he penned his seminar paper on caste as a young dispassioned scholar, and 1936, when he prepared scathing presidential address for the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal one can gauge the shift in Ambedkar's stands.

From his earlier social reformist stance on the subject of caste disabilities to a strident and militant way, Ambedkar' had come almost a full circle. He was no longer emphasising on the reform from within i.e. asking for the removal of the disabilities within the caste structure, instead his call for annihilation of caste had a note of urgency about it. Personal life long experience had convinced him that the ideology of caste was irreconcilable with the goal of social equality. Ambedkar refused the concept of Chaturvarnya as an ideal form of society. Chaturvarnya divided the society into four classes, of which the shudras were denied the right to education, arms and property. Caste had ruined the Hindus. It was a system which paralysed, crippled and deadened the people. It was the antithesis of socialism. Even as an economic organisation the varna system was a harmful institution for it was not merely a division of labour, it was a division of labourers . It was a hierarchy in which the division of labourers was graded one above the other. This division of labourers was not spontaneous. It was not based on natural aptitudes or on choice. Individual sentiments had no place in it . It was based on the dogma of predestination .

In "A Reply to *Mahatma Gandhi*" (*Ambedkar* , Vol. I, 1989, p.86-96) in 1936, Ambedkar stated :

(1) Caste has ruined the Hindus;

- (2) The reorganisation of the Hindu society on the basis of chaturvarnya is impossible because the Varna vyavastha (caste organisation) has an inherent tendency to degenerate into caste system;
- (3) The reorganisation of the Hindu society on the basis of Chaturvarnya is harmful because the effect of the varna vyastha is to degrade the masses by denying them opportunity to acquire knowledge and to emasculate them by denying them the right to be armed;
- (4) The Hindu society must be reorganised on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of liberty, Equality and fraternity;
- (5) In order to achieve this object, the sense of religious sanctity behind caste and varna must be destroyed;
- (6) The sanctity of caste and varna can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the shastras.

In Ambedkar's eye the demise of untouchability lay in the dissolution of the caste system. But this was not possible as the caste system had a religious sanction. Social injustices inflicted on the untouchables would not disappear because the Hindu religion did not consider untouchability a sin. The Hindus were merely following the commandments of Manu. "Looked at from this point of view, the idea of hoping to remove untouchability without destroying the caste system is an utter futility. The underlying idea that caste and untouchability are two different things is founded on a fallacy. The two are one and are inseparable. Untouchability is only an extension of

the caste system. There can be no severance between the two. The two stand together and will fall together" (*Ambedkar*, Vol.V, 1989, p. 101)

THE CURSE OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Ambedkar was convinced that untouchability could not be divorced from the caste system. "One thing he, (the caste Hindu) knows is that there are three barriers in matter of social intercourse which he must observe. They are (1) prohibition against inter-dining, (2) prohibition against inter-marriage, while, in untouchability there is a third barrier added, (3) prohibition against physically touching certain class of people. The first two barriers make up the caste. The third forms untouchability. The caste Hindu does not bother about the number of barriers. He is particular about the observance of the barrier. When he is asked not to observe he turns around and asks why not? His arrangement is that if I am free to observe the first two barriers, what is wrong if I observe the third? Psychologically, caste and untouchability are one integral system based on one and the same principle. If the caste Hindus observe Untouchability, it is because they believe in caste". (*Ambedkar*, Vol. V, 1989, p. 101)

He, therefore, strongly refuted the thinking of those who held that untouchability was separate from the caste system or those who held it possible to remove untouchability without attacking the caste system. Thus Ambedkar's was the expression of the angry revolt against the savage status quoists.

Ambedkar was certainly aware of the complexity and diversity of the problems faced by the people whose cause he represented. ~~Following the social, economic and political trajectory of untouchability, he tried to arrive at the common denomination that was specific to the conditions of~~ untouchability. He chronicled the social, political, religious and administrative wrongs that the untouchables experienced. He supported his accusation by citing newspaper reports from different parts of the country :

- (1) At vykom after the temple was “desecrated” by the untouchables the Hindus decided to purify the temple at great cost before it was declared fit for worship by Hindus again. This showed the degree of scorn and dread of pollution felt by the caste Hindus.
- (2) The Hindus would not allow the untouchables to have their own temples either.
- (3) The Hindus would not let the untouchables take water from their wells even during summer when all other sources of water had dried up.
- (4) The untouchables had no right to education and certainly no right to seek admission to the village school.
- (5) Though the untouchables were claimed as Hindus by the Hindus they could not cremate their dead in Hindu cremation grounds and had to bury their dead.
- (6) The untouchables could not wear the sacred thread.

- (7) The untouchables could not remain seated on a cot in the presence of a Hindu.
- (8) The untouchables could not claim the rights of a citizen if these conflicted with the rules of established order.
- (9) The untouchables had to remove dead cattle from the village even if they did not wish to .
- (10) The untouchables could not wear any decent or clean cloths or any gold or silver ornaments.
- (11) The untouchables could not eat rice food even if they could afford it.
- (12) The untouchables could not take out any procession through the main street of the village.(Gore, 1993)

Moreover any attempt on the part of untouchables to imitate the ways of high caste Hindus and 'to have a little pride in themselves', evoked strong retaliatory measures from the Hindus. For the upper caste people, the untouchables were destined to serve them and any deviation was met with punishment, more often than not, with violence. The lawlessness, he said, had come to be regarded as lawful. He quoted from the Hindu religious law-books to show how traditional Hindu law was based not on the nation of equality but rather on the premise of inequality. And the basis of this unequal relationship was not contract but status. The notion of inequality of different groups in traditional Hindu law was based on an ideology of inequality, which prescribed different rewards and punishments for

members of different castes for some offences. Despite variations in their language and caste names, the common factor among all the untouchables was a life full of sufferings at the hands of the caste Hindus.

Ambedkar queried why untouchability had such a tenacious hold on Indian society, unlike other societies where many changes had occurred in the conditions of the oppressed. His answer took many forms. What “has ruined the untouchables is that Hindu society did not recognise his personality, treated him as one whose (very) personality was unclean which rendered him unfit for human association and common dealing”. (*Ambedkar*, Vol. V, 1989, p. 93)

Unlike depressed segments in other religious and societies, Hinduism had made the untouchable sub human.

In another essay he described Hindus for a lack of social conscience. Ambedkar emphasised that the Hindu was morally unconcerned about the untouchable. He had no conscience in the matter. By his absence of conscience, the Hindu was a great obstacle to the removal of untouchability. The untouchable does not belong to the society of the Hindus and the Hindu does not feel that he and the untouchable belong to one society.

THE SOCIO-POLITICO-ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF UNTOUCHABILITY

In the essay entitled, "The House the Hindus Have Built", Ambedkar underlined the class dimension of the problem of untouchability. For him the cleavage between the Brahmins and the Non-Brahmins was a cleavage between kindred and friends, which still made social intercourse on respectful terms possible. But the cleavage between savarna castes and the untouchables was a cleavage between non-kindred and hostile groups. There was no possibility of an intercourse on respectful terms.

Thus, the problem of the untouchables resulted not only from the Hindu religious ideology but also from the class interest of savarna Hindus (ie. the economic interest of the savarnas)

Ambedkar outlined political dimensions of untouchability along two lines - the larger theme being the fear psychosis which engulfed the minds of Hindu caste men and the sub theme was the struggle between the backward classes and the untouchables. Ambedkar underlined the fear of the caste Hindu that the political separation of the untouchables from the rest of the Hindu population would reduce Hindu plurality vis-à-vis other minority groups, particularly the Muslims. He thought that this was also the main reason why the Muslim and some of the other minorities supported the demand for a separate count of the untouchables in the census. To this was a sub-theme which was the struggle between the backward classes and the untouchables. Backward class representatives wanted the depressed class category to include them. In this they

received no support from the untouchables. Ambedkar said that if the backward classes had asked for a division of the “touchable” Hindus into advanced and backward castes, the untouchables would have supported them. Ambedkar’s grasp of the implications of the relative size of different groups in an electoral polity was always evident. (Gore,1993) In the present political scenario, vote banks and number games are an ample proof of his firm grip of the coming days. Thus, the first measure he envisaged for the upliftment of the depressed is to inspire the depressed to boost their self confidence. He addressed, “If you believe in living a respectful life, you believe in self help which is the best help. You must abolish your slavery yourself. Do not depend for its abolition by some others or on God. He continued to explain the rationality, ‘Your salvation lies in political power and not in making pilgrimages and observance of fasts. Devotion to scriptures would not free you from your bondage, want and poverty. Your forefathers have been doing it for generations, but there has been no respite nor even a slight difference in your miserable life in any way.’

He concentrated, therefore, on a very important tool for having the depressed uplifted—the ‘Legislative’ He concluded - ‘It is the duty of the Legislature to provide for you (depressed) food, clothes, shelter and above all ‘education’. He appealed to the masses to realise ‘The work of law making and of its execution’. He accosted the depressed classes ‘You capture the power of law making’. He showed the channel very reasonably—‘your duty is to divert your

attention from fasting, worship and penance and apply it to capturing law-making power. It is not enough that people are in majority numerically but they must be always watchful, strong, well-educated and self-respecting to attain and maintain success. We must shape our course ourselves and by ourselves'

Dr. Ambedkar in his constructive ordeal recommended to the Minorities Committee of the Round Table Conference that 'before majority rule is established their (depressed) emancipation from the system of untouchability must be an accomplished fact. The depressed classes must be made free citizens entitled to all the rights of citizenship in common with other citizens of the state.'

Before proceeding further it would be worth noting his views about the 'Politics' and its future in functioning due to the impact of the 'Caste system'. He observed that voting is always communal. The voter votes for the candidate of his community and not for the best candidate. Thus the majority community win the seat by the sheer communal majority. 'The Minority community is forced to vote for the candidate of majority community. The votes of minority community are not enough to enable the candidate to win the seat against the candidate put up by the majority community. As a consequence, the voter of the majority community can never condemn to give his vote to a candidate of a minority community. On the other hand, the voter of the minority community who is socially on a lower level takes pride in giving his vote to the candidate of the majority community'.

That is how a minority community candidate always gets defeated in an election. This aspect has worked as an eye opener and remedial steps were envisaged later in free India for obtaining representation essentially from all categories of the society.

REDEMPTION OF THE HINDU SOCIAL ORDER

The salient features of Dr. Ambedkar policies are worth reiteration :

- (1) Like all other religions, only one book should be prescribed for all Hindus that is acceptable to them and no doctrine, religious or social, contained in the *Vedas, Shastras* and *Puranas* be prescribed as sacred or authoritative .
- (2) All priests must be appointed to temples after successfully going through an examination and obtaining a certificate. A priest who does not hold a certificate cannot perform any ceremony and if he, did it should be treated as invalid by the law of the nation.
- (3) Morals, beliefs and worship should be paid utmost attention to and by treating priest as the servant of the state, necessary disciplinary action should be taken by state if necessary.
- (4) The number of priests should be limited by law and the group must be brought under control by legislation.

Thus, the monopoly of the particular caste and the ability of such people to exploit others through religion can be controlled.

In his battle to gain rights for his people, to lift the untouchables to a status equal to the higher caste of India, Ambedkar used many techniques, many tactics. In the religious field he, at first, encouraged attempts to join in religious festivals, to enter temples to perform marriages with Vedic rites. Later he called the caste to a conversion and asked them to leave the fold of Hinduism. For twenty years following that decision in 1936, Ambedkar played with the possibilities of entering Islam, Sikhism, Christianity or any one of India's numerous sects within Hinduism. The final decision was to convert to Buddhism, which meant literally to revive a religion long dead in India.

In the political field, Ambedkar at first supported social representation for the Depressed classes, then joint electorates with Hindus, then separate electorates, and towards the end of his life denied the workability of the reserved seats for the scheduled caste for which he had spent so much time and energy. Ambedkar's varying approaches in the religious and political fields, however, reflect the shifting opportunities and the changing political demands for him. Despite all these, his views are marked by remarkable consistency on the basic premises. The list of his guiding principles can be summed up as follows:-

- The untouchables should revolt because they are slaves, and slavery is inherently inhuman. There is no racial difference that marks them off from

caste Hindus. If Hindu religious scripture ordains the practice of untouchability, these scriptures should be rejected.

- Only by acknowledging their slavery, by admitting their inferior position, could untouchables unify and press for change. Only by Government acknowledgement of their deprivation as a class and the correction of that injustice by special treatment on a caste basis could equality be eventually be reached.
- Only untouchables could understand their own condition and needs; hence only untouchables themselves should lead untouchable movements.
- Education and politics are the chief means to equality: education, so that the untouchable will be able to participate in society on an equal plane; political agitation and participation, so that untouchables can secure their rights and redress their economic and social grievances by law and political policy.
- Untouchables are totally Indian. No foreign ideology, no foreign religion could help them achieve equality as Indians. India must be free before they are totally free, but their battle for freedom must never be subservient to other demands.
- Only as some untouchables become elite can the whole group be raised. Only if ability and ambition enable some untouchables to be at the top of the pinnacle can the mass below realise its own potential.(Zelliot, 1996)

The contours mapped above, helped Ambedkar to arrive at a conceptual clarity regarding the caste question in general and the problem of

untouchability in particular. These perceptions guided him in determining the strategy of the untouchable movement through its many vicissitudes.

SUMMING UP

Ambedkar's understanding of the Indian Caste System can be regarded as significantly different from that of Gandhi.

Ambedkar rejects the Hindu social philosophy which has established the caste system and the system of graded inequality as the law of Hindu social life. His philosophy consists of three principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. These are also the political ideals of the Indian Constitution but are at odds with the social ideal as embodied in the Hindu religion.

Ambedkar has done a comprehensive and remarkable analysis of the Hindu social order, social stratification and caste system in India. He juxtaposes the Hindu order with caste and varna typology at its core against a projected free social order based on the three principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The rigid Hindu social order with fixed ascriptive status and function was a total negation of individual merit and justice.

Ambedkar's genius lies in his focusing on how the caste system also recognised a class system. He pointed out caste as a crucial Indian social reality and equated *caste* to *class* and *Brahmanism* to *Capitalism*. Though class, in the Indian context was again rigid unlike the open, mobile class of

industrialised, Western societies. He saw the Hindu social order as a class system with concentric circles of caste within the wider category of class.

He also described the mechanism of the caste system which consisted of —

1. A religiously sanctioned social order which therefore brooked no amendments or criticism.
2. Brahmans to be regarded as divinely ordained supermen.
3. Denial of vedic knowledge to others except Brahmans which ensured a check on rebellions.

This was in stark contrast to the three fold social humanity of Ambedkar which comprised of :

- (a) Liberty, Equality and Fraternity
- (b) Education, Organisation and Agitation
- (c) Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

He believed not only in reforms but demanded a radical restructuring.

For Ambedkar the major of basis of caste was endogamy of Brahmans which was adopted by non-Brahmans. Infact caste formation was a process of imitation of higher by the lower. He, later, also established the relation between priest, purity-pollution, and untouchability. The religious sanction that the caste system enjoy makes it both social and sacred. This internalisation prevents

the desire to transcend one's status. This immortality has led to the decay of the system.

His earlier stance of reforms within caste structure later changed to belief in total annihilation. He felt varna system was not a division of labour but of labourers. It was the prohibition against physical contact which had given rise to untouchability. Thus all religious sanctions had to be destroyed. Moreover, he analysed the condition of the untouchables from social, political and economic dimensions. For Ambedkar, only political empowerment could deliver them from this abysmal condition. He advocated conversion to Buddhism as a way of deliverance.

In the political field his stance from :

1. social representation for Depressed Classes, to
2. joint electorates with Hindus, to
3. separate electorates and finally
4. device of the workability of reservations for Scheduled Caste.

In spite of these shifts, he remained constant in his belief on :

1. revolution,
2. rejection of Hindu scriptures,
3. a special governmental treatment on the caste basis,
4. education and political empowerment as major means of achieving equality,

5. a formation of an elite of untouchables who would help the others to move forward.

For Ambedkar, life was an odyssey, his was a pilgrimage to find for himself and his co-pilgrims “a place in the sun”, a social space in which they can live and breathe with freedom and dignity.

Chapter III

DIALOGUE

On the threshold of 20th century, the various dimensions related to the problem of untouchability underwent a qualitative change. The problem could no longer be confined to religio-cultural social arena. Moreover purely social and humanitarian solutions had become outdated. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were more than aware of the situation. The situation elicited varied responses. Thus arose two diametrical views on the Hindu social order.

The two competing perspectives on caste had their own logic. If, for Gandhi, the process of social assimilation held a cure for the malaise, for Ambedkar, a guarantee to political empowerment was the need of the hour. If, for Gandhi, their socio-economic upliftment was of prime concern, for Ambedkar, only a separate identity of theirs in the Indian body politic would enable them to influence legislative and executive action or to secure their welfare.

But for both, finally, this all led to an end of a long wait. The wait to hear the death knell of the ancient curse of untouchability. The cause of the untouchables was the mission of both Gandhi and Ambedkar. However, their views were quite divergent. Gandhi wanted the untouchables to remain within the Hindu fold and sought their amelioration by reforming the caste Hindus and purification of the Hindu heart. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to help

themselves by becoming aware of their rights, organising themselves politically and demanding political and legal rights.

Despite their common concern, Ambedkar and Gandhi were often at odds in their programs for abolition of untouchability. In 1932, Gandhi thwarted Ambedkar's attempt to gain political concessions from the British, concessions that Ambedkar believed to be essential for the untouchables' progress. Ambedkar retaliated by criticising Gandhi more harshly than he did the orthodox Hindu who upheld untouchability as a religious essential. The stage was set for a clash between these opposing views.

CONTOURS OF CONFLICT

The contours of the conflict between these leaders can be traced to their ideological difference and the different solutions which they advocated for the resolution of one of India's major social problems. Gandhi may be described as a dominant group leader working for a national goal who was concerned, both from a moral standpoint and a realisation of the need for unity, about injustices to a low status group within the nation. Ambedkar's correlative role was that of the militant leader of politically conscious segment of the same depressed group. Ambedkar's approach to the problem of untouchability was naturally militant and that of a victim. History had convinced him that any application of external balms would not heal the wounds suffered by his

community over the centuries. The approach of reform envisaged by Gandhi within the existing social structure was impractical to Ambedkar who wanted an independent identity for his community with significant political rights and safeguards in relation to its population, based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was afraid that the monolith of the Indian National Congress would exploit the politically backward classes for its subtle political ends. He was more concerned about the practical steps for the emancipation of the untouchables rather than the expression of pious wishes, lip sympathy and use of utopian language.

It was the Vaikam satyagraha of 1924-25 in Travancore state which offered Gandhi his first opportunity to act publicly on behalf of untouchables and produced Ambedkar's first public comment on Gandhian methods. The Vaikam satyagraha, spread over a decade, ended with Travancore becoming one of the first states to enact a law opening its state temples to untouchables. Although the Vaikam satyagraha represents the only time Gandhi used non-violent, direct action on behalf of untouchables' 'rights', it foreshadowed many aspects of subsequent Gandhian activity : stress on the orthodox Hindus' inhuman treatment of untouchables, attempts to secure voluntary lifting of the ban by changing the hearts of caste Hindus, and working within a Hindu framework of ideas. The temple trustees' negative responses was also typical of

later reactions to Gandhi's policies which often elicited bitter criticism from orthodox Hindus. (*Zelliot, 1996*)

It was in 1924, at the founding meeting of his first organisation, the Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha (Organisation For the Welfare of the Excluded), that Ambedkar delivered a speech to the provincial Conference of the Depressed Classes. At this juncture, however, Ambedkar was opposed to conversion to a different faith as a means of removing disabilities, and emphasised on self-improvement, unity and organisation as the paths to a better life for untouchables. He used the Vaikam satyagraha with its high caste participants as an example, not of caste Hindu sympathies, but of political importance of the untouchables : "If we remain Hindus as we are, then the Aryan religion will persevere in this country. On the other hand, if we become Muslims then there will be a predominance of that foreign culture in India. If this were not so, the Brahmans would not have been ready to offer satyagraha for the untouchables class at Vaikam".(*Zelliot, 1996, p. 162*) The following year, the Bombay Province Depressed Classes Conference, again with Ambedkar as president, heard Ambedkar present a more detailed analysis of the Vaikam satyagraha, which Gandhi had then joined. The address, as a whole, was still conciliatory in tone and more emphatic on internal reform than on changing Indian society, but there was no whole hearted support for Gandhi. Although Ambedkar stated that for Untouchables, "The most important event in the country today is the

Satyagraha at Vaikam”, (*Zelliot*, 1996, p. 162) he pointed out that after a whole year of protest there had been no result. He next spoke of Gandhi:

“Before Mahatma Gandhi, no politician in this country maintained that it is necessary to remove social injustice here in order to do away with tension and conflict, and that every Indian should consider it his sacred duty to do so... However, if one looks more closely, one finds that there is a slight disharmony.... For he does not insist on the removal of untouchability as much as he insists on the propagation of Khaddar (home-spun cloth) or Hindu-Muslim unity. Only if he would have made the removal of untouchability a precondition of voting in the party. Well, be that as it may, when one is spurned by everyone, even the sympathy shown by Mahatma Gandhi is of no little importance.”(*Zelliot*, 1996, p. 163)

Ambedkar went on to note that the orthodox Brahmans at Vaikam had used scriptures to justify their position to Gandhi.

“This clearly indicates that either we should burn all these scriptures or verify and examine the validity of their rules regarding untouchability....and if we are unable to prove their falseness or invalidity, we are to suffer untouchability till the end of time ...Truly these scriptures are an insult to people. The government should have confiscated them long ago.”(*Zelliot*, 1996, p.163)¹ Although Ambedkar did not completely reject Gandhi’s support until their political battle over Depressed Class political rights in 1931, two remarks in the 1925 address portend his later actions. His scathing comment on Hindu scriptures culminated in a public burning of Manusmriti in 1927, and in 1935 Ambedkar announced his view to leave Hinduism entirely and to convert to some other religion. Ambedkar’s complaint that Gandhi had not required an oath of disbelief in untouchability as a precondition for membership in

the Congress later turned to a whole sale condemnation of the Congress resolutions on the subject as hypocrisy. (Zelliot,1996)

AMBEDKAR AND THE MAHAR AWAKENING

Before Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism in 1935, the Mahars made several attempts to gain religious and social rights by using the Gandhian technique of satyagraha, mass action without violence. A Depressed Classes Conference was held in Mahad in 1927. During the course of that Conference, a group of several thousand men moved en masse to a tank in the Brahman section of the town, where the leaders of the procession stopped and drank water. After the Conference, the tank was ritually purified by the towns people. Later in the year, Ambedkar called another Conference in Mahad to reiterate the untouchables' right to use the public water supply. It was at this second Conference that the Manusmriti was publicly burned. This radical gesture was balanced by Ambedkar's decision to comply with a court injunction prohibiting further satyagraha for water rights. He preferred to fight a ten year court case, which he won, rather than to take to the streets again. In spite of the long delay in the resolution of this issue, the Mahars look upon the Mahad satyagraha as the beginning of their political awakening. The spirit and unity demonstrated in that first mass action became a Mahar legend. Some caste Hindus

attended the Conferences, but the burning of Manusmriti cost Ambedkar the approval of all but the most radical of his caste Hindu supporters.

The second Mahar satyagraha was initiated in 1929 in an attempt to gain entry to the Parvati temple in Pune. This effort was also conducted in the Gandhian style, but it was not approved by Gandhi or the Congress. Untouchables from several castes led by a Mahar from Pune, together with some Maratha and Brahman sympathisers joined in a four month attempt to enter the gates of the complex on Parvati Hill. "A song written by a Mahar for the Satyagraha related that the marchers climbed the steps to the temple gates shouting the names of Lord Shankar, Shivaji Maharaj Chokhamela and Dr. Ambedkar." (Zelliot, 1996, p. 164)²

Though Gandhi's name did not find mention, the technique and inspiration for the Satyagraha undoubtedly were drawn from Gandhi's teachings. Although Ambedkar's name was shouted by the marchers, he was not present. "The Anti-Untouchability sub-Committee created by Congress in March 1929 investigated the Satyagraha. The committee, which included the Hindu Maha Sabha leader Pandit M.M Malviya and Jammalal Bajaj, a Marwari businessman from Wardha who had built a temple for untouchables in his home district, expressed their disapproval of the satyagraha and recommended that the Congress should not support it. According to their report, half a dozen temples had already been opened; negotiations with the temple trustees were being upset by the "atmosphere of bitterness and distrust" created by the satyagraha; and the "Bombay untouchable leaders... did not make too much of a fetish of non-violence in the face of attack." (Zelliot, 1996, p.164)³

Although there was no direct confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi on this issue, the failure of the satyagraha (Parvati temple was not open to untouchables until India's independence in 1947) and the lack of Congress support in an action performed according to Gandhian principles, increased the distrust, on the part of Ambedkar and his followers, of the Congress and Gandhi. The last of the Mahar satyagrahas, held from 1930 to 1935 at Nasik, widened the breach.

This largest and longest satyagraha effort took place at the Kala Ram temple in the important pilgrimage centre of Nasik. Organised by Ambedkar and the local Mahar leaders, the Kala Ram satyagraha involved thousands of untouchables in efforts to enter the temple and to participate in the annual temple procession. As in the case of the Parvati satyagraha in Pune, the attempt was unsuccessful. Here, too, opposition came not only from the orthodox Hindu but also from some local Congressmen. The outcome of the Kala Ram satyagraha, however, was not only further disillusionment with the satyagraha method and the attitude of the Congress, but also a rejection of Hinduism and a strengthening of the separatist political stance then developing among untouchables.

In 1930, the first year of the Kala Ram satyagraha, Ambedkar appeared before a large Conference of the Depressed Classes at Nagpur. Although he had helped to plan and had encouraged the Nasik satyagraha, he barely

mentioned the untouchables' attempt to enter the Kala Ram temple in his presidential address to the Conference. Instead, he dwelt on political matters. Ambedkar had just been designated as one of the two Depressed class representative of The Round Table Conference to be held in London, and he stated the position he would present to that august body in its deliberation on the future Constitution of India. He held that only swaraj (independence) would bring the possibility of equality to the Depressed Classes, a position not before stated by an untouchable leader. Ambedkar's option for independence, however, contained a proviso. He told his audience that while he agreed with the Congressmen, who said that no country was good enough to rule over another, he intended to tell the Congress 'point blank' that the proposition does not end there and "that it is equally true that no class is good enough to rule over another class." (*Zelliot*, 1996, p.165)⁴

In this Nagpur speech, Ambedkar also indicated that he did not intend to press for a separate electorate for untouchables, one in which they could vote for their candidates independently of the caste Hindu vote. This position differed from the plea for a separate electorate, similar to that won by the Muslims, advocated in 1928-29 by most of the Depressed class groups in their testimony to the Simon Commission. Ambedkar, however, did ask for guaranteed rights, including "adequate" representation on all elected political bodies. This more moderate stance was still out of line with the Congress position. In 1928, the Nehru plan for Government had rejected the idea of specific guaranteed rights for

untouchables, at the same time that it abrogated the 1916 Congress - Muslim League agreement assuring communal representation for Muslims.

THE FIRST ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

At the first round table Conference, held in 1930, which no Congress man attended because of the Non Co-operation Movement, Ambedkar altered his moderate goal. Since his plea for adult suffrage had been rejected by the British, and the Muslim demand for separate electorates appeared unalterable, Ambedkar shifted his position and argued for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes for a ten year period. Consequently, Ambedkar's political stance with regard to the Congress was stiffened considerably, prior to his encounter with Gandhi at the Second Round Table Conference held in London in 1931.

On 4th January 1931, Ambedkar submitted to the First Round Table Conference, "A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of a self-governing India." (*Krishnan*, 1997, p.83) Through this document, he proposed that the Depressed Classes be given sufficient political power to influence legislative and executive action for the purpose of securing their welfare. "As regards the method of representation", he proposed "the Depressed Classes should have the right to elect their representative to the provincial and Central Legislatures,

(a) by adult suffrage, and (b) by separate electorate for the first ten years and there after by joint electorates and reserved seats, it being understood that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed Classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accomplished by adult suffrage.” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p.84)⁵ “Before the first session of the Round Table Conference was concluded, the reports of the Minorities Committee and the Federal Structure Committee were placed before the Conference and were passed by the Conference. Although arrangement on details was lacking, it was unanimously accepted that the untouchables were entitled to recognition as a separate entity for political and Constitutional purposes.” (Ambedkar, Vol. IX , 1990, p. 54)

The significance of this Conference of the Depressed Classes lay in the Report of the Minorities Committee. The Committee observed ‘It was, therefore, plain that, failing an agreement, separate electorates, with all their drawbacks and difficulties would have to be retained as the basis of the electoral arrangements under the new Constitution. From this the question of proportions would arise. Under these circumstances, the claims of the Depressed Classes were entitled to recognition as a separate entity for political purpose” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p. 84) In other words, Ambedkar had succeeded in obtaining, from the Committee a verdict that the Depressed Classes were entitled to recognition as a separate entity for political purpose.

What brought about this change in Ambedkar’s stance at the first Round Table Conference? When Ambedkar found that minorities particularly Mohammedans were clamouring for separate electorates, though originally an

advocate of joint electorates, he decided to change his stand with a view to safeguard the Depressed Classes. Therefore, he proposed separate electorates for them as well, for a limited period of ten years.

A rapid transformation was taking place in him--- from a moderate to an extremist. In the absence of Gandhi, he found himself without any option to his views. The absence of Gandhi enabled him to become bolder in his outbursts and to buttress his claim to be the acknowledge leader of the Depressed Classes. The First Round Table Conference did not lead to any tangible results as the Indian National Congress, the major political party, absented itself from the Conference and Gandhi at that time was in prison.

The first Conference was followed by the calling off of the Civil Disobedience Movements and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact leading to the appearance of M.K. Gandhi at the second Round Table Conference, with all the prestige of the national movement behind him and a claim to be the sole real representative of the people. "Yet what followed was, in a sense, remarkable or at least ironic". (*Omvedt*, 1994, p.169) The second Conference and the Ramsey MacDonald Award (for separate electorates) developed into, of all things, a confrontation. Why should this have happened?

From the nationalist's point of view two things were objectionable about the shape being given to the Constitution in the first Conference : the powers left to the princely states, (i.e., its federal structure) and

the separate electorates for minorities of all the participants in the first Conference : the powers left to the princely states, (i.e. Its federal structure) and the separate electorates for minorities of all the participants in the first Conference, Ambedkar's position (adult suffrage and reserved seats) was actually the closest to the nationalist one-and had there been any hope of giving a different shape to the future construction, some beginnings might have been made here, in an alliance of nationalists with Ambedkar and liberal representatives. Yet, there was no real resistance from nationalist forces (as represented by Gandhi, or from organised pressure outside) to either the federal structure or to separate electorates for other minorities, only exception being the case of untouchables. Why?

Perhaps the simplest reason was that the nationalists had already conceded the need for separate electorates to the powerful Muslim minority and had no strong interest in fighting for democracy in the princely states or opposing the federalism which institutionalised princely autocracy. When Ambedkar changed his position to support separate electorates (which he did when it was obvious there would be no universal suffrage) he came to represent, very simply, the most vulnerable force among all those claiming special protection. (*Omvedt, 1994*)

How, along with this purely tactical consideration was the attitude of Hindu the Congressmen, and Gandhi in particular, towards the Dalit and the issues of untouchability and caste.

SEEDS OF SUSPICION

The historic clash of 1931 between Ambedkar and Gandhi was foreshadowed in their first meeting Mani Bhavan, Bombay on 14th August 1931. (*Krishnan*, 1997) This meet was arranged in the hope of averting a clash between the two at the ensuing Round Table Conference. Ambedkar “tried to impress on Gandhi his point that the Congress had so far not done anything tangible for the Depressed Classes and that Gandhi was under the delusion in imagining that the Depressed Classes were solidly behind him as the representative of the people. Mr. Gandhi did not admit that the Congress had not done any thing or was not doing anything for the Depressed Classes.” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p.85) Gandhi stated that the Congress had spent Rs. 20 lakhs for the removal of untouchability. Ambedkar commented that in his hands this money would have achieved great results. Gandhi expressed surprise that “men like you should offer opposition to me and Congress.” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p.85)⁶

Ambedkar wanted a frank opinion from Gandhi, regarding the decision of the First Round Table Conference. After the deliberation, it has been proposed that the Depressed Classes should be given political recognition in the new Constitution, and like other minorities, should be given political safeguards and adequate representation in the legislatures. Gandhi refused to endorse the decision of the first Round Table Conference. On the contrary, in Gandhi’s opinion the suggestion was suicidal as far as the Depressed Classes were concerned. This

was Gandhi's firm stand. Ambedkar himself acknowledged that "Before going to the first session of the Round Table Conference, I had an interview with Gandhi in Bombay, in which he had told me that he was not in favour of regarding the untouchables as a separate entity for political purposes." (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p. 56)

The Times of India wrote in defence of Gandhi that, though Ambedkar convinced of "the insincere attitude of the Congress towards the grievances of the untouchables. What can the poor Mahatma do when the whole country simply believes in untouchability". (The Times of India, 18th Aug., 1931)⁷

This meeting showed that Ambedkar was critical and suspicious of Gandhi. In an interview to The Times of India, Ambedkar vehemently criticised Gandhi to the extent of saying that "To place the interest of Bardoli above those of India and refuse, on that account, to go to England to take part in the deliberations of the Round Table Conference seems to me to be the height of folly. To bother about the petty tyrannies of village officers and to be unmindful of the bigger problem, the settlement of which will enable us to exercise control of those very officers is a thing which I cannot understand" (The Times of India, 17th Aug., 1931)⁸

In between the two Conferences, Ambedkar met Gandhi in London. The meeting took place in the turbulent atmosphere. "According to B.C Kamble's description, Gandhi treated Ambedkar with a lack of even normal politeness while Ambedkar responded with a condemnation of the Congress, walking out after a scathing speech ending with the famous statement, 'Mahatmaji, I have no country'. This was not dialogue, but confrontation. With these meetings started, the "war between Gandhi and Ambedkar." (Keer, 1990, p. 173) Gandhi was "not in favour of regarding the untouchables as a

separate entity for political purpose". On the other hand, Ambedkar claimed special representation for his community.

They confronted each other again at the Conference, each speaking with emotion and eloquence, with the self assurance of leaders who can gather masses behind them. Each claimed to speak on behalf of untouchables. There was a vast difference in point of view, with Ambedkar stressing the need for political power for the Dalits, and with Gandhi arguing reform and protection from above : "what these people need more than election to the legislatures is protection from social and religious persecution." But the emotional quality of the debate indicates even a deeper clash. (*Omvedt*, 1994)

A HISTORIC CLASH

At the second Round Table Conference, Ambedkar confronted Gandhi, who not only refused to consider separate electorates for the Depressed Classes but also opposed any form of special representation involving reserved seats. The first meeting in Bombay had sown the seed for the acrimonious debate that was to follow. This unsatisfactory meeting, and the basic disagreement between these leaders, on the issue of special representation for untouchables, made negotiations during the Round Table Conference sessions difficult. The situation was exacerbated by Gandhi questioning of Ambedkar's bonafides : "I say, that it is not a proper claim which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the

whole of the untouchables of India I myself in my own person claim to represent the vast mass of the untouchables". (*Zelliot, 1996, p.166*)⁹

These initial skirmishes showed how diametrically opposed to each other were Gandhi and Ambedkar, the former claiming to represent the interest of India as a whole, and the later not only repudiating his claim but also casting aspersions on Gandhi capabilities. According to Ambedkar, "Gandhi was not fit to play the role he undertook to play. No country has ever sent a delegate to take part in the framing of the Constitution, who was completely unequipped in training and in study. Gandhi went to the R.T.C with a song of the Saint Narsi Mehta on his tongue. It would have been better for him and better for his country if he had taken in his armpit a volume on comparative Constitutional law." (*Ambedkar, 1989, Vol.V p.289*)

The second Round Table Conference was held from 7th Sept. to 1st Dec. 1931. This time the personnel of the Conference was enlarged by including a few more delegate such as Sir Muhammed Iqbal, the Muslim League President; Dr. S.K.Dutta, the Christian representative; G.D.Birla, the great financier, Pandit Malviya, a sanatani reformer; Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India; and Sir Ali Imam. The outstanding feature of this session was the presence of Gandhi enigmatic personality. "The first session of the R.T.C was "Hamlet" without the Prince of Denmark!" (*Keer, 1990, p.171*)

Shortly before the Conference met, a change had come over in Britain's body politic. Though Ramsay MacDonald remained in the Prime Minister's chair as before, the Labour Government had been replaced by a

National Government. More over, the seat of Secretary of State too had a new occupant. Wedgewood Benn had been replaced by Sir Samuel Hoare. Conservative leaders, like Churchill, vehemently opposed the proposed transfer of power to India. Against this backdrop, the main work of the Round Table Conference was to be done in the Federal Structure Committee and the Minorities Committee. The Conference was to re-examine and amplify the reports prepared by the corresponding committees of the first session of the Round Table Conference. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar were the members of the Minorities Committee and the Federal Structure Committee.

The main business before the Conference - the key problem in the words of Ramsay MacDonald, "was the solution of the Hindu-Muslim differences". (*Krishnan, 1997, p.88*) It was natural that when several communities representing their interests, met at a common table, the whole problem was bound to become totally complicated. Consequently, the entire exercise centred around finding a solution to the conflicting interests of all minorities represented at the Conference, particularly Hindus, Muslims and the Depressed Classes.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE DIALOGUE

Gandhi made his maiden speech at the Conference on 15th Sept. 1931, in the Federal Structure Committee. He claimed that the Congress was a national organisation and represented all Indian interests and classes, including

Muslims. It represented the Depressed Classes and recalled, as far back as in 1920, - "Mr. Gandhi said - the Congress has from its very commencement, taken up the cause of the so called 'untouchables'. There was a time when the Congress had at every annual session, as its adjunct, the Social Conference, to which the late Ranade dedicated his energies among his many other activities. Headed by him, you will find, in the programme of the social Conference, reform in connection with the 'untouchables' taking a prominent place, but in 1920, the Congress took a large step and brought in the question of the removal of untouchability as a plank on the political platform, making it an important item of the political programme. Just as the Congress considered the Hindu- Muslim unity- thereby meaning unity amongst all the classes - to be indispensable for the attainment of Swaraj, so also did the Congress consider the removal of the curse of untouchability as an indispensable condition for the attainment of full freedom. The position the Congress took up in 1920 remains the same today; and so you will see the Congress has attempted from its very beginning to be what it described itself to be, namely, national in every sense of the term" (Ambedkar, 1990, Vol.IX, p. 56)

From this speech it was evident that Gandhi wanted to represent India as a whole and his approach seemed to be one of integration. Nevertheless, Ambedkar felt : "The speech, however, gave no indication as to what line Gandhi was going to take on the demands presented by the untouchables, although I could see the drift of it." (Ambedkar, 1990, Vol. IX, p.56)

On this issue of special representation claimed by different communities, Gandhi stated, "the Congress has reconciled itself to special treatment of the -Muslim-Sikh tangle. There are sound historical reasons for it but the Congress will not that doctrine in any shape or form... So far as the untouchables are concerned, I have not

yet quite grasped what Ambedkar has to say, but of course the Congress will share the honour with Ambedkar of representing the interests of the untouchables. They are as dear to the Congress as the interests of any body or of any other individual throughout the length and breadth of India. Therefore, I would most strongly resist any further special representation”.

(Ambedkar, 1990, Vol. IX, p.57)

Ambedkar considered this as “nothing but a declaration of war by Mr. Gandhi and the Congress against the untouchables. In any case, it resulted in a war between the two. With this declaration by Mr. Gandhi, I knew what Mr. Gandhi would do in the Minorities Committee which was the main forum for the discussion of this question.” (Ambedkar, 1990, Vol. IX, p.57)

Ambedkar reiterated the stand he had taken on the special representation for the Depressed Classes at the first Round Table Conference. In his first speech on 16th Sept., 1932 as a member of the Federal Structure Committee he stated, “the first thing I would like make clear is this: I want the Depressed Classes to be treated as a separate community for political purposes in the same way as the Muhammadans or the Christians are treated. They must have the same right of representation, not only in the Provincial Legislative councils, but also in both Houses of the Central Legislature.”

(*Krishnan*, 1997, p.90)¹⁰

The Minorities Committee, with the British Premier, Ramsay MacDonald, as Chairman, was constituted to deal with the Hindu-Muslim problems. Since the minorities problem was a problem internal to the Indian problem, Ramsay MacDonald rejected the suggestion of government’s arbitration.

He said that the delegates should themselves undertake the responsibility but if he could assist he would only be glad to do so. The problem was as important as it was difficult. He appealed to all delegates to reach an agreement. The approach of the British Prime Minister of relegating his government to the background caused alarm amongst some minorities that a matter of such importance should be left in the hands of the two larger communities. Ambedkar termed the adjournment as a mischievous move and claimed that the Depressed Classes had already presented their case at the Minorities Sub-Committee at the First Round Table Conference. "The only thing which remains is a short statement suggesting their quantum of representation in the different Legislatures". (*Keer, 1990,p.175*) He made his position clear on the question of claims and counterclaims put forward by various minorities. "I have no quarrel with the question whether any particular community should get weightage or not but I want to say most emphatically that whoever is willing to give that weightage, he must not give it - he cannot give it -out of my share. I want to make that absolutely plain." (Ambedkar, Vol.IX, 1990, p.59)

Sir Henry Gidney, representing the Anglo Indians, supporting Ambedkar stated, "in making this new map of India, all minorities should have the right of putting their own little spot on it and I do not see how we can if the settlement here is going to be entirely a Hindu-Muslim pact." (*Krishnan,1997, p.91*)¹¹

MacDonald clarified that they were all co-operating together not for a statement between any two or any three, but a complete statement. Ambedkar became apprehensive that adjournment would give time and

opportunity to Gandhi and associates to manoeuvre a settlement which would be detrimental to the interest of the Depressed Classes. He was, therefore, keen that Committee deliberations should continue in one form or the other so that the tempo for securing special rights for the Depressed Classes was maintained. Ambedkar, therefore, suggested that a small committee consisting of members drawn from various minorities and the Congress should discuss the problem during the adjournment. Ambedkar felt that unless the purpose was fully spelt out, any adjournment would be counter-productive to the interest of the Depressed Classes and other minorities. The interval may be used for the purpose of solving the Hindu-Muslim question leaving the others in cold. He was, therefore, of the view that the Minorities Committee should itself grapple with the problem rather than allow any informal committee to arrive at a solution of the communal question. Ambedkar made it clear that if the Depressed Classes were not going to be recognised in the future Constitution of India, he would not support the proposition for adjournment. Gandhi brushed aside Ambedkar's objections. "I can only act as a humble messenger of peace, try to get together representatives of different interests and groups, and see whether by being closed in one room and by heart-to-heart conversation, we may not be able to remove cobwebs of misunderstanding and see our way clear to the goal that lies so hazily before us today." (*Krishnan, 1997, p.92*)¹² Gandhi took considerate pains to explain his position. He was of the view that there were ways and means of guaranteeing protection to every single interest. He assured that nobody would be hampered in pressing his views and the aim of the committee would be to "put our heads together

to evolve a scheme.” (*Krishnan, 1997,p.92*) Gandhi laboured hard to make the members disabuse their minds of the idea that there is going to be any steam - rolling in the Conference and in the informal meetings. On this basis, the negotiation during the period of adjournment began.

During the period of adjournment no settlement could be reached. Consequently, when the Minorities Committee met again on 1st Oct. 1931, Gandhi asked for a further week’s adjournment. He hoped that at the end of the week, it would be possible to report some sort of a settlement. This proposal was seconded by Aga Khan and Sardar Ujjal Singh. Ambedkar opposed the proposal as he had serious doubts whether this would serve any fruitful purpose, for Gandhi had stated on the first day that he was not prepared to give political recognition to any other community other than Muhammadans and Sikhs. Since the view taken by Gandhi in the Federal Structure Committee was well considered, Ambedkar felt that it would be useless for the Depressed Classes to attend any informal meeting. Ambedkar was supported by Sir Henry Gidney and Rao Bahadur Pannir Selvam, the representative of the Indian Christians. Dr. Moonje, Sir Muhammad Safi and Sarojini Naidu felt that the objection raised by Ambedkar was merely the result of a misapprehension as to the nature of the proposal made by Mahatma Gandhi and seconded by his Highness Aga Khan. Finally the proposal for further adjournment was accepted.

During the second adjournment also, no acceptable solution could be found. When the Minorities Committee met again on 8th Oct.1931, Gandhi admitted with deep sorrow that he had failed to secure an agreed solution of the communal question. He blamed the composition of the Indian delegation for the defeat. Gandhi said “Causes of failure were inherent in the composition of the Indian delegation. We are almost, all, not elected representatives of the parties or groups whom we are presumed to represent, we are here by the nomination of the government. Nor are those whose presence was absolutely necessary for an agreed solution to be found here”. (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p. 63) He suggested that attention should be given to the hammering of the Constitution. “The informal work of discovering a true solution of the communal problem will and must continue; only it must not balk or be allowed to block the progress of the Constitution - building. Attention must be deviated from it and concentrated on the main part of the structure”. (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p.64)

Gandhi assertion that the delegates were nominated by the government and did not represent people was vehemently refuted. Ambedkar said “we cannot deny the allegation that we are nominees of the Government, but speaking for myself, I have not the slightest doubt that even if the Depressed Classes of India were given the chance of electing their representatives to this Conference, I would, all the same, find a place here. I say, therefore, that whether I am a nominee or not, I fully represent the claims of my communities. Let no man be under the mistaken impression as regards that.” (Ambedkar, Vol.IX, 1990, p.65)

SEPARATE ELECTORATES – ROOT CAUSE FOR DISPUTE

On 28th Oct. 1931, Gandhi circulated the Congress schemes for a communal settlement for consideration by the Minorities Committee. This scheme was based on joint electorates and adult franchise. MacDonald decided to adjourn the meeting. However, he asked the representatives of the minorities to arrive at a common agreement. He stated that the British government would welcome such an agreement. During this adjournment the minorities reached an agreement, commonly referred to as Minorities Pact. This pact was signed by the Aga Khan for the Muslims, Ambedkar for the Depressed Classes, Rao Bahadur Pannir Selvan for the Christians, Sir Henry Gidney for the Anglo Indians and Sir Hubert Carr for the European. In this document, there were many important proposals which affected the Depressed Classes. These included conferment of civil rights, prevention of discriminatory laws, statutory departments to protect minorities, induction of minorities in the cabinet by convention, representation through separate electorates for twenty years in the face of Depressed Classes, adult suffrage, fair representation in the public services for all communities and invalidation of discriminatory customs and usage.

Through this pact, the principle of separate electorates was thus sought to be extended to the Depresses Classes. When Gandhi came to know this, he was furious by the idea of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. He attacked everybody who had taken part in producing the Minorities Pact. He

categorically stated that while the Congress will always accept any solution that may be acceptable to the Hindu, the Muhammadans and the Sikhs, the Congress will be no party to the special electorates for any other minorities.

In a passionate speech in the Minorities Committee on 13th Nov. 1931, he said, "I can understand the claims advanced by other minorities, but the claim advanced on behalf of the untouchables, that to me, is the 'unkindest out of all'. It means the perpetual bar sinister. I would not sell the vital interest of the untouchables even for the sake of winning the freedom of India. I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast masses of the untouchables. Here I speak not merely on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was referendum of the untouchables, their vote and that I would top the poll. And I would work from one end of India to the other to tell the untouchables that separate electorates and separate reservation is not the way to remove this bar sinister which is the shame not of them, but of orthodox Hinduism. Let this Committee and let the whole world know that today there is a body of Hindu reformers who are pledged to remove this blot of untouchability. We do not want on our register and our census untouchables classified as a separate class... Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity?.. Therefore, with all my regard for Dr. Ambedkar, and for his desire to see the untouchables uplifted, with all my regard for his ability, I must say in all humility that the great wrong under which he has laboured and perhaps the bitter experiences that he has undergone, have for the moment wrapped his judgement.. I say that it is not a proper claim which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the untouchables of India. It will create a division in Hinduism... I do not mind untouchables, if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity... I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions

set forth in the village... If I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist it with my life.” (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p. 68-69)

Gandhi foresaw separate electorates would create deep divisions in Hinduism. He also foresaw that adult franchise would give them complete security as the orthodox Hindus would have to approach them for votes. Gandhi had analysed Ambedkar: “He has every right to be bitter. That he does not break our heads is an act of self restraint on his part... Ambedkar is so much saturated with suspicion that he cannot see anything else. He sees in every Hindu a determined opponent of the “untouchables” and it is quite natural.” (Ambedkar, 1990, Vol. IX, p.71)

With Gandhi denouncing the Minorities Pact, there was no hope for an agreed solution. The minorities requested MacDonald to decide the method and numbers for election to the Central and Provincial Legislatures in the future Constitution of India. Before undertaking this task, MacDonald asked every member of the Committee to sign a request to him to settle the communal question and to pledge themselves to accept his decision. (*Krishnan, 1997*)

The seeds of doubt and distrust were sown deep in the minds of Ambedkar regarding the attitude of the Gandhi towards untouchables. He remarked, “The discussion in the Committee threw Mr. Gandhi attitude to the untouchables in relief. Everybody felt that Mr. Gandhi was the most determined enemy of the untouchables. So much of his energy and attention, did Mr. Gandhi, concentrate on the question of the untouchables that, it would not be unfair if it was said that the main purpose for which Mr.

Gandhi came to the Round Table Conference was to oppose the demands of the untouchables.”
(Ambedkar, Vol.IX, 1990, p. 70)

The second Round Table Conference, thus ended on 1st Dec., 1931, failing to come to any agreed settlement. The members of the Minorities Committee authorised MacDonalld in writing, to arbitrate and to award his decision. Gandhi and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru wrote separate letters accepting the Premier’s offer, Gandhi in connection with the Muslim question only, while Sir Sapru for the general question.

It is interesting to note that Subhash Chandra Bose was critical of Gandhi performance in his book ‘The Indian Struggle’. According to Bose, Gandhi failed because of lack of planning. He further criticised Gandhi for not contacting important persons in America, in the League of Nations, and in England. In the evaluation of New York Times, 20th Nov., 1931, Gandhi did not have united India behind him and the problem was made more complex for him by the British stabbing him in the back particularly in deciding the composition of the representatives attending the Conference.

Both Ambedkar and Gandhi returned empty handed. Both had presented their divergent views on tackling the political problem of the Depressed Classes. Intellectual stalwarts like Sapru, Sarojini Naidu, M.R.Jayakar and Muhammad Shafi did not succeed in softening their adamant attitudes and working

out an *acceptable* solution. The direct clash of Gandhi and Ambedkar only complicated the political scene.

“Ambedkar in his earlier years, had himself denounced the *system* of separate electorates as venomous and disintegrating for the country. He advocated for general joint electorates with certain reservation of seats for the minorities. At that time, he considered this as politically just and a rational formula for successful working of any democracy. At the second Round Table Conference, Ambedkar had reversed his earlier stand and now advocated separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. Gandhi opposed this firmly and was committed to joint electorates. In retrospect, a settlement should have been reached if Ambedkar had reverted to his stand of joint electorates or if Gandhi had climbed down from his position of no separate electorates to that of reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes within the system of joint electorates.” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p. 98)

AFTERMATH OF THE CLASH

There was nothing left for the delegates but to return to India and await the decision of MacDonald. Gandhi immediately returned to India. He arrived in Bombay on 28th Dec. 1931, “some 8,000 Depressed class men and women staged a black flag demonstration early in the morning battling with Congress volunteers, as Gandhi set foot on his homeland”. (*Keer*, 1990,p. 191) This demonstration was organised by Shivtarkar, Secretary of Ambedkar’s Depressed Classes institute to counter act an announced welcome by Congress led Depressed Classes group.

Ambedkar returned to Bombay on January 29th, 1931 arriving with other members of the Indian Franchise Committee (Lothian Committee)

which was to pursue some of the questions of an election scheme. He was welcomed by various Depressed Classes groups, among whom were the leaders of the pro-Congress factions, P.Balu, N.S.Kajrolkar. The same evening at a mass meeting in Bombay, Ambedkar was presented with an address of appreciation on behalf of one hundred and fourteen Depressed class institutions. "You have, indeed, proved to the hilt our claim for equality of status and treatment, and, but for the valiant fight you put on our behalf, our claims would have been ignored. You have done all that is humanly possible in safeguarding our rights and we are sure to stand, as a result of your endeavour in London, on an equal footing with all major communities in India in the near future". (*Keer*, 1990, p.194)

The Second Round Table Conference marked the first confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Gandhi had made it clear, in his speech on 13th Nov. 1931, that he would resist separate electorates demanded by the Depressed Classes if necessary at the cost of his life. The seeds for their second historic confrontation on the political rights of the untouchables were thus already sown.

The whole nation awaited the decision of Ramsay MacDonald. the newspapers report indicated that Ramsay MacDonald would grant separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. Gandhi, a worried man in Yeravada Prison (just outside Poona), dashed a letter to Sir Samuel Hoare. He reminded Hoare, of his statement of the Round Table Conference on 13th Nov.1931, "that...

if, therefore, the Government decided to create a separate electorate for the untouchables, I must fast unto death.” (*Krishnan*, 1997,p.102)¹³

Gandhi reiterated his objections to the creation of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. “I am not against their representation in the legislatures... But I hold that separate electorate is harmful for them and for Hinduism, whatever it may be from the purely political standpoint. To appreciate the harm that separate electorates would do them one has to know how they are distributed amongst the so called caste Hindus and how dependent they are on the latter: So far as Hinduism is concerned, separate electorates would simply vivisect and disrupt it. For me, the question of these classes is predominantly moral and religious. The political aspect, important though it is, dwindles into insignificance compared to the moral and religious issues.” (*Krishnan*, 1997, p. 102)¹⁴

In sum, Gandhi fundamental approach was that the Depressed Classes unlike Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, had no separate religious identity since times immemorial. Any attempt to divide them politically from the Hindus would strike at the very root of the unity of Hindu religion and result in another great divide in Hinduism. For Gandhi, it was therefore not only a question of politics but a matter of life and death for the unity of his Hindu faith. In view of their numerical strength, he realised the importance of keeping the Depressed Classes within the Hindu fold both, as a matter of religion and politics. He had time in prison to ponder over this issue and further steel his resolve.

What was Ambedkar to think of all this? It must have appeared to him as unbearable arrogance, even as foolish arrogance - for behind

Gandhi, in the Congress, stood not a band of sincere social reformers but, (Ambedkar was convinced) a class of Brahmans, and other high caste Indians concerned to maintain their monopoly of economic and social power within any 'Swaraj.' Would separate electorates have been so harmful to the Dalits? Dalits themselves still debate the issue. (*Omvedt*, 1994) The point is that Gandhi, who feared a political division... in the villages ignored the division that already existed; in his warning against the spread of violence, he ignored the violence already existing in the lives of the Dalits. Claiming to speak in the name of untouchables, claiming to represent their 'cause' and their 'vital interests', Gandhi was not speaking from their perspective, he was not even speaking as a national leader, he was speaking as a Hindu in his appearance at this second Round Table Conference. "Behind the moralism stood a direct political challenge : Gandhi was refusing to admit Ambedkar's representative status claiming that the Dalits supported him and the Congress. From the time of this confrontation in London a political battle ensued in which all the entire Congress elite (as well as the pro-Congress sections of the press) sought to organise meeting of the untouchables, manoeuvre or produce Dalit spokesman (for instance, a Dalit cricketer, P. Balu) who took a line opposing Ambedkar, and do whatever they could to show that untouchables are denouncing Ambedkar and that there was a 'wave of support for joint electorates'. Ambedkar and militant Dalits responded with demonstrations (in

which newly formed Samta Sainik Dal played an important role) seeking the support of various Dalit organisations.” (*Omvedt*, 1994, p.172)

Thus, after the third Round Table Conference, during which Gandhi was in jail, the British government announced a decision regarding representation which, it was hoped, would effect a compromise between the Congress and Ambedkar. This communal award of 1932 gave the Depressed Classes a double vote, one in a special constituency for a modest number of reserved seats and another in the general electorate. Gandhi response to communal award was to enter a ‘fast unto death’.

RAJAH—MOONJE PACT

In the political process that occurred with the confrontation with Gandhi in London, the Ramsay MacDonald award on 16th Aug. 1932, Gandhi fast (begun 20th Sept.) and the final Poona Pact (24th Sept.), one event that stands out is the “Rajah-Moonje Pact”. This represented an agreement between the Madras Dalit leader M.C.Rajah and B.S.Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha and it was worked out some time in January 1932. With Rajah stood G.A. Gavai of Nagpur, and Ambedkar expressed to him his bitterness at the intervention Rajah and Gavai had earlier called for separate electorates, now they were prevailed upon to support the idea of joint electorates with Hindu spokesman claiming that the Depressed Classes, with supposed membership of 40,000, was the real all-India

organisation with Rajah, its long time leader, the true Dalit spokesman. To Ambedkar, Rajah and Gavai were simply acting as upper caste agents in this matter, and he had already condemned the association in his Nagpur Speech of 1930 as a nominal organisation existing mainly on paper. In this he was undoubtedly right but the Depressed Class Association intervention illustrates more than this, and that is the degree to which not only Gandhians but also the Hindu nationalists were wooing untouchables. (*Omvedt*, 1994)

In between the end of third round Conference and the declaration of the communal award, Ambedkar went to England in May 1932, to convince the British Government to the necessity of granting Separate electorates to the Depressed Classes in the settlement of the communal issue. He returned to Bombay on 17 August 1932-- the day on which the communal Award was announced.

THE COMMUNAL AWARD

The communal Award allocated seats through separate electorates to the different communities in each province. The communal Award in relation to the Depressed Classes may be summed up as follows :

“Members of the Depressed Classes qualified to vote will vote in a general constituency. In view of the fact that for a considerable period these classes would be unlikely, by this means alone, to secure any adequate representation in the Legislature, a number

of special seats will be assigned to them as show in the table. These seats will be filled by election from special constituencies in which only members of the Depressed Classes electorally qualified will be entitled to vote. Any person voting in such special constituency will, as stated above, be also entitled to vote in a general constituency. It is intended that these constituencies should be formed in selected areas where the Depressed Classes are the most numerous, and that except in Madras, they should not cover the whole area of province. In Bengal it seems possible that in some general constituencies a majority of the voters will belong to the Depressed Classes . Accordingly, pending further investigation, no number has been fixed for the members to be returned from the Special Depressed Class constituencies in that province. It is intended to secure that the Depressed Classes should obtain not less than ten seats in the Bengal legislature.

The precise definition in each Province of those who (it electorally qualified) will be entitled to vote in special Depressed Classes constituencies has not yet been finally determined. It will be based as a rule on the general principles advocated in The Franchise Committee's Report. Modification may, however, be found necessary in some Provinces in Northern India, where the application of the general criteria of Untouchability might result in definition unsuitable in some respects to the special conditions of the Province. His Majesty's Government do not consider that these Depressed Classes constituencies will be required for more than a limited time. They intend that the Constitution shall provide that they shall come to an end after 20 years if they have not previously been abolished under the general powers of electoral revision"...(Krishnan, 1997, p. 115)¹⁵

Thus in the History of India untouchables were for the first time given independent political existence and legal rights to the shape the future of motherland. It was a victory of Ambedkar's ideology of uplifting untouchables. (Sharma, 1992). The Communal award elicited varied responses. "The Congress

Party including the Nationalist Muslims strongly condemned the award. Their main objection was to the provision of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes which amounted to political segregation. Moreover, the Award was harmful to interest of the Depressed Classes as much as that they were given much less representation than promised to them under Minorities Pact.” (Krishnan, 1997, p. 118)¹⁶

The Award was a cruel shock for Gandhi. As the Congress representative at The Second Round Table Conference, he valiantly fought against the recognition of the Untouchables as a separate element. By the act of confirming the Communal Award, the British government had not only overruled Gandhi but also had conferred recognition upon the untouchables as a separate and distinct element in national life entitled to the same safeguards as other minorities such as Muslims, Sikhs and Indian Christians. Without doubt, this was a historic decision in the sense that recognition of Depressed Classes as a distinct political entity was accepted for the first time.

In spite of the benefits accruing to the Untouchables, Ambedkar too Communal award was not up to the mark. The Communal Award had scaled down the representation in the Provincial Legislature to quite a small number. (Free Press Journal, 24 August 1932)¹⁷

In his words :

“The Communal Award gave the Untouchables two benefits

1. a fixed quota of seats to be elected by a separate electorate of the Untouchables,

general electorate". (Ambedkar, vol. V, 1989, pp. 341-342)

Sir M.C.Rajah representing a faction of the Depressed Classes was dissatisfied with the Award, owing to inadequate number of seats allotted to them :

“The Community had been let down and should now throw its lot with majority community in joint electorates with reservation of seats. As a majority community with separate electorates their influence could be circumscribed where as strong section of general electorate it would be unlimited”. (Krishnan, 1997, p. 119)

“...this seeks to create such divisions in this country that it can never again stand upon its own legs”. (Krishnan, 1997, p. 119)¹⁸

THE EPIC FAST

On August 18, 1932 Gandhiji wrote another letter to the British Prime Minister, from Yavada Central Jail. He hardly cared for the fact that he was a signatory to the requisition and, therefore, was bound by the award. He said that ‘the fast shall continue till the British Government on its own or under pressure of public opinion revise their decision and withdrew the scheme of communal electorates for the Depressed Classes. (Bombay Chronicle - August 18, 1932). Macdonald replied on September 8, 1932, “Under The Government scheme the Depressed Classes will remain part of the Hindu Community... and that The British Government

has no intention of severing Depressed Classes from Hindu Community". (Sharma, 1992, p. 137).

Gandhi remained unconvinced, and his decision to a fast unto death from 20 September 1932 remain unchanged. The British Premier and his advisers could not understand Gandhi's emotional and religious approach to the problem. They even scented a political motive to recover the prestige he had lost through the decline of civil disobedience. The British Premier even questioned Gandhi's motive when he wrote, "As I understand your attitude, you propose to adopt the extreme course of starving yourself to death not in order to secure that the Depressed Classes should have joint electorates with other Hindus, which is also provided, but solely to prevent the Depressed Classes, who admittedly suffer from terrible disabilities today, from being able to secure a limited number of representatives of their own choosing to speak on their behalf on the legislation which will have a dominating influence over their future". (Krishnan, 1997, p. 120)¹⁹

Viceroy had a nagging suspicion that Gandhiji was a hardly in a position to appreciate lacerated feeling of the Depressed Classes when he said, "The fact, cannot be overlooked, that Gandhiji is not himself one of the Depressed Classes but a caste Hindu, and that it is the Depressed Classes alone who are best entitled to determine where their own interests in the matter lie. The essence of Mr. Gandhi's plan clearly is by a sedulous fostering of the popular compassion for him in his suffering to overwhelm a group of people who have not been able to accept his views regarding a matter which primarily affects them". (Sharma, 1992, p. 138)

Gandhi's critics could not understand the ethics of fasting for the solution of the political problem. Gandhi explained the rationale in a press interview on 20 September 1932, that it was based on "Faith in my cause, faith in the Hindu community, faith in the human nature itself and faith even in the official world". "My cry" he concluded "will rise to the throne of The Almighty God". Even Jawaharlal Nehru doubted the political sagacity of Gandhi.

The President of Adhi-Dravida General Association, Nagercoil, wrote, "The chief object of Gandhi in voicing for joint electorates is to keep Depressed Community under depression and slavery and dance to his fiddle. These people are now included among the Hindus. If they leave his fold then the Hindus would become a minority. His community is, therefore, threatened with a disruption. Separate electorate would deprive his community of the oppression of the voiceless people who by separate electorates would elect their true representatives to the legislature and leave away the persecution and humiliation, they now undergo at the hands of the caste Hindu who now at the eleventh hour call 'oh! My brother come and dine with me'. If this community by separate electorates be treated as human beings, then who is there to plough the field of the Brahmans...".(Krishnan, 1997, p. 12)²⁰

Ambedkar in a statement to the press, on 19 September 1932 was extremely critical of the fast. "It passes my comprehension why Mr. Gandhi should stake his life on an issue arising out of the communal question which he, at The Round Table Conference, said was one of a comparatively small importance. Indeed, to adopt the language of those of Mr. Gandhi's ways of thinking, the communal question was only an appendix to the book of India's Constitution and not the main chapter. It would have been justifiable, if Mr. Gandhi had resorted to this extreme step for obtaining independence for the country on which he

was so insistent all through Round Table Conference debates. It is also a painful surprise that Mr. Gandhi should single out special representation for the Depressed Classes in the Communal Award as an excuse for his self immolation". (Ambedkar, vol.IX, 1990, pp. 311-312). On the same day Ambedkar stated, "Though I regard the matter as closed, I am prepared to consider the proposals of the Mahatma. I, however, trust the Mahatma will not drive me to the necessity of making a choice between his life and the rights of my people. For I can never consent to deliver my people bound hand and foot to the caste Hindus for the generations to come. (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p. 317)

Ambedkar was more than aware of the significance and the magnitude of the crisis generated by Gandhi's decision to fast. It had put him into an unenviable position. People from all corners of the country appealed to him to reconsider the issues. A vicious campaign was launched against Ambedkar. He was labelled as a monster, a traitor and a hireling. But Ambedkar was in no mood to relent. He attacked the weak point in Gandhi's argument. He added that Gandhiji knew what would have happened to his life if he had resorted to a 'fast unto death' against separate electorates of Muslims or Christians or if he had gone on a fast unto death against the British Government for immediate independence. Gandhiji had never threatened a 'fast unto death' for the immediate abolition of untouchability. Despite the tension filled atmosphere, Ambedkar remained composed and the hue and cry generated by Gandhi's fast could not shake his

resolve. Louis Fisher has written, "If any body could have contemplated with equanimity the death of Gandhi, Ambedkar was the man. He called the fast, a 'political stunt'". (Times of India, September 14, 1932)²¹

The threatened fast of Gandhi created a very hostile environment for Ambedkar. Moreover, the onus of possible death of Gandhi lay directly on Ambedkar's shoulder. Ambedkar's biographer describes the situation thus : "It was a cruel irony of fate that the leaders and Press that had refused to recognise Ambedkar as the leader of the Depressed Classes were now compelled to recognise his leadership of and spokesmanship for the Depressed Classes. He now became the cynosure of the whole country." (Keer, 1990. P. 206)

Ambedkar, not caring for the criticism said "The Mahatma is not an immortal person, nor the Congress, assuming that it is not a malevolent force and is not to have an abiding existence. There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the Depressed Classes, but every one of them has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone . But the Untouchables have remained as Untouchables". (Keer, 1990, pp. 207-208)

Thus Ambedkar--Gandhi confrontation arising out of Gandhi's threat to fast unto death had stirred up serious controversy in every in nook and corner of India . Press was full of colourful letters which seemed to harp more on passion than robust common sense.

Gandhi's threat of a fast hastened efforts to reach a compromise and on 19 September a large Conference of "Hindu and Untouchable

leaders” was held in Bombay that included Ambedkar, M. C. Rajah, P. Baloo, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, M.R.Jayakar, Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, C. Rajagopalacharia, B. S. Moonje and A. V. Thakkar (in other words, primarily Hindu nationalists and Gandhians). (Omvedt, 1994)

Malaviya explained the purpose of the Conference and emphasised the gravity of the situation which demanded special settlement. This was followed by a general discussion on the subject of removal of Untouchability.

“Ambedkar stressed that Gandhi’s proposals must be obtained before he and his friends could discuss the questions of joint and separate electorates”. Rajagopalachari suggested that an agreement based on joint electorates with reservation of seats could persuade Gandhi to end his fast. The deputation which waited on Gandhi in Yeravada Jail reported that he was agreeable to changing his views against reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes in the general electorates had now changed his position against reserved seats for the Untouchables. On 13 September 1932 and again on the 19 September 1932, Gandhi accepted the idea of reserved seats “as unavoidable” and hoped that it was a “passing evil”. (Krishnan, 1997,)

COMPROMISE AND THE POONA PACT

It was finally agreed to appoint a committee consisting of Malaviya, Jayakar, Sapru, G.D.Birla and Ambedkar to go through the specific proposals and to authorise Malaviya to consult persons he liked in drafting a scheme which would be acceptable to Gandhi. All the members of the Committee were for joint electorates for the Depressed Classes except Ambedkar who demanded separate electorates. The Committee drafted a scheme known as Sapru-Jayakar scheme based on joint electorates with adequate safeguards for the protection of the interests of the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar demanded 197 reserved seats against 71 offered through separate electorates in the Communal Award. In addition, Ambedkar wanted the system of reservation to continue for 15 years and thereafter a change should only be effected after referendum to the Depressed Classes. During this tense and hectic period, while Ambedkar and the caste Hindus tried to hammer out an agreement to both the Depressed Classes and Gandhi, the health of Gandhi steadily deteriorated. (Krishnan, 1997, pp. 124-125)

Indeed the times was trying for Ambedkar. A baffled Ambedkar was under tremendous pressure. Ambedkar was continuously reminded that if Gandhi died, it would be because of his unyielding attitude. Ambedkar was on the horns of dilemma. Whether to protect the rights of the Untouchables, or to save the life of Gandhi, was the paramount question before Ambedkar. He responded to the call of humanity and saved the life of Gandhi by agreeing to alter

the Communal Award in a manner acceptable to Gandhi. Ambedkar at this juncture realised that the duty “which I owed as a part of common humanity, to save Gandhi from sure death” had to take precedence over “the problem of saving for the Untouchables, the political rights which the Prime Minister had given them”. (Ambedkar, Vol. IX, 1990, p. 88)

Gandhi wanted Ambedkar to realise that Untouchables were a part and parcel of the Hindu Community and not separate from it. By agreeing to alter the Communal Award, Ambedkar left the imperialist fold and accepted the terms of Gandhi, revealing his pragmatism and broad outlook. The major link between the Untouchables and the Hindus was Gandhi, whose life at this juncture Ambedkar revered, valued and saved. By their vision and understanding, formalised in the Poona Pact of September 1932, the issue of the Depressed Classes got merged in the issue of struggle for India’s political freedom. “Thus, in the final agreement hammered out by Sapru and Ambedkar, it was envisaged that a two-tier system of voting would allow untouchables first to select a panel of four Dalit candidates and then the general constituency (including caste Hindus) would decide among them. This provided the basis of the Poona Pact once it was accepted by Gandhi. The result was finally that Dalits gained nearly double the number of seats given to them in the Macdonald Award.” (Omvedt, 1994, pp. 173-174)

Ambedkar had some reason to be satisfied with the final outcome; the seats reserved for the Dalits were nearly equivalent to their proportion in the population. Beyond this, however, the whole process brought out

another reality. While the compromise agreement was hammered out with Ambedkar, the final agreement, the 'Poona Pact', was between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi as a representative of caste Hindus, Ambedkar as a representative of the Dalits. What Gandhi had sought to deny at the Round Table Conference and what the Congress and Hinduist leaders were continually denying in their propaganda - Ambedkar's position as the unchallenged Dalit leader was in practice confirmed. (Omvedt, 1994)

PAST AND CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO THE FAST

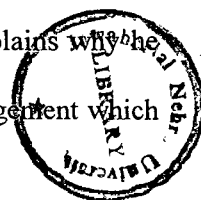
The "Epic fast", (Pyarelal, 1932) elicited varied responses not only from people of that time but even from scholars who have studied it. For Omvedt responses varied primarily because "not just a matter of different interpretations, but of the fundamentally different perspectives of high caste Hindus and Dalits". (Omvedt, 1994, p. 174).

For Gandhi the fast was one of 'purification', of seeking to 'purge Hinduism' of the 'blight of untouchability' and thus of motivating caste Hindus to take up the campaign against untouchability. "Almost all upper caste Hindus have also see it in these terms" (Omvedt, 1994, p. 174). The result is that among the upper caste political trends it has been praised by Gandhians and by those who see it as an important step in maintaining the integrationist nature of Hindu Society.

“In 1909, the introduction of separate electorates by the Morley-Minto reforms had created an institutional base for the growth of Muslim separatism. Twenty three years later, a similar attempt to make a mighty hole in the nationalist front was foiled by Gandhi’s fast”. (Krishnan, 1997, p. 129). “Gandhi had fasted for Hindu- Muslim unity he did not want two Indians. Now he was faced with the prospect of three Indians. He regarded Hindu-Muslim enmity as politically disastrous and religiously suicidal. Gandhi could not countenance the widening of the Hindu - Harijan Gulf”. (Fischer, p. 387)

For Ambedkarites, the whole issue smacks of a deep conspiracy on the part of caste Hindus and Gandhi. The fast was a direct assault against untouchables and the separate electorate given to them. The fast was a grim reminder of keeping them in the Hindu fold, and it was a ‘moral blackmail’ since Gandhi’s death would have provoked a violent backlash against Dalits through the villages. “In fact rather than a moral dialogue, hard power politics was at play in the process of negotiation that settled the fast (Ambedkar noted that at the beginning Gandhi was not even ready to concede reserved seats for untouchables). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was a far more realistic assessment.” (Omvedt, 1994, pp. 174-175)

Another view is that “if the Communal Award had not been amended by the Poona Pact in 1932, the solution of the Indian political problem during the years 1945-47 would have become infinitely more difficult than it actually was, bedevilled by the stand of the Muslim League and princely intransigence. Gandhi foresaw the problem that explains why he was ready to sacrifice his life for it . More important than the Constitutional arrangement which



did not come into operation for the next three years was the emotional catharsis through which the Hindu community passed. The fast was intended to sting the conscience of the Hindu community into right religious action. Gandhi believed that the dropping of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes was the beginning of the end of Untouchability. The dramatic circumstances in which this was done provided great publicity both to Gandhi's concern for the unity of Hinduism and to Ambedkar's leadership. Ambedkar emerged as the saviour of the Mahatma. It is an irony of fate that in September 1932, a Mahar (Ambedkar) saved the life of a caste Hindu (Gandhi) and in January 1948, a caste Hindu (Nathuram Godse) had assassinated a caste Hindu (Gandhi). As an impartial observer Reverend Fr. J.Jans wrote, one remarkable result of fast had been to set in motion powerful forces for the abolition of the curse of untouchability. The great Hindu community was never so moved as it had been since the publication of the Gandhi - Hoare - MacDonald correspondence. Almost a miracle had been wrought". (Krishnan, 1997, pp. 129-130)

In the final meeting that occurred after the Poona Pact, Ambedkar is quoted as praising Gandhi's generosity, saying 'I am very grateful to the Mahatma... I must confess that I was immensely surprised when I met him that there was so much in common between him and me'. At the same time, he went on to express reservations, including the fear of 'whether the Hindu community will abide by it'. (Bombay Chronicle, 26 september 1932)

"These few words of Ambedkar have been taken as showing much more than they really represented. At the same meeting Rajagopalachari said, he had told Mahatmaji that the greatest experiment in Satyagraha in which he ever succeeded was the conversion of Dr. Ambedkar. He had not converted Dr. Ambedkar by the coercive element in the fast but by the 'Satyagrahic' element in the fast.

And this interpretation is today given by Ravinder Kumar: Gandhi had thus achieved what was a true Satyagrahi he always strove for : he had won his opponent's heart ! ... The differences between the two leaders, one an untouchable by birth, the other an untouchable by volition, were thus healed ... The agreement between the Mahatma and Ambedkar saved a society from turning into itself and committing collective suicide. Indeed, the Poona Pact was a victory won by Gandhi in the course of a struggle seeking to liberate Hindu society from a dangerous malformation lodged in the very core of its social being. It was, perhaps, the Mahatma's finest hour." (Omvedt, 1994, p. 175).

For Omvedt, the above Gandhian interpretation is built on like a castle made of sands. In no way does, few words spoken in a process of reconciliation indicate a radical change. In Ambedkar's eyes, the issues of power politics were inherent in this process of reconciliation. A fundamental dichotomy still had not ceased to exist. Whereas for Gandhi, it was by reforming Hindu society that Dalits would be provided with a healing touch, for Ambedkar only political empowerment would liberate the Dalits. "Gandhi's sincerity may have genuinely touched him, but the moral grandeur of an individual was never the point". (Omvedt, 1994, pp. 175-76).

The Boston Daily Globe of 26 September 1932 under the caption 'Light of India' wrote, "Gandhi has opposedan attempt by British to segregate the 'untouchables' in a separate electorate... So compelling is his spiritual authority, so universally revered is he in India, that the danger of his death, and the possibility of incurring through it a stigma upon their consciences have driven caste and outcaste together. Indian unity, in political sense, is nearer achievement... His, is a doctrine of unity and fraternity".²²

The New Statesment and Nation, London reported "...It doubtless is in Mr.Gandhi's mind that the Congress, if these outcastes remain wholly within the Hindu electorate, will shepherd them, and place a number of their candidates on its lists. But by Mr. MacDonald's separate electorate, the militant movement led by Dr. Ambedkar will have its chance, and may create a furious anti - Hindu party which will combine with the Muslims and the smaller minorities to break the nationalists and to support the Imperial Power... It may be said that Mr. Gandhi is not the voice of India ... But there come electrical moments when one is compelled to realise that this strange man has the genius that can by a dramatic act rally India to himself and give to his voice the resonance of legions. With this voice we must converse while there is breath in his body ..."²³

The World Tomorrow from New York stated, “..For our own part, having discussed this face to face with Dr. Ambedkar and having heard Mr. Gandhi set forth his views in London, we are stoutly convinced, though not in the spirit of blind Gandhi worship, the reason and truth are with the Mahatma. Instead of citizens, voting as citizens, under the proposed plan, Muslims will vote as Muslims, Hindus as hindus, Women as women, and in certain section ' Untouchables' as 'Untouchables'. It would be difficult to devise a procedure better calculated to intensify. The bitterness of religious and caste controversies than to base political institutions upon these cleavages”²⁴

Commerce and Finance, New York compared the political arrangement which the British Government had imposed on India with the same arrangement as was the bestowal of the franchise on the ignorant blacks of the country which had inflamed the public sentiments, ultimately leading to the Civil war in America. This settlement was, therefore, intended to divide India against itself. If this issue could be settled amicably, the differences between Hindus and Muslims should yield to the gentle persuasion to sweet reasonableness. The paper added “the announcement seem to indicate that his self - immolation has done more to arouse the Indian sense of justice to the oppressed than any amount of discussion around the ' round table' could have done.”²⁵

No doubt, Gandhi's fast stirred the conscience of humanity both at home and abroad. At home, all the warring factions for the moment buried their differences, and endeavoured to find a lasting solutions to the problems of the Depressed Classes. The Fast also raised the issues whether such tactics were legitimate. Gandhi's reply was, " Fasting for purification of self and others is an age long institution and it will subsist as long as man believes in God. It is the prayer to the Almighty from an anguished heart. But whether my argument is wise or foolish, I cannot be dislodged from my position so long as I do not see the folly or error of it". (Pyarelal,1932 P 313 - 314)

He threatened to resume it in obedience to his inner voice should a breakdown occur of the Poona Pact because of " Criminal neglect of caste Hindus..... Such neglect would mean a betrayal of Hinduism. I should not care to remain its living witness". (Pyarelal, 1932 P 314)

By this fast, Gandhi had performed a miracle of bringing about outburst of spontaneous love among Hindus for their downtrodden brethren in a period of hardly a week. There was a considerable enthusiasm shown by the caste Hindus in denouncing Untouchability and throwing open temples and schools to the Untouchables in such numbers as was not done during the last decade. The epic fast generated a tremendous wave of enthusiasm. By a

coincidence, the day following the breaking of his fast was Gandhi's birthday according to the Hindus calendar. The whole country created a record of achievement for reform. As many as sixty prominent temples all over the country were thrown open to the untouchables from the 13 September to 2 October, 1932. Following the pact, Gandhi spurred his campaign to mitigate the evil of untouchability. There was a spurt of response among his followers, mainly in the form of temple entries which were reported acclaim in the Gandhian press. It was in the course of this campaign in 1933 to uplift the untouchables that Gandhi bestowed on them the new name, " Harijan" which means children of God from a poem by Narasimha Mehta in his native Gujrati. His Anti - Untouchability League " became the "Harijan Sevak Sangh" and he started a publication called "Harijan". The new name was intended, it was said, to give new dignity to the untouchables and to impress on caste Hindus the need to admit the Untouchables into the Hindu fold. The caste Hindu followers adopted the new name and it soon passed into the common usage. Gandhi himself made an extensive ten months tour of India to preach against untouchability and to collect money for the alleviation of Untouchables. There was without doubt an awakening of the Hindu conscience towards the untouchables. Moreover Gandhi's campaign committed the Congress to concern for the untouchables that brought about temple entry legislation and also

the inclusion of untouchables in the provincial cabinets during the Congress rule in the Provinces (1937 - 1939) (Krishnan,1997)

THE IMPACT OF 1930-32

Despite the accord, sharp difference still persisted on both the sides. The storm was far from over. The differences surfaced as soon as Gandhi started his League against Untouchability (which was to become the Harijan Sevak Sangh) and Ambedkar attempted to intervene. There were two issues : whether the league / Sangh would be controlled by Caste Hindus or whether the Dalits would have at least a share in control; and whether it would seek only to 'abolish untouchability' or aim at the abolition of chaturvarna itself. Gandhi firmly held out for caste Hindu control on the grounds that since untouchability was an "evil" of Hinduism that had to be purged, Hindus themselves must do this; he also stressed that he was not against Chaturvarna as a system. It was simply impossible for Gandhi and Ambedkar to work together on this basis.

The events of 1930 - 32 were momentous. They showed the strength that the Dalit Movement had achieved during the 1920's catapulting Ambedkar and the issue of untouchability into the centre of political arena. At the same time they brought to Ambedkar the final disillusionment with Hinduism and leading the voice of Dalit militancy, he became convinced that

autonomy would never be achieved within even a reformed Hinduism. " the events made it clear that (a) Gandhi, who represented the best of Hinduism, would not budge from paternalism and acceptance of Chaturvarna ; (b) inspite of the moralistic atmosphere that surrounded the fast and Pact it was hard bargaining and power (mobilizing strength) that counted; (c) large sections of caste Hindus did not support Gandhi in giving even limited rights and representation to the untouchables, as illustrated by the strom of opposition to the Poona Pact. It was condemned by Hindu revivalists as selling out the interests of Hindus (many upper castes, especially Bengalis, protested at the time over the over riding of their interests), and criticized by leftists for leading people into a distraction from real anti imperialist work); (d) other Dalit leaders could be used by the upper castes as long as they identified with Hinduism.(Omvedt,1994 P 176)

Following the Poona Pact , Gandhian's began an anti - untouchability drive that included temple entry and bills in legislatures through out the country as well as the longer term ' Harijan' campaign. Ambedkar and his followers , in contrast, turned to a clear rejection of Hinduism and to economic and political radicalism, expressed in the conversion announcement 1935 and the founding of the Independent Labour Party in 1936. Ambedkar was confirmed in his belief that the caste system was exploitative and that autonomy was necessary. '

Untouchability' was not just a peripheral will that could be removed without basic changes in the system; the system was inherently exploitative. Since only the exploited can remove the exploitation by destroying a system and fighting their exploiters, autonomy was necessary ; ' the emancipation of dalits had to be the act of Dalits themselves'.

SUMMING UP----

In spite of the fundamental differences existing between Gandhi and Ambedkar from their personality to their approach towards the caste problem, and the social and political strategies to tackle the curse of untouchability, it is quite possible to have a conciliatory stance. Their efforts and movements can be understood as being supplementary to each other.

To begin with, apart from being nationalist the basic similarity between the two can be traced to the fact that removal of untouchability formed the integral part of their active social life. Much of the recent political debate about the relationship between Ambedkar and Gandhi has served to highlight the differences between the two. This is important, but it is also necessary to see the commonality. For instance, while it is true that Ambedkar often attacked Gandhi rather strongly, it can

be pointed out that the very fact that Gandhi was addressed and singled out for attack is related to his position as the only one within the leadership of Indian nationalism who had ever seriously addressed the issue of untouchability. It is important also to note that an element of competition between the two leaders has added fuel to the fire of differences in attitudes and stands, since both claimed the status of the leader of the Harijans/Dalits.

The evangelical approach of Gandhi sees untouchability as an aberration in Hinduism and stresses the uplift of untouchables and penance on the part of caste Hindus, both of whom will eventually join together in a purified and redeemed Hinduism.

The secular approach, on the other hand, sees untouchability as an inherent part of Hinduism and stresses the denial of civil rights and economic opportunities, a condition to be corrected through political action and government intervention.

For Gandhi, the use of the term 'Harijan' referred to an effort to integrate with the mainstream Hindu social order, whereas for Ambedkar the use of the term 'Dalit' implied a project of radical emancipation rooted in the twin notion of self-assertion and self determination.

Gandhi followed the Orientalist sociology in idealizing Indian villages as idyllic 'Village Republics' whereas Ambedkar saw them from

the perspective of the Dalits as ‘dens of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism.

Whereas for an aggressive Ambedkar, it was turning the system upside down which was the need of the hour, for Gandhi it had to be a persuasive effort, a change of heart.

Gandhi continued to defend the varna system until almost the end of his life and posited a counter modernist perspective of civilization, on the other hand, Ambedkar remained clearly and unabashedly pragmatic and modern. Though both acted as major catalysts to further the cause of the untouchables, there is no evidence of a ‘later Ambedkar’ and a ‘later Gandhi’ coming closer together in any terms at all.

Ambedkar remained fundamentally committed to a radical restructuring of society along modern lines of individualism and democracy. Gandhi from a distinctive community based perspective, wanted to imitate a process of self introspection. The remedy lay within the Hindu framework itself.

To sum up, it can be said that Gandhi and Ambedkar represent two aspects of one Truth, neither of which can be ignored.

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12. ibid., p. 528.
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14. ibid.,
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23. *ibid.*, p. 134
24. *ibid.*,
25. *ibid.*,

Conclusion

CONCLUSION

THE LEGACY OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

Despite being at odds, with each other throughout their lives, coupled with the fact, that Ambedkar lost no opportunity to criticize Gandhi and Gandhi remained steadily resistant to Ambedkar's point of view, there are ample indications that each was conscious of the other's necessary place in any final solution of the problem of untouchability. Ambedkar recounted to reporters on the evening before his conversion to Buddhism that years before he had told Mahatma Gandhi, " I will choose only the least harmful way for the country" (Nagpur Times, 14 October 1956).¹ On the other side, there is a widespread belief on the part of many followers of Ambedkar (especially Mahars) that Gandhi wanted Ambedkar to be the Prime Minister. This is supported by a note in the "Illustrated Weekly of India" to the effect that if Gandhi had had his way, " B.R. Ambedkar , lifelong opponent of Gandhism, would have been even at the head of state" (22 January 1950).²

The paths of Gandhi and Ambedkar, while they often diverged, ultimately converged, forcing on the Indian conscience the problem of untouchability as an issue of national concern. (Zelliot, 1996) Nurullah and Naik reinforce this view in their analysis of the influence exerted by these two men :

" Gandhi's main work lay among the caste Hindus, and its greatness is to be measured by the extent of change brought about in the minds of the caste Hindus. But however painful, it is a fact of history that he did not have a very large following among the Harijans themselves .On the other hand, Dr. Ambedkar was Harijan by birth..... and therefore was destined to be the leader of these people by virtue of his birth, complete identification with their cause and unequalled capacity In a way , his work was complementary to that of Mahatma Gandhi, although owing to differences of approach, he often came in conflict with Gandhiji and Congress.

The great service of Dr. Ambedkar to the cause is the awakening that he created among the Harijans. He gave them a leadership which they sadly lacked and which was very badly needed. He puts the problem of the Harijans before the country in its true perspective - -- political, social and economic ." (Nurullah and Naik, 1951, pp. 723-33)

Today when the country is celebrating, fifty years of independence, many Gandhian forms or symbols still remain, but much of the substance departed with him. Gandhi often expressed the wish to live 125 years. If he had, perhaps he would then have seen a government and society emerge in India more responsive to his ideals.

CASTE AFTER GANDHI :-

In today's chaotic India , his anarchic spirit and persistent moral perspective would have been troubled by two fundamental developments : the profound sense of discord that has grown within India since Independence along various lines including those of caste would indeed have proved a bit too severe and galling for Gandhi, and second, the preoccupation in India with politics as if now that the major political reform of Independence had been achieved, her political interests had been forced to feed elsewhere, and found lush growth everywhere . The first of these features may be called factionalism ; the second, politicization. For Gandhi these were seen as threats to realization of sarvodaya, and the varnadharma ideal .

" After the prayers are over, we talk . The people present in the room express only unalloyed, violent bitterness. Neither the spirit of Gandhi nor that of the Buddha is here ; only resentment, hatred and suspicion.

Saddest of all, the village is riven into two hostile blocs, one of caste Hindus and the other of Buddhists who were previously Harijans. There is complete segregation and social boycott between them. There has been no improvement in the status of the Harijans since they embraced a new religion. They continue to be treated as untouchables. And, where in Gandhi's time, the two

sections had lived in amity and oneness, since he was insistent on abolition of untouchability and caste distinctions, there is bitter and open antagonism now, which extends even to the precincts of the ashram school. No work is done together. " Therefore we have made no progress in development work or anything, I am told, though the village is covered now by the Community Development Programme, ' Our economic condition is very poor; worse than what it used to be. 'Obviously, though the 'revolution' came to Sewagram under the personal direction of Gandhi himself, it has proved to be of a wholly transient character. Almost everything that was achieved in the village in Gandhi's time in the social and economic fields is lost already, in less than a decade after his death." (Nair , 1963 pp. 186-8)³

From the above observations, (as made by Kusum Nair, a writer sympathetic and appreciative of Gandhian ideas), it is clear that in Sewagram, the Maharashtrian village which Gandhi made his head -quarters after 1936, things are hardly the way Gandhi would have liked them to be.

If Gandhi was asked to give his verdict on the state of affairs of Sewagram, the relevant term would have been: ' resentment, hatred and suspicion, the division of the village ' into two hostile blocs ' as a result of caste antipathies; the persistence of ' untouchability and caste distinctions', 'bitter and

open antagonism,' and the complete breakdown of social co-operation. The judgement, in short, is given on the basis of the growth, after Gandhi, of all those evils which he combated. He himself would have been the first to ask ; If here in Sewagram, then what of all India ? (Dalton, 1993).

Gandhi extolled varnadharma as an ideal of social harmony; a principle rooted in the conception of the Four varnas as constituting an organic social order. Yet Gandhi, as much as any of his Indian contemporaries, was fully aware of the divisive influence of caste, and condemned this, where it occurred as another manifestation of untouchability. For Gandhi knew the villages as well as any national leader, and he accepted the force of factionalism as a basic fact of life. Satyagraha may be seen as a weapon designed to reduce factionalism in all its forms; that is, as an effective technique of conflict- resolution.

What Gandhi failed to appreciate was the way in which the politicization of Indian society, and particularly of caste, has stimulated new and reinforced old varieties of factionalism, that is, he did not anticipate these political trends in language and caste after independence.

CASTE - POLITICS NEXUS

" Independence was an invitation to each language territory to come into its own, invoking the memory of the golden age that each can summon forth from the millenia of Indian history. Each caste group, too, saw in a free India dedicated to equality, a chance in Orwell's sense to be more equal than the rest. Caste, a social order, has provided a basis for the new economic and political competition, and the new caste competitors form ranks, according to native linguistic, regional ties. As economic competition grows, and as the political victors set the ground rules for the economic competition, so the unity and militance of regional lobbies and regional caste lobbies will grow (Harrison, 1960, p. 5).

Professor Mayer, observes that the existence of opposed factions, emerges as a 'constant', while ' caste forms an important, but only one, factor in the political situation under analysis.(Mason, 1967 PP. 121-41).

Recent studies done by Paul Brass, demonstrate convincingly the pervasive nature of factionalism and politicization in the contemporary Indian scene. The phenomenon of politicization is clearly evident in changing aspects of caste since Independence. Mayer while writing on the politics of local election has pointed out how caste is losing its position as a ritual division and has manifested as a

political division of society. This judgement has been confirmed by numerous anthropologists and political scientists in the last couple of decades. At the village level, this has led M.N. Srinivas, for example, to stress the political significance of the local ' dominant caste'. Above the village level, political scientists like Rajni Kothari have described the formation and operation of 'caste associations' and ' caste federations, thus illustrating the variety of forms that caste power may take, and the strength of its political implications. Once caste became politicized, it was understandable that factionalism should find expression through it at the village level. Thus it is a strange paradox that, the new universal political order, in constitution and in principle rejects caste , while in practice, it has accomodated caste as a natural ally. Caste has, in fact, come to terms with the democratic political process. Politics has drawn caste into its web for organising support and in articulating the needs of the masses. The organisation of support is done through the same organisation in which the masses are found, namely the caste groups. In making politics their sphere of activity, caste and kin groups attest their identity to strive for positions of power. Different parties and movements mobilise different social status groups as resources for their political objectives. Thus even today, at the time of election, the caste configuration in a constituency and the caste of the candidate play a paramount role in the candidate getting a

ticket and his eventual win or loss. For organised party politics, the caste provides a ready made system of segments which could be used to marshal support. Liberal education, government patronage, and an expanding franchise have been major factors that have penetrated the caste system. Discontent and exploitation prevailing within the caste groups provided a basis for organising caste factions and alliances. Thus modern politics found an on going vertical network of caste and made the structure of caste a political vehicle.

According to Rudolph and Rudolph, caste has in its transformed state, helped the Indian masses (of which nearly 70% live in the villages) make a success of representative democracy. It has fostered, the growth of equality by making Indians less separate and more alike. Indians are becoming less separate, in the sense, that due to the electoral system, numerical strength i.e. the number of votes, make a lot of difference in power. Thus it is in the interest of large majority of a castes to come together to achieve their political goals. In this process, caste associations and caste federations are formed. (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1967)

Formation of caste federations refer to a grouping together of members of distinct endogamous groups into a single organisation for common objective. One of the most active caste federation is the Kshatriya Sabha of

Gujarat. It dates from 1946 and includes several jati- clusters of the region, notably the Rajputs, Bariyas and Bhils. It was not only a caste community but was also a political community. The Sabha had made use of new avenues of politics and promoted Rajput leaders. The federation welcomed all jatis who followed the Rajput model in their life style. Even the poor landless and Muslim Rajputs (Rajputs who converted toIslam) were taken into their fold. The founder of the Sabha believed that Kshatriyas were a 'class' and not just a 'caste'. To prove this point, many of the rich, aristocratic Rajputs would even go to the extent of having a common meal with the Bariyas and Bhils. With numerical strength they gained political importance and influence (Kothari 1970, Pg.30- 70)

CASTE AS A VEHICLE OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION:-

The relationship that caste bears to politics can be best understood in terms of three types of political mobilisation discussed by Rudolph and Rudolph, which exemplify different phases of political development in India. The three types of political mobilisation are : vertical, horizontal and differential

(i) Vertical mobilisation : This is a process in which political support is acquired by the traditional notables, such as the erstwhile Rajas, feudatory landlords, locally dominant caste elites, and so on. This is possible in a society

legitimacy of traditional authority still survives. Rudolph maintains that vertical mobilisation remains a viable strategy for dominant classes and castes until dependants, tenants and clients become politicised enough to be mobilised by ideological appeals to class or community interests and sentiments.

(ii) Horizontal mobilisation- This is a process in which popular political support is marshalled by class or community leaders and their specialised organisations. As the term horizontal indicates, the solidarity among classes and caste groups, such as provided by the caste federations, introduces a new pattern of cleavage by challenging the vertical solidarities and structures of traditional societies. The major difference between this form of mobilisation and vertical mobilisation is that here, the agent of mobilisation is the political party rather than the local notable. Here political parties appeal to voters directly as individuals or indirectly through the organised groups to which they belong. Direct appeals to individual voters may emphasise ideology on issues, on the one hand, and community identification through caste, on the other. This mobilisation is possible only as long as internal differentiation has not developed and caste communities are by and large homogenous, cohesive and their interests are still diffuse and varied.

(iii) Differential mobilisation - This process takes place when the changes that caste has and is undergoing carries it beyond the traditional ascriptive definition. These changes include internal differentiation on fission, and integration of several caste groups in caste federations and associations i.e. fusion which express the shared interests, symbols and norms of these castes. It also brings out caste from its village home, and it does not remain rooted to the village social structure alone. "Urbanization has often not led to a reduction of caste influence, for 'immigrants from rural areas ... often tend to settle in distinct caste 'colonies' whithin the cities [and] the consequence is greatly improved facilities for organizing. Moreover , cities teach men to forget caste as a cooperative element making for interdependence; caste becomes instead the unit in which men associate for competition against others. " (Morris-Jones, 1964, P 65-66)

Finally, in reference to the larger caste associations and federations, a recent study of this subject observed that :

"Caste is shedding some of its old time character and is acquiring a new emphasis and orientation. While still retaining a good part of the traditional modes of integration, it has entered a phase of competitive adjustment in the allocation and re-allocation of functions and power among various social groups. The institutions of caste association and caste federation are

the media through which such an adaptation in roles is taking place. The important thing is the motivation that lies behind such a process of group assertion. Here caste consciousness no doubt plays an important part in mobilizing and consolidating group positions. But the motivation behind it indicates an important shift in the emphasis, from the preservation of caste traditions and customs to their transformation through political power. It is essentially a secular motivation in which mobilization of group support follows rather than precedes individual competition for power. Caste always had a political aspect to it but now the political aspect is gaining in more emphasis than ever before, especially in regard to individualized rather than group orientations to power. The network of kin and caste relationships is by stages drawn into personal networks of influence and power, and in the process greatly politicized. To this extent, caste identification and caste consciousness become means in the power struggle, the latter also influencing the normative orientation of such consciousness." (Kothari and Maru. 1965 P. 49).

Rudolph and Rudolph have defined caste associations as 'paracommunities' which enable members of castes to pursue social mobility, political power, and economic advantage. (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967) Caste association resemble, in many ways, the voluntary associations or interest groups

found in industrially advanced societies. However, caste associations or paracommunities are distinct in many respects from voluntary associations; as well as from natural associations like caste out of which they have developed. The caste associations are more like the voluntary associations at the organisational level than the traditional caste structures, It has offices, membership, incipient bureaucratisation legislative process which can be seen through conferences, delegates and resolution,. But, unlike the voluntary associations, caste associations are characterised by a shared sense of culture, character and status which gives it a solidarity not found in voluntary associations. The functions of caste associations are diverse. It serves the Indian society by both levelling the sacred and hierarchical caste order and also replacing it, It initiates and manages the efforts of the lower castes to become twice- born, to don the sacred thread which symbolises higher ritual rank and other. This is clean from the case of the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, a low caste of toddy tappers who through the efforts of their association, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam formed in 1910, acquired not only higher status but a modern organisation to serve their needs.

(i) To promote the social, material and general welfare of the Nadars

(ii) To take practical measures for the social , moral, and intellectual advancement of the Nadars.

(iii) To start schools and colleges for imparting western education to Nadar children and to help poor but deserving pupils belonging to the community with scholarships, books, tea etc.

(iv) To encourage and promote commercial and industrial enterprise among the members of the community (Kothari 1970 P. 115) These and several other objects of this caste association and caste associations in general, reveal the significant contribution that these organisations provided to their communities. Thus paracommunities or caste associations contribute to fundamental structural and cultural change in Indian society by providing an adaptive institution in which both the traditional as well as modern features of society can meet and fuse.

THE ETERNALITY OF CASTE :-

In the end, it can be said that for a vast majority of Indian population, especially the Hindus envisaging a social system without caste is impossible. Caste is part of their social identity and existence. The joint family and caste system together provide for the individual in our society some of the benefits which a welfare state provides in the industrially advanced countries. Caste stands for a certain amount of cultural homogeneity. However, it has its evil

and exploitative side which has not been perceived by the majority of the people , especially the upper castes. The principle of caste is so firmly entrenched in our political and social life . That every one including the political leaders have accepted tacitly these very principles . The coming of modern means of communication has increased the 'horizontal stretch of caste.' For-thing caste groups could interact and communicate with each other and find commonalities and shared interests to form clusters and this has resulted in the increase of caste solidarity within a region. One effect of universal adult franchise of the strengthening of caste consciousness. Political parties are at pains to select candidates who have a social base, usually drawn from the locally dominant caste group. It is obvious that the eradication of caste is a distant reality, despite the indications to the contrary. As long as caste performs the function of a welfare state in India and provides for the common bonds of kinship ties, political groups and alliances it can be assured of a continued existence in Modern India.

END NOTE

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3. As quoted in D.Dalton, “The Gandhin Views of caste, and Caste after Gandhi”, in Philip Mason ed., *India and Ceylon : unity and diversity* (London : Oxford University Press, for the Institute of Race Relations, 1967.

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