

**COLONIALISM AND GANDHI'S STRUGGLE AGAINST  
UNTOUCHABILITY: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATES,  
COMMUNAL AWARD AND THE POONA PACT**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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### DECLARATION

I, SUJAY BISWAS, hereby declare that the dissertation entitled, **COLONIALISM AND GANDHI'S STRUGGLE AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATES, COMMUNAL AWARD AND THE POONA PACT** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** from Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University.

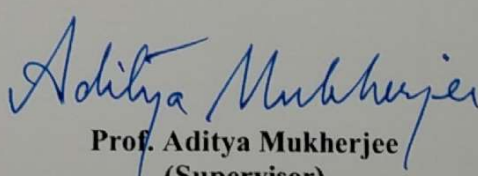
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### CERTIFICATE

We recommend that the dissertation be place before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## **To My Mother**

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# Introduction

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## [1]

Indian nationalism faced a wide spectrum of challenges, of which the problem of caste divisions amongst the Hindus, particularly the practice of untouchability, was a formidable one. “Caste sought to maintain a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status. The rules and regulations of caste hampered social mobility, fostered social divisions and sapped individual initiative.”<sup>1</sup> The British Government devoted their best efforts to sustain and accentuate the caste divisions amongst the Hindus, and in particular, to widen the gulf between the Untouchables<sup>2</sup> and the so-called caste-Hindus by wooing the Untouchables on the pretext of being the protector of the downtrodden people of the society. The Government encouraged the Untouchable leaders to politicise the issue and prompted them to put forth their demands, such as the demand for separate electorates, to sharpen the divisions in the Hindu society and weaken the Indian National Movement.

Gandhi had the foresight to understand the imperial designs of perpetuating divisions in the Hindu society through the backing of constitutional provisions. He succeeded, to a considerable extent, in defeating the British policy, as was exemplified in the Poona Pact of 1932 between Gandhi and the Untouchable leader, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The Poona Pact thwarted the British design to perpetuate and accentuate divisions in the Hindu society. Gandhi had brought about reconciliation between different personalities, programmes and groups, viewed impossible by the British Raj. For example, Gandhi cemented the cleavages between the “pro-changers” and “no-changers” in 1924. However, Gandhi’s role as a unifier with respect to the Untouchables and the caste-Hindus has not been adequately

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<sup>1</sup> B. Chandra, et al., *India’s Struggle For Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Dalits’, ‘Harijans’, ‘Scheduled Classes’, ‘Untouchables’, ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Pariahs’, and ‘Panchamas’, are several names for the same people. They are a group of several castes; themselves divided from one another, the common factor being their very low economic and social condition. I have used the term ‘Untouchable’ as well as the other designations. I hope that the employment of ‘Untouchable’ will not be mistaken as implying any derogation of these persons.

emphasised. Through his life-style Gandhi exemplified that the practice of untouchability was unjustified. He tried to convince the orthodox Hindus that there was no sanction in the *Shastras* for the abominable social practice. He wanted to bring an attitudinal change amongst the caste-Hindus by creating ‘guilt’ consciousness in them as they had been ill-treating their Untouchable brethren for centuries.” He wanted to bring about social change in an ingenious way. Gandhi had pushed for the removal of untouchability to the forefront as early as 1920 at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress that adopted the non-cooperation resolution. He had declared that removal of untouchability was an essential condition for his concept of *Swaraj*. For him, *Swaraj* was not only “expulsion of the British from India” but also the liberation of society from slavery. To Gandhi, attainment of political freedom was inadequate without social freedom.

## [2]

Even though Gandhi’s life and work has been a subject of study for decades, I find that the study of Gandhi’s anti-untouchability movement, in general, and the movement he undertook between 1932 and 1934 against the practice of untouchability, in particular, has not received sufficient attention among scholars. To my knowledge, the movement has not been subjected to detailed scrutiny. A few works do refer to it, but do not offer a comprehensive study about Gandhi’s efforts and work to ‘eradicate’ untouchability. Some of these are B. R. Ambedkar’s “*What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*,”<sup>3</sup> Eugene F. Irschick’s “*Tamil Revivalism In The 1930s*,”<sup>4</sup> Chinna R. Yagati’s “*Dalits’ Struggle For Identity: Andhra And Hyderabad 1900-1950*,”<sup>5</sup> Sushila Nayar’s “*Mahatma Gandhi: Preparing For Swaraj*,”<sup>6</sup> and D. G. Tendulkar’s “*Mahatma: Life Of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*,” Vol. III.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*, Bombay, Thacker & Co., 1945.

<sup>4</sup> E. F. Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism In The 1930s*, Madras, Cre-A, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> C. R. Yagati, *Dalits’ Struggle For Identity: Andhra And Hyderabad 1900-1950*, New Delhi, Kanishka Publishers, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> S. Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi: Preparing For Swaraj*, Vol. VII, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1996.



The story of Gandhi's "epic fast" that marked the beginning of his Anti-Untouchability Movement and also inflicted a mighty blow to imperial designs of sustaining and accentuating divisions in the Indian society is better known through Pyarelal's, "*The Epic Fast*."<sup>8</sup> The book provides a first-hand documentation of the events and the negotiations between the Untouchable representatives and the caste-Hindus leading to the signing of the Poona Pact in 1932. The book provides a useful contemporary insight into the attitudes of both the Untouchable representatives and the caste-Hindus towards Gandhi's movement against untouchability.

### [3]

This study hypothesizes that Gandhi gave a perceptible "impetus to the movement for the eradication of untouchability," and managed to either break or bridge caste barriers between the Untouchables and the caste-Hindus. This study raises many questions: Why were the caste-Hindus so critical of Gandhi's movement? Why did Gandhi attempt to attack the caste-Hindu *mentalité* about untouchability? Why did Gandhi's constructive programme not advocate satyagraha by the Untouchables to defy the caste prohibitions through public protests, blockades, and other kinds of demonstrations? Why did Gandhi depend on persuading the caste-Hindus to give up untouchability? These and other questions will be explored in the course of the study.

### [4]

This proposed research is concerned with a period in Indian history during which Gandhi mobilised the Untouchables as well as the caste-Hindus in two different movements between 1932 and 1934, namely, the Guruvayur Temple Entry Satyagraha and his "pilgrimage" against untouchability. The Guruvayur Temple Entry Satyagraha was solely focused on allowing the Untouchables to enter into temples. Temple-entry was the main plank of the Anti-Untouchability Movement and Gandhi supported it by declaring to undertake a "fast unto death" along with K. Kelappan over the question of the opening of Guruvayur temple to the Untouchables in 1932. Why was

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<sup>7</sup> D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life Of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol. III: 1930-1934, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1951.

<sup>8</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1932.

Guruvayur Temple in South India chosen to be the key basis of the Anti-Untouchability Movement? Why did Gandhi by-pass North India to initiate the movement?

Gandhi's "pilgrimage" against untouchability (1933-34) was an extended and expanded movement focused on providing the Untouchables with access not only to temples but also to schools, wells, roads, and providing economic opportunities through the manufacture of *khadi*, the hand-spun and hand-woven Indian cotton. The "pilgrimage" against untouchability had a dual thrust. It saw Gandhi travelling all over India and connecting with the Untouchables as well as the caste-Hindus. Gandhi in his writings and speeches repeatedly emphasised that the caste-Hindus were required to atone and "make reparations for the untold hardships to which the caste-Hindus have subjected the Untouchables for centuries."<sup>9</sup> Can a linkage be discerned between Gandhi's Temple Entry Movement and his "pilgrimage" against untouchability? Were the two movements complementary or supplementary to each other?

Gandhi appealed to the conscience of the caste-Hindus, while simultaneously relying on legal and constitutional measures "for removing untouchability, and also for opening temples to the Untouchables." He urged the colonial Government to facilitate the passage of two bills connected to the Untouchables. One, C. S. Ranga Iyer's Temple Entry Bill that sought to amend the Madras Religious Endowments Act so as to authorise the caste-Hindus in any locality to admit the Untouchables to the Hindu public temples through a majority vote, and the second bill, M. C. Rajah's Untouchability Abolition Bill "declared the general right of the Untouchables to use all public facilities, and outlawed any enforcement to the contrary by courts or public authorities." Why did Gandhi need to take recourse to legal and constitutional measures to remove untouchability? Was Gandhi's recourse to legal and constitutional measures an attack on British colonial rule in India, which was perpetuating untouchability in various ways?

Since it is not possible to explore all these aspects at the stage of the M. Phil dissertation, I will focus on two themes: (1) Gandhi's struggle against the caste system in general and the historiography around it, and (2) British policies leading to

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<sup>9</sup> Chandra, *Struggle For Independence*, p. 293.

the Communal Award, Gandhi's "epic" fast and the Poona Pact. The first part attempts to examine Gandhi's practices with regard to different caste restrictions and associated religious ritual obligations to obtain a better understanding of his views on caste and related issues. It explores Gandhi's own personal practices related to caste restrictions and religious obligations. It also explores how community life was organised in Gandhi's *ashrams*. Against the background of a proper understanding of his personal practices, an examination is made of the validity of the various schools of thought on Gandhi's attitude/approach to caste, *varna* and untouchability. In the second part, an effort is made to understand British policies towards the caste issue, especially the Communal Award, as well as a landmark event in Gandhi's struggle against the caste system. This was Gandhi's 1932 "epic fast" against the Communal Award that awarded separate electorates to the Untouchables. The fast marked the turning point for Gandhi's fight against untouchability.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it seems only appropriate to delve deeper into the significance of the event. I hope to explore the Temple Entry Movement, particularly the Guruvayur Satyagraha, and Gandhi's "pilgrimage" against untouchability and the constructive programme at the stage of my Ph.D. research.

## [5]

This study will be based on both primary and secondary sources. An important and yet untapped source material covering the entire Gandhian movement against untouchability of 1933-34 is the British intelligence reports, "Mr. Gandhi's Tour in India – Reports of Local Governments"<sup>11</sup> archived at the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi, India. The reports are very rich in information and contain a great deal of intra-Congress and inter-party goings-on in all relevant parties and groups. These intelligence reports delineate that the caste-Hindu majority, who had perhaps little doubt about the moral authority of Gandhi and even less inclination to doubt the charismatic power of Gandhi as the liberator, "were full of disbelief at the

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<sup>10</sup> J. Adams, *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*, London, Quercus, 2010, p. 206.

<sup>11</sup> Government of India, 'Mr. Gandhi's Tour In India – Reports Of Local Governments', *File No. IOR/4691 L/P&J/7/595*, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML), New Delhi, India. Also see, Government of India, Home Department (Political), *File No. 3/23/33-Political*, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi, India; Government of India, Home Department (Political), *File No. 50/I-Political*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

practicability of the therapeutic prescriptions suggested by Gandhi so far as reforming Hindu society was concerned”<sup>12</sup> and were at once quite unready to put these into practice. The British documents reveal much more than mere knowledge gathering. The Hindu orthodoxy constituted the extreme Right-Wing opposition to Gandhi’s reform programme of expanding the base of Indian democracy or rather the democratic base of the Hindu society by including the Untouchables. The political forces generally known to belong to the Left displayed not only a great deal of doubt and total indifference towards the Gandhian programme but sections of them went so far as to accuse Gandhi of withdrawing from the anti-imperialist struggle.

These British intelligence reports are not the only source for Gandhian discourse and the movement against untouchability. The texts of his discourse and the movement are also provided in “*The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*” (CWMG).<sup>13</sup> These are detailed and also cogently edited. They provide sufficient material for discerning specific effects of Gandhi’s discourse on the Indian society. For example, how Gandhi explained in his speeches, interviews and letters that the eradication of untouchability was not only to aid the Anti-Untouchability Movement, but affect the Indian society, and ultimately, attainment of *Swaraj*. The CWMG shows the effect Gandhi’s discourse had on the Untouchable participants and the caste-Hindus in the movement.

Apart from the above sources, mention may be made of two rather rare books. S. Mahadevan travelled with Gandhi’s party covering the Central Provinces, Andhradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka during his “pilgrimage” against untouchability having been deputed for journalistic work. Mahadevan’s book, “*Mahatma Gandhi’s Warning And Flashes In Harijan Tour*,”<sup>14</sup> provides a unique eyewitness account and a great deal of human interest material detailing Gandhi’s method of propagandistic activities and of his plea for the removal of untouchability. This book brings to fore scenes of popular enthusiasm and the unmistakable support

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<sup>12</sup> B. Ray, (ed.), *Gandhi’s Campaign Against Untouchability, 1933-34: An Account Of The Raj’s Secret Official Report*, New Delhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 Vols. Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971.

<sup>14</sup> S. Mahadevan, *Mahatma Gandhi’s Warning And Flashes In Harijan Tour*, Madras, The Journalist Publishing House, 1936.

of the people to the cause of reform. Gandhi had Chandra Shankar Shukla as his Secretary during his “pilgrimage” against untouchability. Chandra Shankar took detailed notes of a number of very important interviews during Gandhi’s “pilgrimage.” These interviews compiled in “*Conversations Of Gandhiji*,”<sup>15</sup> too, are a very important source for this period. Many of these conversations deal with the removal of untouchability and ‘Harijan’ service. These reports serve to show how freely his colleagues debated upon Gandhi’s proposals and how he tried to carry them with him by reasoning and persuasion. Some of the discussions serve to explain the workings of Gandhi’s mind and point to the correct interpretation of a few of his decisions.

For the greater part of Gandhi’s public life, he employed newspapers as vehicles to disseminate his teachings, to comment on ethical, political and social issues, and to respond to a wide variety of questioners, opponents, and seekers. The newspaper, “*Harijan*,” which Gandhi started in 1933, first in English followed by other languages in Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and others, all at short intervals, reported on Gandhi’s messages and activities during the movement. Apart from “*Harijan*,” “*The Times Of India*,” “*The Bombay Chronicle*,” “*The Hindu*,” and “*The Hindustan Times*” have also been used. These also constitute an important source material for the study of Gandhi’s Anti-Untouchability Movement.

## [6]

The dissertation is divided into the following four chapters:

Chapters 1 and 2 re-examine Gandhi’s views on caste and untouchability that have created much misunderstanding in scholarly circles. Gandhi has been criticised for ambiguity and inconsistency on the issue with a focus on excessive deference to Hindu orthodoxy. Critics argue that Gandhi said nothing new and repeated the arguments of his predecessors, notably Dayanand Saraswati. Others, sympathetic interpreters, see Gandhi undergoing a rational evolution, ranging from an all out orthodox stance in the early years to a liberal one by the 1930s. Such interpretations reflect an oversimplified understanding of a complex reality. To Gandhi, untouchability was the worst practice known to mankind, the greatest blot on

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<sup>15</sup> C. Shukla, *Conversations Of Gandhiji*, Bombay, Vora & Co. Publishers Ltd., 1949.

Hinduism and a cup of poison to Gandhi himself. However, it was Gandhi's love for Hinduism that made him commit untouchability to flames. Gandhi had overcome caste prejudices at age twelve when he challenged his mother that Hindu religion did not sanction untouchability. At eighteen, he defied caste to go abroad, faced the wrath of his brother who admonished him, subsequently took the risk of social boycott for accepting Untouchables in his *ashrams* on equal terms, performed unclean tasks himself, and vowed and worked to eradicate untouchability. He averred to be an open rebel against Hinduism if untouchability was not abolished. Above all, he made removing untouchability a central plank of Indian politics, necessary to achieve *Swaraj*. Gandhi even critiqued the *varna* order in a manner that was revolutionary for a caste-Hindu. There was no element of compromise in Gandhi's attitude towards untouchability.

Chapters 3 and 4 re-evaluate the dominant historical narrative that sees Gandhi's "fast unto death" against the Communal Award, as antagonistic to the interests and political rights of the Untouchables. It is stated that Gandhi deliberately took such a coercive step to prevent the passing of the Award. It is said that majority of the Untouchables were convinced that Gandhi's attitude was wrong. In opposing the Award, Gandhi was not speaking from their perspective, nor as a national leader. Gandhi was speaking mainly as a caste-Hindu. The demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables, as enshrined in the Award, was manufactured by the Government. A review of the confidential correspondence among the British officials shows that there was no widespread yearning among the Untouchables, not even elementary awareness, for seeking separate electorates through the Award. In fact, majority of them scarcely knew that an Award had been announced ostensibly for their emancipation. The British strategically supported the Untouchables on the issue while distancing the caste-Hindus further, and, help to create fissures among Indians themselves in order to thwart the rising tide of the national movement. Separate electorate was a key device to make the Untouchables assert their separateness.

### [7]

Gandhi, more than anything else, was *committed* to human *unity* across communities, cultures and nations. His praxis of *ahimsa* (non-violence) was founded on the idea of unity. He could not neglect his ultimate commitment even as a lawyer,

pushing forward the case of a client. As Gandhi himself put it in his autobiography, “*The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*,” “I realised that the true function of a lawyer was to unite parties riven asunder.”<sup>16</sup> Gandhi’s entire political career in India was informed by a never-failing sensitivity to the rights of the minorities. As Gandhi said, “I am myself so jealous of the rights and wishes of the minorities ....”<sup>17</sup> The ‘Harijan’ Movement that Gandhi undertook between 1932 and 1934 was essentially a “civic” rights movement. It implied the uplift and the freedom of the ‘Harijan’ community from the ignominy of inhibitions perpetuated by the caste-Hindus in the name of the Hindu religious order. Gandhi took it up as a crusade to uphold the cause of freedom for the ‘Harijans’. He stressed the necessity of political and social freedom for them as “no [nation] can possibly be built on a *denial* of individual freedom.”<sup>18</sup> In the construction of the Indian nation, Gandhi did not accept a unity based on assimilation or fusion – not to speak of deportation or extermination, but *a unity based on friendship*. Gandhi emphasised that “when we (caste-Hindus) learn to regard these five to six crores of outcastes *as our own*, we shall learn the rudiments of what it is to be *one people*.”<sup>19</sup> And the *only* way, he said, in which the caste-Hindus could expiate the sin of untouchability was to *befriend* the ‘Harijans’<sup>20</sup> “*as they were*.”<sup>21</sup> His was thus an alternative view of nation making. Friendship and mutual trust, non-violence and love, not hate, among communities and sects were to be the principle of national unity for him. An effort to study Gandhi is however not either to praise him for his success or condemn him for his failure. It is an exercise to realise what this man, who lived and died for communal peace and human unity, stood for in his personal life and what did he do in his struggle for that cause.

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<sup>16</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Autobiography Or The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, New York, Dover Publications, 1983, p.117.

<sup>17</sup> *Harijan*, 1st April 1933; ‘Notes: Majority vs. Minority’, 1st April 1933, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 54, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, p. 260. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>18</sup> *Harijan*, 1st February 1942, (emphasis mine).

<sup>19</sup> *Young India*, 25th March 1926, (emphasis mine).

<sup>20</sup> ‘Speech At Women’s Meeting, Benares’, 2nd August 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 278; *Harijan*, 31st August 1934.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Statement On Untouchability-X’, 9th December 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 52, p. 155, (emphasis mine); *The Bombay Chronicle*, 10th December 1932, (emphasis mine).

## Historiography Gandhi's Approach to Caste and Untouchability

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*“In my search after Truth[,] I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things ... and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.”*<sup>1</sup> – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

### [1]

A lot has been written about Mahatma Gandhi. Still, there are many facets of his personality and politics, which are not well-known, for example, “his total commitment to civil liberties and democratic functioning.”<sup>2</sup> Also, Ravinder Kumar emphasises that “there has been no attempt to see the social structure of India through his eyes, and to relate his vision of society to the idiom of his politics, and to the instruments through which he launched political agitation.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, writes D. R. Nagaraj, “the imprint of the Gandhian model of tackling the ‘Harijan’ question merits serious analysis.”<sup>4</sup> On no other issue, however, notes Bhikhu Parekh, “was Gandhi as viciously attacked as that of untouchability.”<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi's ideas regarding caste and untouchability have created much misunderstanding. His views on caste changed considerably during his lifetime, and perhaps because of this, they have been the subject of considerably confused commentaries. Gandhi has been unduly attacked for his “ambiguity” and “inconsistency”<sup>6</sup> in his remarks on caste as well as for excessive deference to Hindu

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<sup>1</sup> *Harijan*, 29th April 1933.

<sup>2</sup> B. Chandra, ‘Gandhiji, Secularism And Communalism’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 32, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 2004), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> R. Kumar, ‘Class, Community Or Nation? Gandhi's Quest For A Popular Consensus In India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Gandhi Centenary Number, (1969), p. 360.

<sup>4</sup> D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet And Other Essays: The Dalit Movement In India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2014, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> B. Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform: An Analysis Of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1999, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> As Mohinder Singh points out, “[there] is nothing [more] consistent in the views of Gandhi's critics than the accusation of inconsistency ....” M. Singh, ‘Truth In Autobiography: Gandhi's Experiments



orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> Critics have focused on Gandhi's allegedly specious distinction between *varnashram-dharma* and the caste system.<sup>8</sup> Milder criticism has observed that Gandhi said nothing new, but merely repeated the arguments of his predecessors, most notably Swami Dayanand Saraswati.<sup>9</sup> These groups of scholars believe that Gandhi accepted the caste system in *toto* as the "natural order of society" – as a system that promoted control and discipline and was sanctioned by religion. Whereas sympathetic interpreters have seen his conception of caste, as undergoing a rational evolution, moving gradually from an orthodox stance to more liberal views in the 1930s, and culminating in a radical position at the end of his life.<sup>10</sup> This latter interpretation is the more nearly correct; but since it has no-where been developed fully, it suffers from over-simplification. By emphasising the evolutionary nature of Gandhi's approach to caste, it moves too far, "thus projecting too much orthodoxy into his earlier position, and purging his later ideas of all orthodoxy."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the common limitation of the works of those scholars who believe that Gandhi accepted the caste system in *toto*,<sup>12</sup> and of those scholars who believe that Gandhi's attitude towards caste evolved

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With Truth', *Gandhi Marg*, No. 12 (March 1970), p. 752, quoted by J. I. (Hans) Bakker, *Toward A Just Civilisation: A Gandhian Perspective On Human Rights And Development*, Toronto, Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 1993, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> S. Natarajan, *A Century Of Social Reform*, New York, Asia Publishing House, 1959, pp. 150-51.

<sup>8</sup> G. S. Ghurye, *Caste And Class In India*, Bombay, Popular Book Depot, 1957, pp. 220-21; O. C. Cox, *Caste, Class And Race: A Study In Social Dynamics*, New York, Doubleday, 1948, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism And Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964, pp. 344-45.

<sup>10</sup> L. Fischer, *The Life Of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1957, pp. 362-64.

<sup>11</sup> D. Dalton, 'The Gandhian View Of Caste And Caste After Gandhi', in P. Mason, (ed.), *India And Ceylon: Unity And Diversity*, London, Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 167-68.

<sup>12</sup> There are a good number of scholars who sincerely hold that Gandhi believed in the caste system in *toto*. These scholars can be further divided into two groups – the first are Ambedkarite scholars, for example, Parimala V. Rao ('Gandhi, Untouchability And The Postcolonial Predicament: A Note', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 37, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 2009), pp. 64-70), Braj Ranjan Mani (*Debrahmanising History: Dominance And Resistance In Indian Society*, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 2008) and the second are Gandhian scholars, for example, Margaret Chatterjee (*Gandhi's Religious Thought*, Indiana, University Of Notre Dame Press, 1983), Bhikhu Parekh (*Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*), Ramashray Roy (*Self And Society: A Study In Gandhian Thought*, New Delhi, Sage Publications In Collaboration With United Nations University, Tokyo, 1984; *Gandhi And Ambedkar: A Study In Contrast*, Delhi, Shipra Publications, 2006).

over time, “is that they are largely derived from some of Gandhi’s writings or speeches, and in the process of reaching these conclusions, Gandhi’s practices are neglected.”<sup>13</sup> The effort here is to examine the various interpretive positions and the basis of its attack or defense of Gandhi’s treatment of the question of caste and untouchability, a topic to which Gandhi devoted a large amount of time and energy.

## [2]

Gandhi revolted against the practice of caste restrictions and untouchability from a very young age. He himself violated every caste restriction. Gandhi narrates an incident from his childhood when he was hardly twelve years old. The story was of Uka – a scavenger – who used to visit Gandhi’s house to clean the latrines. Gandhi recounted that although he (Gandhi) had been a very dutiful and obedient child when it came to respecting his parents, he had often had tussles with them when they asked him to perform ablutions after accidentally touching Uka.<sup>14</sup> Another story, which brings to light Gandhi’s attitude towards the practice of untouchability, is contained in his autobiography. When his wife refused to clean the chamber-pot of his Christian clerk, a man born to Untouchable parents, he declared that he would not stand this nonsense in his house and caught her by the hand and dragged her to the gate with the intention of pushing her out.<sup>15</sup> In his autobiography, he also writes that “in South Africa Untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me.”<sup>16</sup> Gandhi “had no scruples about inter-dining.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that Gandhi showed a remarkable irreverence towards the practice of untouchability based on notions of purity and pollution from a very young age.

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<sup>13</sup> N. Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’? Reflections On His Practices’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 13, 01 Apr., 2017, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> *Young India*, 27th April 1921 & 4th May 1921; ‘Speech At Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad’, 13th April 1921, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 19, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, pp. 569-75. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>15</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography Or The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Trust, 1927, (Reprint 2011), p. 225.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

In the first paragraph of his autobiography, Gandhi writes that over the last three generations, his family has not been pursuing their hereditary or traditional duties. He himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors' calling. He also let his children choose their own professions and never pressed them to follow any pursuits prescribed by their caste. Moreover, he tried to learn skills associated with activities prohibited to his caste, such as the work of a scavenger, barber, washerman, cobbler, tiller, and tailor. He also taught many of these skills to his children, wife, and co-workers.<sup>18</sup> It is also worth noting that Gandhi not only allowed his son Ramadas to marry someone from a different sub-caste, but also allowed his son Devadas to marry a girl who was from another *varna* altogether. He also, by design, married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was Untouchable by birth, to a *Brahmin* boy in 1933. On many occasions, Gandhi expressed his support for inter-caste marriages.<sup>19</sup>

None of Gandhi's *ashrams* were built on the basic principle of caste system or *varnashram-dharma*. And none of the caste restrictions were observed in his *ashram*. Here, life was organised along the basic principles of Gandhi's philosophy, and the *ashrams* can be seen as an extension of Gandhi's personal practices.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi himself said, "the *ashram* is the measuring rod by which people can judge me."<sup>21</sup> The *ashrams* shared a common aim of experimenting with living a simple life to realise the dignity of human labour. These *ashrams* were clearly not established with the aim of building an ideal community along the principles of the Hindu caste system or *varnashrama-dharma*. Not only were the settlers at each of Gandhi's *ashrams* a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals from different castes and religions, but there was also no strict division of labour amongst them. Every settler, irrespective of caste, religion, or gender had to do daily manual labour. Everyone had to perform every kind of work including cooking, gardening, cleaning, scavenging, shaving, and cutting hair on a rotational basis. Untouchability was not practised in any form in the *ashrams*; even the common practice of treating women as Untouchable during their menses was not practised in the *ashrams*. Though every inmate had to observe the

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<sup>18</sup> Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'?', p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 291.

vow of celibacy, many inter-caste marriages were organised in the *ashrams*. At Sabarmati Ashram, on the occasion of his son Ramadas's marriage, Gandhi said, "the wedding just celebrated would perhaps be for the *ashram* the last as between parties belonging to the same caste. It behoved people in the *ashram* to take the lead in this respect, because people outside might find it difficult to initiate the reform. The rule should be on the part of the *ashram* to discountenance marriages between parties of the same caste and to encourage those between parties belonging to different sub-castes."<sup>22</sup> Gandhi also allowed the solemnising of the wedding of a *Brahmin*, A. G. Tendulkar, and an Untouchable woman, Indumati, at Sevagram Ashram on 19th August 1945.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that Gandhi's experiments with simple living and community life cannot be seen as a sign of religious orthodoxy. In no way can they be interpreted as an effort to organise human life along the basic principles of the caste system or *varanshrama-dharma*. On the contrary, "the experiments are to be seen," argues Nishikant Kolge, "as an effort to break caste, community, and religious arrogance and discrimination."<sup>24</sup>

Yet, one of the charges levelled against Gandhi is that he acted as an *apologist* for the caste system. It lays greatest emphasis on Gandhi's deceptive distinction between the *varnashram-dharma* and the caste system, on the fact that reform will inevitably fall through on such trivialisation, and it is argued that a total condemnation of the whole system, whether called *varna* or caste, is absolutely essential for effective change. The origins of this critique can be located in Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's 1945 publication, "*What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*"<sup>25</sup> that contains a strong attack on Gandhi and on the Congress movement led by him. "It is ironic," writes Martin Deming Lewis in "*Gandhi: Maker Of Modern India?*," despite the fact that "no aspect of Gandhi's activities for social reform has been so widely acclaimed as his efforts on behalf of

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<sup>22</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 500.

<sup>23</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 84, p. 202.

<sup>24</sup> Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'?', p. 46.

<sup>25</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings And Speeches*, (ed., V. Moon), Vol. 9, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BAWS*, followed by volume and page(s).

the Untouchables, ... one of his most bitter critics should have been a man who was himself an Untouchable, B. R. Ambedkar.”<sup>26</sup>

Ambedkar’s framework is in turn used by later critics to understand Gandhi’s conception of caste, and to make his caste reform programmes appear different and threatening. The noted writer and activist, Arundhati Roy, on reading Ambedkar’s “*Annihilation Of Caste*” remarked, “[when] I first read it, I felt as though somebody had walked into a dim room and opened the windows.”<sup>27</sup> And similar is the experience of other Dalit hagiographers and pamphleteers. The point being made is that the way the later critics look at Gandhi’s treatment of the question of caste and untouchability, is through the lens called “*What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*.” There is a kind of repertory of images that keep coming up in their writings, and this is really quite consistent with Ambedkar’s work. This interpretation is a product of the mental state that believed in the firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problem of Untouchables, and this has shaped the contours of themes and patterns of the critics of Gandhi. Therefore, the best way to begin is by a critical invocation of Ambedkar’s work.

### [3]

Writings of Ambedkar create the impression that Gandhi was an outstanding *casteist*, “opposed to all those, who [were] out to destroy the caste system.”<sup>28</sup> “Mr. Gandhi’s views on the caste system ...,” asserts Ambedkar, “... were fully elaborated by him in 1921-22 in a Gujarati journal called *Navajivan*.”<sup>29</sup> Gandhi believed, states Ambedkar, “that if Hindu society has been able to stand it is because it is founded on the caste system. The seeds of *Swaraj* are to be found in the caste system .... A community which can create the caste system must be said to possess unique powers of organisation .... It can work as an electorate for a representative body. Caste can perform judicial functions by electing persons to act as judges to decide disputes

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<sup>26</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, ‘What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables’, in M. D. Lewis, (ed.), *Gandhi: Maker Of Modern India?*, Boston, D. C. Heath and Company, 1965, p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> A. Roy, ‘The Doctor And The Saint’, in B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, (ed., & annotated by S. Anand), New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Congress And Gandhi’, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

among members of the same caste .... I believe that inter-dining or inter-marriage are not necessary for promoting national unity .... To destroy caste system and adopt Western European social system[,] means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation, which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder.”<sup>30</sup> Ambedkar, however disagreed. To him, “there cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system. It is the system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.”<sup>31</sup> No mention is however made by Ambedkar of the context in which Gandhi made the above statement. Ambedkarite scholars follow suit.

Kancha Illiah writes Gandhi as wanting to “build a modern consent system for the continued maintenance of *Brahminical* hegemony ....”<sup>32</sup> This was evident in “Gandhi’s defense of the caste system as an essential form of social organisation,” says T. K. N. Unnithan, which gives “the impression that he was orthodox in this respect.”<sup>33</sup> Caste was to him “an extension of the principle of family, as both governed by blood and heredity.”<sup>34</sup> Gandhi said, “[caste] does attach to birth. A man cannot change his *varna* by choice. Not to abide by one’s *varna* (caste) is to disregard the laws of heredity.”<sup>35</sup> He believed, asserts Arundhati Roy, “that if Hindu society has been able to stand it is because it is founded on the caste system. To destroy caste system and adopt Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation, which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> K. Illaiah, *Why I Am Not A Hindu: A Shudra Critique Of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Kolkata, Samya, 2001, p. 86.

<sup>33</sup> T. K. N. Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste And The Untouchables, 1917-1950’, in M. D. Lewis, (ed.), *Gandhi Maker Of Modern India?*, Boston, D. C. Heath and Company, 1965, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> D. Keer, *Mahatma Gandhi: Political Saint And Unarmed Prophet*, Bombay Popular Prakashan, 1973, p. 358.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Roy, ‘The Doctor’, pp. 25-26.

Gandhi thus highlighted, emphasises Christophe Jaffrelot, “the *necessity* of maintaining one’s rank ... as an element of natural regulation.”<sup>37</sup>

For Gandhi, *varna vyavastha* “[was] a model of social organisation, which [attributed] to a socio-professional vocation ensuring a harmonious functioning of the whole.” He appreciated “the distribution of men in different castes as a factor of socio-economic complementarity and social harmony,”<sup>38</sup> which “was essential for ... progress.” To Gandhi, “the superiority of the caste system to the class system was that in the former money, ‘the greatest disruptive force in the world’, did not form the basis, whereas as distinctions of wealth did for the basis of the class system.”<sup>39</sup> In *Hind Swaraj*, Jaffrelot states that “[Gandhi] congratulated himself that in contrast to Europe, India ‘has no system of life corroding competition. Each followed his own occupation or trade, and charged a regulation wage’.”<sup>40</sup> He thus denied, writes Unnithan, the fact that “the evils produced by the caste system were no less than those created by the institutions of class.”<sup>41</sup>

Further for Gandhi, says Unnithan, “*varnashram-dharma* [satisfied] the religious, social and economic needs of a community.”<sup>42</sup> Gandhi said that “[the] villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system and through it they dealt with any oppression from ruling power or powers.”<sup>43</sup> But “he believed that there should be no hierarchy between castes; that all castes should be considered equal ...”<sup>44</sup> *Varna*, according to Gandhi’s interpretation, meant “pre-determination of the choice of a man’s profession ...,” and thus he saw no reason for anyone to claim superiority. Whereas Gandhi “accepted the function of a *Brahmin* ‘as capacity for superior service’,” writes Unnithan, “he refused to recognise his superiority in status. He said, [the] *Brahmin* had no right to assume superiority; it was against the law of

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<sup>37</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise Of The Low Castes In North Indian Politics*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 18, (emphasis mine).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste’, p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste’, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

*varna*.” Gandhi moreover asserted that even if one *varna* claimed superiority, this had no religious sanction.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, most Ambedkarite scholars argue that Gandhi was an outstanding product of the Hindu orthodox milieu. According to them, Gandhi resisted any change in the basic social structure of Hindu society, and he was the one who, more than anyone else, defended and validated the caste system when its legitimacy was being seriously challenged and its existence seemed precarious. For instance, Parimala V. Rao writes, “Gandhi inherited a Congress which already had a powerful pro-caste group. Added to this was the personal commitment that Gandhi himself had *vis-à-vis* the defence of the institution of caste.”<sup>46</sup> Another scholar, Braj Ranjan Mani, writes, “he [Gandhi] was a *Bania* more *Brahmanised* than *Brahmans*; his world-view and life philosophy were moulded and shaped by the age-old *Brahmanic* values and way of life. ... [He] never gave up his basic belief in the *Brahmanic* fundamentalism which is evident from his constant evocation of *varnashrama*, *Ramrajya* and trusteeship.”<sup>47</sup>

One of the important limitations of this view held by Ambedkarite scholars is that the primary objective of their study is not to understand Gandhi and his views on caste and other related issues; their primary field of study is Ambedkar or the Dalit movements and they see Gandhi and his movement in relation to it or in contrast against Ambedkar to better understand Ambedkar and his contribution to the upliftment of the Dalits.<sup>48</sup> For instance, Kancha Ilaiah writes, “the fundamental difference between these two thinkers lies in positioning themselves from their own communities.” He further adds, “Ambedkar was not only born in an Untouchable Mahar family but all through his life stood for the suppressed, oppressed and exploited masses. Gandhi, on the other hand, was born in a *Baniya* family and stood for the oppressor and exploiting upper castes.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, most Ambedkarite

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<sup>45</sup> Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste’, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> Rao, ‘Gandhi, Untouchability And The Postcolonial Predicament’, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Mani, *Debrahmanising History*, p. 348.

<sup>48</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> K. Ilaiah, ‘Dalitism Vs Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict In History,’ in G. Shah, (ed.), *Dalit Identity And Politics: Cultural Subordination And The Dalit Challenge*, Vol. 2, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 126.



scholars' studies assume that Gandhi believed in the caste system because of his personal belief in the *Brahmanical* worldview, which he inherited by virtue of being born in an upper-caste-Hindu family. However, these views appear problematic when one considers Gandhi's personal practices, which show that he openly violated most of the important restrictions of the caste system, and that he built *ashrams*, which were founded on principles that rejected all the basic rules of *varnashrama-dhrama*.

Such critics also fail to grasp one great quality of Gandhi. They see Gandhi as an unchanging person. But in fact, argues Bipan Chandra, "he constantly 'experimented with truth', and changed and developed his understanding of society, politics and social change."<sup>50</sup> Gandhi's thought and activity in these and other aspects were in constant evolution. Ambedkar has quoted statements on the caste system, inter-caste dining and marriages from Gandhi's early writings. The later critics do much more. They see Gandhi through Ambedkar's eyes. The later critics look at Gandhi's treatment of the question of caste and untouchability through the lens called *What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*. Thus there is a kind of repertory of images that keep coming up in their writings, and this is really quite consistent with Ambedkar's work. While Gandhi's basic commitment to human values, truth and non-violence remained constant, his opinions on all these and other issues underwent changes – sometimes drastic – and, invariably, in more radical directions. For example, Gandhi had said to Sri Lankans in 1927 that if India could take pride "in having sent you Mahinda<sup>51</sup> and the message of the Buddha to this land, it has also to accept the humiliation of having sent you the curse of caste distinctions."<sup>52</sup> By the early 1930s, Gandhi had declared that caste was "a handicap on progress"<sup>53</sup> and "a social evil,"<sup>54</sup> and, by the 1940s that it was "an anachronism,"<sup>55</sup> which "must go."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Chandra, 'Gandhiji', p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Mahinda was the first-born son of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka from his wife Devi and the older brother of Sanghamitra.

<sup>52</sup> 'Speech At Colombo', 25th November 1927, *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 318.

<sup>53</sup> *Young India*, 4th June 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 46, p. 302.

<sup>54</sup> 'Letter To Suresh Chandra Banerji', 10th October 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 51, p. 219.

<sup>55</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 17th April 1945, *CWMG*, Vol. 79, p. 384.

<sup>56</sup> 'Letter To Shyamlal', 23rd July 1945, *CWMG*, Vol. 81, p. 25.

Dennis Dalton argues that “Gandhi saw no harm in self contradiction.” According to Gandhi, “life was a series of experiments, and any principle might change if Truth so dictated.”<sup>57</sup> Critics of Gandhi could learn something from the statement made by him in 1933: “In my search after Truth[,] I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things ... and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.”<sup>58</sup> Gandhi also “did not see consistency as a virtue and [asserted that] all ideas were to be tested on the anvil of *experience*.”<sup>59</sup> Gandhi wrote on the same lines in 1938: “During my student days ... I learnt a saying of Emerson’s which I never forgot. ‘Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds’, said the sage. I cannot be a little mind, for foolish consistency has never been my hobgoblin ..., my recent writings must be held as cancelling my comparatively remote sayings and doings. Though my body is deteriorating through age, no such law of deterioration, I hope, operates against wisdom which I trust is not only not deteriorating but even growing.”<sup>60</sup>

According to Nishikant Kolge, “Gandhi never accepted that there were inconsistencies or changes in his opinions, not to speak of radical changes in his position.” To justify his point, Kolge points out that before Gandhi made the above-mentioned comment, “[in] my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things,” in the same piece of writing Gandhi also says, “[as] I read them [own writings] with a detached mind, I find no contradiction between the two statements, especially if they are read in their full *context*.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, whenever Gandhi was charged with inconsistency in his writings – although he said that he was not at all concerned about appearing consistent and suggested that his readers take his last opinion as final – Kolge writes, “he made it very clear that he personally did not find any inconsistencies and this suggestion was for those friends who did find

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<sup>57</sup> D. Dalton, *Indian Idea Of Freedom: Political Thought Of Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi And Rabindranath Tagore*, Haryana, The Academic Press, 1982, p. 158.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Chandra, ‘Gandhiji’, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> A. Copley, ‘Is There A Gandhian Definition Of Liberty?’, in A. J. Parel, (ed.), *Gandhi, Freedom And Self-Rule*, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2000, p. 25.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Chandra, ‘Gandhiji’, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 60, quoted in Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System?’’, p. 49, (emphasis mine).

inconsistencies in his writings.” Gandhi also suggested, Kolge adds, that before making their choice, “these friends should try to perceive an underlying or abiding consistency between his two seemingly inconsistent statements at different times.” He again quotes Gandhi to justify his point: “Whenever I [Gandhi] have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to take the meaning that my latest writing may yield unless, of course, they prefer the old. But before making the choice they should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies.”<sup>62</sup> Gandhi seems to be right in denying any inconsistencies in his position on caste, emphasises Kolge, because he, from a very young age, violated most caste restrictions. His attitude towards the caste system remained more or less consistent throughout his life.<sup>63</sup>

Rajmohan Gandhi argues that before 1935, Gandhi had at times claimed that “an ideal” form of caste could be justified, while nearly always adding that “the ideal” never existed in practice, and always insisting that any notion of superiority and inferiority was utterly wrong. Also, as Gandhi saw it, “the *varnas* were set by birth though ‘changeable’ by a person choosing another profession. However, if sons remained in their father’s profession, there would be less competition and strife in the world – provided everyone took only a living wage and no more.” Rajmohan thus emphasises that Gandhi made a statement about the *varnas* being set by birth, but “qualifies it, adds a rider to the qualification, and finally attaches a *proviso* to the rider.”<sup>64</sup>

Gandhi’s noble inconsistency, says A. R. Wadia, was that although “he never gave up his ‘theoretical’ belief in the caste system as such, he broke every rule of the orthodox caste system.” Caste system stands or falls with the observance of heredity in occupations, marriage with only the sub-caste concerned, and dining only with members of the sub-caste concerned. He says that “Gandhi in the spirit of a true reformer broke every one of these prohibitions.”<sup>65</sup> Though born a *Vaishya*, he played

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<sup>62</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 70, p. 203, quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>63</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 49.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in R. Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A Portrait Of Gandhi*, New Delhi, Viking, 1995, p. 239.

<sup>65</sup> A. R. Wadia, ‘Gandhiji And Untouchability’, in K. S. Saxena, (ed.), *Gandhi Centenary Papers*, Vol. 4, Bhopal, Publications Division, Council of Oriental Research, 1972, p. 53.

the role of a *Brahmin* becoming a teacher of mankind. He was not averse to being a sweeper. He played the role of a *Khatriya* too, though of a non-violent variety. He blessed the marriage of a *Brahmin* lady with a *Vaishya*, even though that *Vaishya* was his son. He had no objection to dine with a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or an Untouchable.

In a vivid account of the passive resistance movement in South Africa, Henry Polak wrote of its leader, Gandhi, that, while “a *Vaishnava Bania* by birth, he is by nature a *Brahmin*, the teacher of his fellow-men, not by the preaching of virtue, but by its practice; by impulse a *Kshatriya*, in his chivalrous defence of those who had placed their trust in him and look to him for protection; by choice a *Sudra*, servant of the humblest and most despised of his fellowmen. It is said of [the seer] Ramkrishna that he once swept out the foul hut of a *pariah* with his own hair, to prove his freedom from arrogance towards and contempt for the Untouchable outcast. The twice-born Prime Minister’s son [Gandhi] has been seen with his own hands to purify the sanitary convenience of his own house and of the gaols in which he has been interned.”<sup>66</sup>

In a similar vein, Bhikhu Parekh argues that Gandhi’s genius lay in the fact that while he kept hankering after the ancient *varna* system, his moral theory undercut its very basis. Gandhi equated religion with spirituality, spirituality with morality and defined morality in terms of self-purification and active social service. According to him, writes Parekh, the true *Brahmins* were only those engaged in “total dedication to the service of mankind as a way of attaining *moksha*.” There was thus no room for a distinct *varna* of *Brahmins* in his society who were engrossed in a “pedantic study of scriptures, religious ceremonies and *karma-kānda*.” The separate *varna* of *Khatriyas* disappeared, as Gandhi suggested that citizens trained in the art of non-violent satyagraha should replace the violence prone police and the army. The traditional occupation of the *Kshatriyas* thus became the general responsibility of all. Every man became a *Vaisya*, since he wanted “everyone to earn his living and no one to depend on *dāna* or charity,” and thus, again, the *Vaisyas* as a separate *varna* disappeared. Lastly, for him, manual labour, the work of the *Shudras*, “was the only true form of socially acceptable productive work.” Since all citizens performed the work of

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in R. Guha, ‘Does Gandhi Have A Caste?’, *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

*Shudras*, they too ceased to exist as a separate *varna*. Therefore, Parekh emphasises that Gandhi's well-rounded or fully moral man engaged in all four activities. He served his fellow-men, fought against untruth and injustices, earned his living and engaged in manual labour. He belonged to all four *varnas* and hence to none alone. Parekh thus contends that "Gandhi so radically redefined the four categories of traditional occupations underlying the ancient *varna* system that the latter no longer made sense."<sup>67</sup>

A corollary is Anthony J. Parel's reading of Gandhi's conception of *dharma* as *duty* that focuses on his attitude towards the institution of "caste." Parel says that members of society in the past carried out their ordained duties as enshrined in the scriptures, and on this depended the stability of the social order. He says that Gandhi's initial understanding of the scriptural teaching of the caste system was that "the four castes, as sanctioned in the *Rig Veda* and the *Gita*, embodied an egalitarian principle, where all the four castes were equal in dignity." To Gandhi, each human being was 'born' with one of the three natural qualities or *gunas* – *sattva* or the quality of causing virtue, *rajas* or the quality of causing passion and *tamas* or the quality of causing dullness. These natural qualities in turn determined his/her natural aptitude for work. *Sattva* was present in those inclined towards "truth, wisdom, beauty, and goodness;" those inclined towards "action, energetic behaviour, and violence" possessed *rajas*; and *tamas* was present in those inclined towards "stupidity, gloom, and melancholy." "A combination of natural qualities and natural aptitudes," to Gandhi, writes Parel, "determined one's caste, not birth or heredity."<sup>68</sup> Thus, for Gandhi the *varnashram-dharma*, he was committed to, implied status by ascription, not by choice. It was a matter of one's duty to the welfare of the community, and all callings were to be considered of equal value, whether *Brahmin* or *Bhangi*.

Ramashray Roy adds an important dimension to the issue at large by analysing Gandhi's attitude towards caste by focusing on his conception of "work as sacrifice." He argues that according to Gandhi, the ultimate end of life was "self-realisation" and

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<sup>67</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 252.

<sup>68</sup> A. J. Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy And The Quest For Harmony*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 87.

“sacrifice” was the exclusive means of realising this end. The final human realisation is *moksha*, liberation from *samsara* or the cycles of births and rebirths. Gandhi treated work as sacrifice, that is, the performance of action as a sacred duty. This sacred duty laid for him in exerting oneself in the benefit of others, that is, service. But, Gandhi cautioned that unless it was performed in a spirit of sacrifice, such a service would lead to bondage. Sacrifice was doing something for the service of others.<sup>69</sup> Therefore it follows, asserts Ramashray, “every function from that of the priest and the king down to that of potter and scavenger is literally a priesthood and every operation a rite.”<sup>70</sup>

Gandhi, thus, defined *varna dharma* as “the performance of one’s worldly duties, well insofar as it [was] consistent with fundamental ethics. He [might] earn crores by doing so; however, he [would] not hoard riches but devote the balance for the good of the people.”<sup>71</sup> Gandhi thus rejected, says Ramashray, Marx’s idea that possession must be ended in order to usher in an ideal society. Instead, Gandhi argued that it was not possession that was the problem; it was possessiveness that lied at the root of the problem. But “complete non-possession [was] an abstraction.” The attitude of possessiveness can be curbed, according to Gandhi, “only by the pursuit of a simple life style symptomatised by the reduction of needs to the bare minimum, on the one hand, and by embracing the idea of trusteeship, on the other.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Valerian Rodrigues argues that to Gandhi, mankind itself was an organic whole and men were necessarily interdependent. Therefore, every action was both self and other-regarding. No man can brutalise or degrade another without inflicting it on himself. In harming others, men harmed themselves. Gandhi, thus, revisited the traditional doctrines of *varnashrama* and *karmasiddhanta* to make them the bearers of the principles of interdependence, responsibility and freedom.<sup>73</sup>

Ramashray Roy thus holds that “Gandhi advocates retention of the *varna vyavastha*” because “in his view, *varna vyavastha* is natural and affords greater

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<sup>69</sup> Roy, *Gandhi And Ambedkar*, pp. 139-41.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140-41.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup> V. Rodrigues, ‘Reading Texts And Traditions: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 02, (January 08, 2011), p. 59.

opportunities than other arrangements for self-realisation and social harmony.”<sup>74</sup> Roy argued that this was because Gandhi believed that the goal of modern civilisation, especially in its most utilitarian forms, was simply the satisfaction of one human desire after another. Self-gratification was not only accepted but encouraged, and the higher purpose of life, which for Gandhi was self-realisation, gradually became obsolete. On the other hand, “a social order,” Roy adds, “of Gandhi’s conception must be treated as a *yajna*. As an instance of *yajna*, society signifies an order that is based on the phenomenon of extended selves; it must reflect the values that promote harmony, non-exploitation, equality, and participation.” Roy adds, “[Gandhi] finds this possibility to exist *only* in a social order that is based on *varna vyavastha*. Given the ultimate end of life, that is, self-realisation, and *yajna* as the exclusive means of realising this end,” Roy reminds the reader that “it is in this context that we can understand why Gandhi lays so much emphasis on *varna vyavastha*, in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular.”<sup>75</sup>

However, according to Nishikant Kolge, there are different levels of misunderstanding in such an analysis of Gandhi’s views. Kolge argues that though it is true that Gandhi criticised modern civilisation because it encouraged the proliferation of human wants and desires and made the acquisition of more and more goods and material comforts the core of human life and rendered obsolete the idea of self-realisation, it did not mean that Gandhi completely rejected modern civilisation and uncritically advocated for the retention of *varna vyavastha*. Kolge is also critical of Roy’s argument that Gandhi’s conception of society that promoted harmony, non-exploitation, equality, and participation could exist *only* in a social order that was based on *varna vyavastha* – given the ultimate end of life was self-realisation. Kolge argues that Gandhi attacked all kinds of violence and domination, irrespective of whether he discovered it in the traditional (*varna vyavastha*) or the modern (modern civilisation) way of life. “[Gandhi’s] criticism of modern civilisation,” acknowledges Kolge, “was more explicit than his censure of traditional practices,” but this was “due to the historical context – Indian’s struggle against colonialism – in which he found himself.” Gandhi chose to idealise the traditional way of life for the same reason, and argued that it is the path to individual dignity and social harmony. “But this does not

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<sup>74</sup> Roy, *Self And Society*, pp. 111-12; Roy, *Gandhi And Ambedkar*, p. 140.

<sup>75</sup> Roy, *Gandhi And Ambedkar*, p. 140, (emphasis mine).

mean,” cautions Kolge, “that he rejected modern civilisation entirely and advocated a return to *varna vyavastha*.” Moreover, Kolge holds that Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilisation shows that he believed that individual dignity, social harmony, and the ultimate end of life, that is, self-realisation, “can be achieved within the boundaries of modern civilisation.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, for Gandhi, it was not a matter of preference; being a practical man, he accepted that modern civilisation is going to stay here, and hence needs to be improved. As A. J. Parel observes, “[the] correct Gandhian metaphor for modern civilisation is not ‘disease’ but ‘curable disease’: ‘civilisation is not an incurable disease’. *Hind Swaraj*, in this respect, is a short treatise on ‘the malaise of modernity’ and Gandhi is one of its physicians.”<sup>77</sup> Also for Gandhi, the real work was defining *yogadharma* (self-realisation) that was relevant to and practicable within the context of the modern *yuga*.<sup>78</sup> As Bhikhu Parekh writes: “If we were to pick out the one dominant passion, the central organising principle of [Gandhi’s] life, it would have to be his search for and his struggle to establish *dharma* appropriate to India in the modern age.”<sup>79</sup> Gandhi’s efforts to reform modern civilisation, thus, should not be understood as him preferring modern civilisation to a traditional society that was organised on the basic principles of *varna*.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, it is also not correct to say that Gandhi emphasised *varna vyavastha* in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular. Replying to a question, Gandhi himself said, “[if] *varnashrama* goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear.”<sup>81</sup> Responding to another question at a different point, he explains that his adherence to the idea of *varnashrama* should not be taken very seriously: “I have gone nowhere to defend *varnadharma*, though for the removal of untouchability I went to Vikom. I am the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of *khadi*, establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity, and removal of untouchability, the three pillars of *Swaraj*. But I have never placed establishment of *varnashram-dharma* as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing

<sup>76</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 48.

<sup>77</sup> A. J. Parel, ‘The Doctrine Of Swaraj In Gandhi’s Philosophy’, in U. Baxi & B. Parekh (eds.), *Crisis And Change In Contemporary India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1995, p. 62.

<sup>78</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 11.

<sup>80</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 48.

<sup>81</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 522.



a wrong emphasis on *varnashram-dharma*.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Gandhi clarified that he was not presenting his views on caste, *varna*, and inter-caste marriage and dining “for public acceptance.” He gave those views for the satisfaction of enquirers, Gandhi said, for “I would have my friends and the public to know me as I am, and not picture me as something they fancy but has no likeness to me.”<sup>83</sup> It is known that Gandhi was a man of action, and if he really believed that a society based on *varna* would be conducive to self-realisation, he would have lived a life in alignment with the basic principles of *varna* and would have organised his *ashrams* too along those lines. But, Gandhi neither lived his life, nor organised the way of life in any of his *ashrams*, on the principles of *varna*. As Nishikant Kolge rightly emphasises, “Gandhi did not place undue emphasis on *varna vyavastha* nor on the caste system grounded in it.”<sup>84</sup>

Prominent Gandhian scholar, Margaret Chatterjee, similarly writes that “Gandhi spoke in favour of following one’s hereditary occupation. What was behind it, I believe, was his perception of the undoubted fact that industrialisation would gradually erode the network of traditional occupations that had provided a livelihood for villagers for centuries. ... Industrial civilisation would never be able to provide a livelihood for the teeming millions of India.”<sup>85</sup> However, Nishikant Kolge argues that Chatterjee’s claims, first, that Gandhi rejected industrialisation because he believed that it would not be able to provide a livelihood for millions of Indians; and second, that he preferred and propagated hereditary modes of occupation over industrialisation for resolving India’s economic problems may not be accepted as appropriate explanations for Gandhi’s defence of the caste system and hereditary occupations in his writings. Kolge argues that for Gandhi the danger of industrialisation was not that it would gradually erode the network of traditional occupations that had provided a livelihood for villagers for centuries, but that it would destroy values and create alienated individuals in an industrial society. He was afraid that industrialisation would turn a person into a mechanical part in the production machine.<sup>86</sup> As Gandhi wrote: “It is beneath human dignity to lose one’s individuality

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 523.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Letter To Lokanath Misra’, 18th February 1933, *CWVG*, Vol. 53, p. 339.

<sup>84</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> Chatterjee, *Religious Thought*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>86</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 47.

and become a mere cog in the machine. I want every individual to become a full-blooded, fully developed member of society.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, Gandhi fundamentally viewed industrialisation with suspicion because it destroyed the autonomy of the individual and the dignity of individual labour. Moreover, “since Gandhi was also aware that hereditary occupations could crush individuality,”<sup>88</sup> emphasises Kolge, “he did not advocate for their continuance as an alternative to industrialisation to solve the economic problems of India.” Though it is fact that Gandhi defined caste or *varna* as hereditary occupations and appreciated it for several reasons, but he did not believe that it could solve the economic problems of India. “There is hardly any evidence,” Kolge adds, “that suggests that Gandhi advocated for traditional hereditary occupations (caste or *varna*) to resolve India’s economic problems.” Also, Gandhi did not set up any organisations to persuade people to follow their hereditary occupations. In addition, there are no references to hereditary occupations in his constructive programme to create an ideal village.<sup>89</sup>

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Added to the aforementioned criticism was Ambedkar’s assertion that the practice of untouchability and social stratification on the basis of caste having had become the order of the day, Gandhi began to make a specious distinction between *varnashram-dharma* and the caste system. Gandhi declared, asserts Ambedkar, that “he [Gandhi] gave support to caste because it stands for restraint. But at present caste does not mean restraint, it means limitations. Restraint is glorious and it helps to achieve freedom. But limitation is like chain. It binds. There is nothing commendable in castes as they exist to-day. They are contrary to the tenets of the *Shastras*. The number of castes is infinite and there is a bar against inter-marriage. This is not a condition of elevation. It is a state of fall.” The “best remedy” therefore, according to Gandhi, writes Ambedkar, was “to reproduce the old system of four *varnas*” by fusing [the] small castes into four such big castes, so that society was divided into four orders, namely, “(1) the *Brahmins*, whose occupation was learning, (2) the

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<sup>87</sup> Nicholas F. Gier writes, “Gandhi wants to protect the individual from dissolution either in a pre-modern totality or the modern bureaucratic state.” F. N. Gier, *The Virtue Of Nonviolence: From Gautama To Gandhi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>88</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 68, p. 266.

<sup>89</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 47.

*Khastriyas*, whose occupation was warfare, (3) the *Vaishyas*, whose occupation was trade, and (4) the *Shrudras*, whose occupation was service of the other classes.” In short, “Mr. Gandhi became an upholder of the *varna* system.”<sup>90</sup>

Given this reformed position, states Ambedkar, Gandhi then presented his understanding of untouchability, caste, and *varna* that he found in the Hindu scriptures. Gandhi believed that “caste has nothing to do with religion .... *Varna* and *ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *varna* teaches us that we have ... to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling .... There is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a *Brahmin* – a spiritual teacher – and a scavenger are equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God, and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man .... There is nothing in the law of *varna* to warrant a belief in untouchability.”<sup>91</sup> Ambedkar, however blames Gandhi for his failure to recognise that untouchability and inequality of status are inherent in the caste system or the *varnashram-dharma*, and that the former cannot be abolished without the annihilation of the latter. He says that “the outcaste is a byproduct of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system.”<sup>92</sup>

Ambedkar, moreover, criticises Gandhi, saying that his “philosophical difference between caste and *varna* is too subtle to be grasped by people in general, because for all practical purposes in Hindu society, caste and *varna* are one and the same thing.... [His] theory of *varna-vyavastha* is impracticable in this age and there is no hope of its revival in the near future. But Hindus are slaves of caste and do not want to destroy it. So when [he advocates his] ideal or imaginary *varna-vyavastha*, [the Hindus] find justification for clinging to caste. Thus, [he was] doing a great disservice to social reform .... To try to remove untouchability without striking at the root of *varna-vyavastha* is simply to treat the outward symptoms of a disease.”<sup>93</sup> Ambedkar in a monograph, *The Annihilation Of Caste* (1936), restated and re-

<sup>90</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Congress And Gandhi’, p. 48.

<sup>91</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation Of Caste: With A Reply To Mahatma Gandhi*, Julhindur, Punjab, Bheem Patrika Publications, 1968, p. 103.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 26; Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 37.

<sup>93</sup> Ambedkar, *Annihilation Of Caste*, p. 106.

emphasised his position: “[The] Hindu society has been ruined by caste and *chaturvarna*, both of which besides denying knowledge to the masses, were opposed to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.”<sup>94</sup>

Gandhi’s continued belief in *varna* troubled Ambedkar, as it was to him fundamentally opposed to democracy and cannot be rationally defended. He added that Gandhi was “preaching caste under the name of *varna*” in order to sustain the support of the orthodox and un-orthodox Hindus for the movement for *Swaraj*. According to Ambedkar, there is, under Hinduism and its caste/*varna* system, a “fundamentally wrong relationship” between high-caste men and low-caste men. Without attempting to bring about any structural change of that wrong relationship, Gandhi, Ambedkar stated, was trying to present the Hindu society as a tolerable and good religious community. He went to write that by focusing on improving the personal character of the caste-Hindus, Gandhi was “wasting his energy and hugging an illusion.” The social system of the Hindus, namely, the caste/*varna* system, said Ambedkar, is what has to be changed. According to him, the Hindu society had to be transformed into a casteless society.<sup>95</sup>

Gandhi’s *varna* system was therefore nothing dissimilar, writes Ambedkar, to the caste system of the orthodox Hindus, for as Gandhi himself said, “[it] is based on birth,” and though “[there] is no harm if a person belonging to one *varna* acquires the knowledge or science and art specialised in by persons belonging to other *varnas*[,] [but] as far as the way of earning his living is concerned[,], he must follow the occupation of the *varna* to which he belongs[,], which means he must follow the hereditary profession of his forefathers.”<sup>96</sup> Ambedkar states that whether “Mr. Gandhi changed over from caste system to the *varna* system,” it matters not, for “the idea of *varna* is the parent of the idea of caste,” and both “caste [and] *varna* ... are fundamentally opposed to democracy.” In this context, Ambedkar therefore asserts that “the social ideal of Gandhism,” which is “either caste or *varna* ...[,], is not democracy.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>95</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 1, p. 89.

<sup>96</sup> Ambedkar, ‘Congress And Gandhi’, pp. 48-49.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

In a similar vein, D. N. argues that “faced with pressure from the rather weak Dalit Movement, which the British wanted to use to divide the anti-colonial struggle,”<sup>98</sup> Gandhi emphasised the distinction between *jati* and *varna*, and insisted that caste (*viz.*, *jati*) had nothing to do with religion. Violation of this law of *varna*, therefore, asserted Gandhi, had ended in giving rise to the caste system, with all its horrors, as practiced in India. Unnithan says that as Gandhi became more convinced that “caste as an institution had degenerated to a great extent and the much feared social stratification on the basis of caste had become the order of the day,”<sup>99</sup> he declared, “down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of *varna*.”<sup>100</sup>

Thus, Gandhi now began to distinguish, Unnithan writes, “between the ideal caste system, as intended by its founders, and the caste system as practiced in India.”<sup>101</sup> The former he called *varnashram-dharma* and the latter its distorted practice. In Gandhi’s opinion, the caste system as practiced in India was a deviation from the laws of *varna*, or the principle of caste, that was largely responsible for the economic and spiritual ruin of India. He regarded caste as a “drag upon Hindu progress” and untouchability as “an excrescence upon *varnashram*.” Gandhi thus “advised social reformers,” emphasises Unnithan, “to eradicate this inequality from society.”<sup>102</sup> “What is noteworthy,” writes D. N., “is that those who wish to preserve caste (which for a long time has been *jati*) refer to the early period of the existence of castes, of *varna*.”<sup>103</sup> Ajit Roy fully accepts this view. He argues that Gandhi sought to achieve his objective in the sphere of caste relations without destroying, even seriously disturbing the existing order.<sup>104</sup>

Further for Gandhi, untouchability was an internal issue confined to the Hindu religion and was capable of being solved through understanding within the Hindu

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<sup>98</sup> D. N., ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And Separate Electorates Issue’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 21 (May 25, 1991), p. 1328.

<sup>99</sup> Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste’, p. 84.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>103</sup> D. N., ‘Separate Electorates Issue’, p. 1328.

<sup>104</sup> A. Roy, ‘Caste And Class: An Interlinked View’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 14, No. 7/8, Annual Number: Class and Caste in India (Feb., 1979), p. 304.

community. Hence, for him, argues Owen M. Lynch, “the battle against untouchability was essentially a religious one.”<sup>105</sup> He therefore called for a change of heart among the Hindus as an act of expiation and reparation for the centuries of oppression. And by change of heart, says Duncan Forrester, “[Gandhi] meant ‘conversion’ to a purified Hinduism on the part of the high castes.”<sup>106</sup>

Gandhi further re-emphasised his stand, writes Dhananjay Keer, by arguing that “the caste system contained the seeds of *Swaraj* and they could carry out social reform with ease through the agency of the caste system.” He was therefore “opposed to the movements which [were] being carried on for the destruction of the caste system.”<sup>107</sup> Gandhi stated that “[it] was the notions of high and low ..., that created untouchability. When they were removed, untouchability would disappear and the caste system would be purified.”<sup>108</sup> He also asserted, says Christophe Jaffrelot, that “like every other institution, caste has suffered from excrescence. I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural and essential .... The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority.”<sup>109</sup> Tanika Sarkar states that “the more Gandhi defended caste as non-hierarchical, the more urgent it became to salvage it from the harshness of untouchability, in order to claim that it was equitable and benign.”<sup>110</sup>

But in the contemporary period, says D. N., “it was disingenuous to suggest that it was *varna* that should be retained and not *jati*, because what actually existed was *jati* with all its features of discrimination and untouchability.”<sup>111</sup> To ask, as Gandhi did, that people should follow their traditional callings “was to condemn the

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<sup>105</sup> O. M. Lynch, *The Politics Of Untouchability: Social Mobility And Social Change In A City Of India*, Delhi, National Publishing House, 1974, p. 134.

<sup>106</sup> D. B. Forrester, *Caste And Christianity: Attitude And Policies On Caste Of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions In India*, London, Curzon Press, 1979, p. 102.

<sup>107</sup> Keer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 358.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in H. Coward, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And Untouchability’, in H. Coward, (ed.), *Indian Critiques Of Gandhi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 56.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in C. Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar And Untouchability: Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 61.

<sup>110</sup> T. Sarkar, ‘Gandhi And Social Relations’, in J. M. Brown & A. Parel, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion To Gandhi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 180.

<sup>111</sup> D. N., ‘Separate Electorates Issue’, p. 1328.

Untouchables and other low castes to a life of servitude.”<sup>112</sup> Gandhi, thus like an obedient “orthodox reformer,” writes Keer, “white-washed a dilapidated house!”<sup>113</sup> Oliver Cromwell Cox, thus, laments that Gandhi was unable to rise very far beyond the principles of impurity and its logical extreme, untouchability, and “would remove untouchability but otherwise maintain the caste system intact.”<sup>114</sup> Gandhi’s suggestion that it “was necessary to improve the conditions of the Untouchables” is therefore “bogus,” says Keer, since “he believed in caste and at the same time wished to abolish untouchability!”<sup>115</sup>

This selected approach to untouchability, says Jaffrelot, “can be explained more fundamentally by [Gandhi’s] attachment to a traditional Hindu social order,”<sup>116</sup> or as H. N. Mukherjee puts it, by his “fascination for *varnashram* concepts and therefore a certain weakness for the caste system,”<sup>117</sup> which he considered to be potentially harmonious, and that in turn “weakened his championship of the Untouchables.”<sup>118</sup> Referring to *varnashram-dharma*, Gandhi again restated, “the four *varnas* have been compared in the *Vedas* to the four members of one body, and no simile could be happier. If they are members of one body, how could 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 .... It is this canker that is at the root of various ills of our time, especially class and civil strife. 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 everyone shall fulfill the law of one’s being by doing in a spirit of duty and service that which one is born.”<sup>119</sup> Judith Brown writes that “in

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1328-29.

<sup>113</sup> Keer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 361.

<sup>114</sup> Cox, *Caste, Class And Race*, p. 35.

<sup>115</sup> Keer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 358.

<sup>116</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, p. 61.

<sup>117</sup> H. N. Mukherjee, *Gandhi, Ambedkar And The “Extirpation” Of Untouchability*, New Delhi, People’s Publishing House, 1982, p. 20.

<sup>118</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 54.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 19, (emphasis mine).

upholding *varnashrama* as opposed to the current practice of caste distinctions, Gandhi was compromising between the claims of orthodoxy and reform.”<sup>120</sup>

In sum, “Gandhi thought that Hindu society formed almost a harmonious whole provided it was reformed and restored to its pristine order.”<sup>121</sup> The contradiction in Gandhi’s idea of social reform, according to Jaffrelot, is that “his emphasis on the socio-economic cohesion goes hand in hand with a denial of the hierarchical principle, which nevertheless is at the heart of the *varna* system,”<sup>122</sup> for “if Gandhi tries to eliminate the hierarchical dimension of the caste system, he describes its organic rationale with arguments which leave little place for social mobility.” For Gandhi, “such mobility [implied] forms of competition which [produced] social tensions, as evident in the individualistic societies of the West.” Jaffrelot, therefore argues that in reality Gandhi’s social reform operated “only to the point where egalitarianism [run] the risk of challenging social unity – which is hierarchical.”<sup>123</sup> Roy thus holds that “Gandhi never decisively and categorically renounced his belief in *chaturvarna*, the system of four *varnas*.”<sup>124</sup>

Thus, the whole-hearted support that Gandhi gave to caste system only meant that he was prepared to do what the ancient Aryans had refused to do, writes Wadia, that is, “give the Untouchables a place in the fourth caste of *Shudras*.”<sup>125</sup> Zelliott and Coward also argue that since “there [was] no fifth caste in the *Shastras*, Untouchables [were to] be regarded as *Shudras* (servants) – a view acceptable to some orthodox Hindu leaders of the day, [which] was to possess equality of status if not opportunity.” As Gandhi put it, “[one] born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes. For a scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your President.”<sup>126</sup> Bal Gangadhar Tilak had earlier asserted

<sup>120</sup> J. M. Brown, ‘The Mahatma And Modern India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Gandhi Centenary Number (1969), p. 330.

<sup>121</sup> Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 19.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>124</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 41.

<sup>125</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 55. J. I. (Hans) Bakker argues that traditionally, since the Untouchables had no caste, they had no *dharma* either. Bakker, *Toward A Just Civilisation*, p. 127.

<sup>126</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 56; E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit: Essays On The Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1992, p. 154.



that “[it] is a sin against God to say that a person is Untouchable, who is not so to God Himself .... Hinduism absorbed the *Shudras*, can it not also absorb the Untouchables?”<sup>127</sup>

Jaffrelot, further argues that, Gandhi wanted to integrate the Untouchables in a caste system, which was hierarchical, as Gandhi himself said, “[the Untouchables’] lives ..., are so intimately mixed with those of the caste-Hindus ... for whom they live,” (signifying “submission”<sup>128</sup>), and despite “[their] revolt against the Hindus and their apostasy from Hinduism ... [they] are part of an indivisible family, for there is ... something ... in Hinduism which keeps them in it *even in spite of themselves*,” (that emphasises “deference” and “physical or symbolic violence”<sup>129</sup>). Harold Coward explains that the Vaikom Satyagraha experience had led to this change in Gandhi’s approach to untouchability. He argues that “to win the confidence of the orthodox Hindu community, Gandhi had to be seen by them more as a fighter to preserve Hinduism and less as a reformer.”<sup>130</sup> Thus, he began to present himself as a committed *Sanatanist* Hindu. “Emphasising allegiance to his religion,” contends Coward, “Gandhi began to *underplay* his reformist goals, including the eradication of untouchability.”<sup>131</sup>

According to Ajay Skaria, “despite [Gandhi’s] willed opposition to untouchability, he actively participates in its perpetuation” because “[his] thinking of *varnadharma* [is] ... subsumed within the tropes of *maryada dharma* [the *dharma* of proper limits, of propriety] and the *thekana* [or rightful place].”<sup>132</sup> Skaria argues that although Gandhi treats “differences of caste [*varna*] as *swabhavik* [natural],”<sup>133</sup> he holds “that the equality of castes [*varnas*] is entirely compatible with their separateness.”<sup>134</sup> Gandhi makes this claim, Skaria adds, “by reworking the *Gita*’s

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 154.

<sup>128</sup> Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 24.

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>130</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 47.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>132</sup> A. Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi’s Religion Of Resistance*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2016, p. 162.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

term *swadharma*,” which he translates as “own duty” or “one’s own duty”<sup>135</sup> rooted in “self-sacrifice.” In Gandhi’s conception thus, writes Skaria, “*varnadharma* does not allow for hierarchies: where all are equally marked by self-sacrifice, by a refusal to persist in being, *varnadharma* becomes the “truest path to equality”.”<sup>136</sup> As such, *varnadharma* comes to Gandhi to name “the equality that works across incommensurable difference.”<sup>137</sup> To justify his point, Skaria quotes from Gandhi’s writings on the *Gita*: “What may be called *swadharma*? The *varnashram* had its origin in this idea. ... [We] are told that following one’s *swadharma* one even attains perfection; that is, following one’s *swadharma* one attains equality with all. In this transitory world, we see equality nowhere. No two leaves are equal.”<sup>138</sup> By treating *varnadharma* as the institutionalisation of finitude, *varnadharma* thus, argues Skaria, “comes [to Gandhi] to name the order of an equality organised around *thekana* or rightful place.”<sup>139</sup>

Gandhi in thinking of *varnadharma* also drew heavily on the trope of *maryada dharma*. Gandhi, asserts Ajay Skaria, not only “affirms *maryada* unconditionally and absolutely” but also “regards the emphasis on *maryada* or limits as a – maybe the – most essential element of Hinduism.”<sup>140</sup> *Maryada dharma* refers in Gandhi’s vocabulary, Skaria adds, “to the customary restrictions among castes such as those around inter-dining, inter-marriage, or inter-mingling.” Although Gandhi does not believe in *maryada dharma*, “he continues to affirm it as a way for those upper castes who believe in untouchability to continue the practice without actively imposing social sanctions on the Untouchables.”<sup>141</sup> To justify his point, Skaria quotes Gandhi’s letter to one correspondent, “who likely defended untouchability”: “To me the whole idea of your argument tends to show that those who have the ideas of physical purity that you should treat themselves as Untouchables rather than treat any single human being as such, and this is the well-known practice followed among the *Vaishnavas*. Those who follow it do not call themselves Untouchables, but they are called

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>138</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 37, p. 345, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>139</sup> Skaria, *Unconditional Equality*, p. 160.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

‘merjadees’ [those who follow *maryada dharma*].”<sup>142</sup> This shows Gandhi’s “refusal to share a common space with other castes, especially socially subordinate ones,” emphasises Skaria, which “is itself profoundly exclusionary and violent.” Therefore, Gandhi’s explicit commitment to an understanding of *varna* in terms of an immeasurable equality across substantive social differences, argues Skaria, meant that “*varnadharma* or *maryada dharma* can only be experienced by the Dalits as a most violent subordination.” Until his last years, Skaria points out, “[Gandhi] seeks to institute a proper *varnadharma* – thus his emphasis on the “uplift” of lower castes, his insistence that they should abandon “unclean habits” such as eating meat or consuming alcohol.” Skaria goes on to assert that “[it] is surely his commitment to *varnadharma* as an order of conservative equality that makes him so reluctant to support temple entry movements – they demand an abstract equality.”<sup>143</sup> Since Gandhi’s explicit formulations draw heavily on the tropes of the *thekana* and *maryada dharma* in thinking of *varnadharma*, he “cannot conceptualise a political role for the insurgent Untouchables or ‘Dalits’, only for the deified Untouchables or ‘Harijans’.” Gandhi’s “conservatism [thus] destroys his affirmation of the equality of all being,”<sup>144</sup> concludes Skaria.

Undeniably, “Gandhi’s views on caste changed from the 1920s to the 1940s, and eventually he decided ‘to challenge caste directly by accepting and sanctioning inter-marriage itself’.”<sup>145</sup> However, Jaffrelot laments that “this ‘last and most far-reaching step’ not only took place, ‘only in 1946’,” when, asserts Roy, “[Gandhi’s] views were just views and did not run the risk of translating into political action,”<sup>146</sup> but “also did not imply,” writes Jaffrelot, “the eradication of caste as a social unit.”<sup>147</sup> Zelliott also emphasises that “underlying Gandhi’s change in attitude toward social practices was an unchanging belief in *varnashram-dharma*, the divinely ordained

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<sup>142</sup> ‘Letter To Nagardas Bhambania’, 3rd January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 356, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>143</sup> Skaria, *Unconditional Equality*, p. 162.

<sup>144</sup> A. Skaria, ‘Gandhi’s Radical Conservatism’, *Seminar*, Volume 662, Number 662, October 2014, p. 34.

<sup>145</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, p. 63; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 153.

<sup>146</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 41.

<sup>147</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, p. 63.

division of society into four groups defined according to duty.”<sup>148</sup> Tanika Sarkar fully accepts this view. According to her, “there was *no* linear progress or a single decisive moment of shift in Gandhi’s position [on caste]. There was, instead, a co-existence of different tonalities, which pushed against one another. Some of them sharpened over time as a result of the dialogue, but some remained constant: the defense of *varna*, for instance.”<sup>149</sup>

Parekh argues that though Gandhi discredited and undermined the intellectual and moral basis of untouchability, he failed to undermine its social, economic and political roots. Gandhi took a long time to acknowledge that the “roots of untouchability lay deep within the caste system.” His continued attack on untouchability therefore “lacked a cutting edge.” Since Gandhi defended the caste system, writes Parekh, “he could only argue that the Untouchables should become touchables,”<sup>150</sup> without ending “their lowest social and moral status.” Moreover, Gandhi’s defense of the principle of hereditary occupation, upon which his *varna* system rested, not only “confined [Untouchables] to their lowly traditional occupations,” but also blinded him, asserts Parekh, “to the very need to do something about them.” According to Parekh, Gandhi’s contention that a degrading occupation need not necessarily lead to social and moral inequality also “took little account of the enormous weight of tradition.” And lastly, Gandhi’s belief in rebirth had an inherent lacuna, says Parekh, for “if a man deserved to be born into a specific *varna*, he also deserved to be confined to the relevant occupation.”<sup>151</sup>

Keer, therefore asserts that a man (referring to Gandhi), who believed in the gospel of caste by birth-cum-hereditary vocation and disapproved of inter-caste marriages, under the soothing but deceptive balm of the principle that all professions are equal, but shoemakers must remain shoemakers, scavengers must remain scavengers, carpenters must remain carpenters, washer-men must remain washer-men from father to son, from generation to generation, so that the God-ordained caste system might prevail, “can hardly be called a lover of social equality and social justice.” Indeed, Keer laments that “[Gandhi] hampered the past and contemporary

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<sup>148</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>149</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, pp. 183-84, (emphasis mine).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 267.

work of the galaxy of social reformers and evolutionaries ..., who raised their hammer against the caste system, which deprived Hindus of a strong feeling of patriotism and nationality, of social equality and solidarity and denied opportunity to develop fully and freely.” Instead of helping the progressive social forces that were working for the re-organisation of society on deeper and broader foundations, Gandhi “defended the antiquated and unjust, defective and decaying institution of caste, which was injurious to growth and solidarity of the people and contradictory to or conflicting with the aspirations of true nationalism and democracy.”<sup>152</sup>

Thus, influenced mainly by Gandhi, writes Unnithan, “the Congress had accepted the removal of untouchability as a primary and necessary means for the goal of social equality in independent India.”<sup>153</sup> The practice of untouchability however continues to exist, because “the social system is so deeply imbedded in the Indian mind that legislative measures alone are of no great consequence.” Therefore, in Unnithan’s opinion, untouchability cannot be easily eradicated from India by palliative measures taken from time to time. He argues that for the permanent removal of this age-old evil, its root, namely, the caste system, has to be broken. Gandhi’s “contribution would have been much greater,” asserts Unnithan, “had he directed his opposition simultaneously against the caste system, which has given sanction to untouchability, than to the latter alone.”<sup>154</sup> Ajit Roy concurs that “[Gandhi] had no consciousness about the need for demolishing the social reality which had given rise to and continued to sustain the obnoxious practice of untouchability, [which] was the fundamental limitation of his ‘Harijan’ campaign ....”<sup>155</sup> This was because *Swaraj*, as conceptualised by Gandhi, emphasises Bidyut Chakrabarty, simply meant “political and economic freedom from colonialism.”<sup>156</sup>

Critics, in general, have looked at inconsistencies in Gandhi’s writings on the issue of caste and *varna*. They should have also looked at what he had been doing. As Anthony J. Parel writes that “nowhere in [Gandhi’s] entire political career, do we find

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<sup>152</sup> Keer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 362.

<sup>153</sup> Unnithan, ‘Gandhi’s Views On Caste’, p. 85.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>155</sup> Roy, ‘Caste And Class’, p. 303.

<sup>156</sup> B. Chakrabarty, *Social And Political Thought Of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 112.

him attempting to restore the *dharma* of the discredited *varnashrama*.<sup>157</sup> Gandhi asserted that restoring a pure *varna* system was like “an ant trying to lift a bag of sugar” or “Dame Parkington pushing back the Atlantic with a mop,”<sup>158</sup> that is, he was saying that the *varna* system was impossible. Parel argues that Gandhi did not claim that India had put into practice the caste system’s ideal of harmony and equality proposed in the *Rig Veda* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the fact that history did not live up to that ideal, did not detract from the validity or the integrity of the ideal.<sup>159</sup> Gandhi did not want to revive the institutions of caste, for he argued that since everyone felt free to follow any calling “... the law of *varna* [had] become a dead letter ...;”<sup>160</sup> “it was [therefore] ‘an ideal dream’ and a ‘childish folly’ to attempt to revive the *varna* system.”<sup>161</sup> Knowing that his “ideal” of *varnashram* was unrealisable, Gandhi conceded that the hereditary principle in *varnashram* must be considerably relaxed. He urged the caste-Hindus to realise that just as other castes had given up their occupations, just as the *Brahmins* had forsaken teaching and taken up other jobs, just as the *Kshatriyas* had willingly accepted slavery, just as the *Vaishyas* had given up their trade and entered other fields, similarly the Untouchables, too, had a right to give up their old occupations.<sup>162</sup> In fact, he helped many Untouchables to quit their hereditary callings, to acquire an academic education and to qualify themselves as doctors, engineers and teachers.<sup>163</sup>

As early as 1927, Gandhi declared that the “caste ideal,” as envisaged in the scriptures, was in practice today, “a ‘hideous travesty’ of the original idea, [and] it existed only in distorted form,”<sup>164</sup> and by 1935 when Ambedkar was criticising Gandhi’s views on caste and untouchability, Gandhi’s final position was that “caste

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<sup>157</sup> Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy*, p. 94. Gandhi also said that he had “no ready solution to the problem how true *varnadharma* can be established.” ‘Answers To Correspondents’, Before 8th October 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 68, (emphasis mine).

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 240.

<sup>159</sup> Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>160</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 59, pp. 62 & 66, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>161</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 59, p. 67, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> “‘Patidars’ And Untouchables’, 14th December 1924, *CWMG*, Vol. 25, p. 429.

<sup>163</sup> H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford & Lord Pettick Lawrence, *Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Odhams Press, 1949, p. 204.

<sup>164</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 59, pp. 63-64, quoted in Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy*, p. 90.

had to go.” In addition, some months before Ambedkar had written his *Annihilation Of Caste*, Gandhi had publicly given up defending caste. “*Caste Has To Go*” was his heading to a 16th November 1935, article in *Harijan*, in which Gandhi wrote, “[the] sooner public opinion abolishes [caste], the better.” Also, in his 1936 debate with Ambedkar, Gandhi reiterated his rejection of caste, and said that it was “harmful both to spiritual and national growth,” and thereafter he publicly affirmed his acceptance of inter-dining and inter-marriage, which he had thus far hesitated to do,<sup>165</sup> because by learning of the discrimination personally faced by Ambedkar even at the height of his prominence, Gandhi became more sensitive to the “structural roots” of caste discrimination.

Drawing a distinction between caste and *varna*, Gandhi said that the latter “refers to a person’s *qualities* of character and occupation”<sup>166</sup> / “profession.”<sup>167</sup> There were four *varnas*. The *Brahmin* was the repository of knowledge, the *Kshatriya* was that of power, the *Vaishya* was that of wealth and the *Shudra* was that of service. All these four labours were regarded as duties to be discharged by every one of them for the protection and advancement of *dharma*, and everyone who performed his duty to the best of his knowledge and ability, gained equal merit with the rest, if the latter, too, did likewise. In such a religious conception of *varnadharma*, knowledge of the *Brahmins*, power of the *Kshatriyas*, and wealth of the *Vaishyas*, were used “not for personal ends, but for spiritual and social advance.”<sup>168</sup> The merit, therefore, Gandhi emphasised, consisted not in being one or the other, but in the performance of the duty assigned to it. Here, there was no untouchability. There was no superiority. This was the essence of Gandhi’s *varnadharma*. He said that it “may be non-existent today and it is so,” but that, however, “in no way diminishes the force of my argument that there is no superiority and inferiority in the original conception of *varnadharma* and that untouchability can never be a necessary outcome of this pure division of duties.”<sup>169</sup> Moreover, Gandhi emphasised that the four divisions were not a vertical

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<sup>165</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 240.

<sup>166</sup> ‘Letter To Chhotalal’, 25th January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 147, (emphasis mine).

<sup>167</sup> ‘Letter To Satis Chandra Das Gupta’, 5th November 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 51, p. 350.

<sup>168</sup> ‘Interview To Associated Press’, 14th February 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 306; *The Hindu*, 15th February 1933; *The Hindustan Times*, 15th February 1933.

<sup>169</sup> ‘Confusing The Issue’, 4th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 454; *Harijan*, 4th March 1933.

section, but a horizontal plane on which all stood on a footing of equality, doing the services respectively assigned to them. Gandhi's belief that the pursuit of one's calling was one's *dharma*,<sup>170</sup> “[adds] a distinctly Protestant flavour to caste-divided labour forms”<sup>171</sup> argues Tanika Sarkar.

In course of time, however, Gandhi said, this fact was forgotten and the *varna* system became disorganised. It reduced itself to touchability and untouchability and to restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage. This resulted in its fall, *viz.*, the confusion of the *varnas*. Gandhi lamented that the *varnashrama* “as we see it today” implied restrictions as regards untouchability and inter-marriage and inter-dining among the *varnas*. It was “*not* the *Shastras* but only usage that [supported] the restriction on inter-marriage and inter-dining as part of the *varnadharma*.”<sup>172</sup> Therefore, “[it] is quite evident,” emphasised Gandhi, “that the *varnashrama* of Dr. Ambedkar's conception is being practised today, but that is not my conception of *varnashrama*.”<sup>173</sup> Gandhi was pained to see that what went by in the name of *varnashrama* was *not* the real *varnashrama* but a travesty and a mockery of the same.<sup>174</sup> He was, therefore, all for co-operation in a fight against pseudo-*varnashrama*. Untouchability was the product, not of *varnashrama*, he said, but of the high and low.<sup>175</sup> “Fight by all means the monster that passes today,” he wrote, “and you will find me working side by side with you.” His *varnashrama* accommodated many Untouchable families in his *ashram* with whom he dined with great pleasure.<sup>176</sup> However, holding the removal of untouchability more precious than the retention of *varnashrama*, Gandhi declared, he did not care “if *varna* went to the dogs in the removal of untouchability.”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> ‘Varnadharmā’, 19th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 130.

<sup>171</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, p. 180.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Varnadharmā’, 19th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 130, (emphasis mine).

<sup>173</sup> ‘Interview To Associated Press’, 14th February 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 306; *The Hindu*, 15th February 1933; *The Hindustan Times*, 15th February 1933.

<sup>174</sup> *Young India*, 5th November 1925.

<sup>175</sup> *Harijan*, 11th February 1933.

<sup>176</sup> *Young India*, 22nd September 1927.

<sup>177</sup> *Harijan*, 28th September 1939.



Gandhi never believed that *varna* was immutable. While he found reason in *varnashram*, he never subscribed to its orthodox rigidity, nor was he against determination by human achievement. He reproduced the following lines from epic literature in the *Harijan* with his own comments. They were quoted in an address delivered by Madame Sophia Wadia. “Listen to these words of Yudhishtira in the *Vanaparva* of the *Mahabharata*: Truth, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, gentleness, austerity and mercy, where these are seen. O King of the Serpents, there is a *Brahmin*. If these marks exist in a *Shudra* and are not in a *Dvija*, the *Shudra* is not a *Shudra*, nor the *Brahmin* a *Brahmin*. And in the *Vishnu Bhagavata* we read: What is said as the marks of conduct indicative of a man’s caste, if those marks are found in another, designate him by the caste of his mark (that is, not of his body and birth). But some of you would prefer *Manusmriti*. Well, here you are: As a wooden elephant, as a leathern deer, such is an unlearned *Brahmin*; these three bear only names. The *Brahmin*, who, not having studied the *Vedas*, labours elsewhere, becomes a *Shudra* in that very life together with his descendants.”<sup>178</sup>

Gandhi said that “these and numerous other verses from the *Shastras* unmistakably show that mere birth counts for nothing. A person must show corresponding works and character to establish his claim by birth. Such verses also enforce the argument that (a) a person loses *varna* by failing to exhibit its peculiar characteristics, (b) inter-*varna* marriage or inter-dining, whatever virtue the restrictions on them may have, does not affect a person’s *varna* at least not so much as the failing to live up to one’s *varna*, and (c) birth, while it gives a start and enables the parents to determine the training and occupations of their children, does not perpetuate the *varna* of one’s birth, if it is not fulfilled by works.”<sup>179</sup> This is why Gandhi did not find any fault with the structured caste system of the Hindus as originally propounded. The perception that Gandhi always advocated as a part of his social philosophy that all talents of all kinds are a trust and must be utilised for the benefit of the society.<sup>180</sup> He had the highest regards for anybody who would perform his duties according to the dictates of his *dharma*.

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<sup>178</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 54, pp. 410-11, (emphasis mine).

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances In Action*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1955, pp. 48-49.

The Hindu epics had given Gandhi a romantic image of the *varnashram* in ancient India, the fundamental four-fold divisions in which castes were the equivalents of trade guilds and birth was not the sole determinant of status and privilege. It seemed to Gandhi that the system despite its obvious faults, had served as a cushion against external pressures during turbulent periods; he wondered whether it could be restored to its pristine purity and adapted to the changing needs of Hindu community. This was the background of some complimentary references he made to the caste system which are often quoted against him. It must, however, be borne in mind that all the kind words Gandhi ever said about the caste system were about what he believed it to have been in the hoary past and not about what it was in his own time.<sup>181</sup>

Bhikhu Parekh in his attempt to explain why Gandhi may have defended caste in his writings has written, “[since] Gandhi believed in rebirth and the law of *karma*, he thought that the characteristic occupation of an individual’s caste corresponded to his natural abilities and dispositions and represented a necessary moment of his spiritual evolution.”<sup>182</sup> In other words, according to Parekh, Gandhi defended caste because he believed that one’s past *karma* was linked to one’s natural abilities and dispositions, which represent a necessary moment of one’s spiritual evolution. Nishikant Kolge finds such an explanation problematic. Kolge argues that even if Gandhi in his writings expressed his faith in the doctrine of *karma*, “it is difficult to demonstrate that his interpretation matched the orthodox version where the occupation practised by a caste is thought to necessarily correspond to their natural abilities and dispositions due to their past *karma*.” A close look at Gandhi’s writings where he evokes the doctrine of *karma* emphasises Kolge, “reveals that he does it often for pragmatic reasons and that, most of the time, it goes against the orthodox interpretation.”<sup>183</sup> To justify his point, Kolge quotes from Gandhi’s writings. Gandhi writes, “[if] you believe that the ‘Harijans’ are in their present plight today as a result of their past sins, you must concede that they have the first right of worship in temples. God has been described by all the scriptures of the world as a Protector and

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<sup>181</sup> B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi And His Critics*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 25.

<sup>182</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 226.

<sup>183</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 47.

Saviour of the sinner.”<sup>184</sup> On other occasions, Gandhi simply rejects the orthodox understanding of the doctrine of *karma* – that one’s destiny is the fruit of one’s past *karma*. He wrote, “[the] law of *karma* is no respecter of persons, but I would ask you to leave the orthodoxy to itself. Man is the maker of his own destiny, and I therefore ask you to become makers of your own destiny.”<sup>185</sup>

It is suggested by some scholars that political thinkers are properly studied without reference to their personalities and practice. However, when one turns to Gandhi, one finds it peculiarly difficult to ignore his personality and his activities.<sup>186</sup> Gandhi also very categorically said: “To understand what I say one needs to understand my conduct ....”<sup>187</sup> In other words, Gandhi meant that he can be best judged or understood by his conduct rather than his writings; and if some contradictions or inconsistencies appear in his writings, then they should be resolved in light of his practices: “What you do not get from my [Gandhi] conduct, you will never get from my words.”<sup>188</sup> Hindus observed several rules pertaining to endogamy and commensality. Endogamy forbids marriages among persons of different castes. One could only marry within one’s own caste. Commensality restrictions stipulated that neither should the members of one caste eat in the company of any other caste, nor should they eat food cooked by any person of a lower caste.<sup>189</sup> Gandhi from a very young age, revolted against the practice of untouchability and in his whole life he did not practice untouchability and caste restrictions in any form. Throughout his life Gandhi ate with people of different faiths as well as castes including Untouchables. In his autobiography, Gandhi states: “I had no scruples about inter-dining.”<sup>190</sup> Not only Gandhi allowed his son Ramdas<sup>191</sup> to marry someone who was

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<sup>184</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 304.

<sup>185</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 26, p. 294.

<sup>186</sup> R. N. Iyer, *The Moral And Political Thought Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>187</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 51, p. 353.

<sup>188</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 73, p. 145.

<sup>189</sup> L. Gora & M. Lindley, *Gandhi As We Have Known Him*, New Delhi, National Gandhi Museum In Association With Gyan Publishing House, 2007, p. 105.

<sup>190</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 96.

<sup>191</sup> On 27th January 1928, Ramdas married Nirmala who belonged to a different sub-caste.

from a different sub-caste but also allowed his son Devadas<sup>192</sup> to marry a girl who was from another *varna* altogether. He also, by design, married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was an Untouchable, to a *Brahmin* boy in 1933.<sup>193</sup> On many occasions, Gandhi expressed his support for inter-caste marriages.<sup>194</sup>

Hereditary occupations are understood to be one of the most important characteristics of the caste system. Each caste is assigned a particular type of work, and every Hindu is expected to follow his hereditary occupation.<sup>195</sup> Gandhi writes in his autobiography that over the last three generations, starting with his grandfather, his family had not been pursuing their hereditary or traditional duty assigned to them according to the caste system. He, too, himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors' calling. He also let his children choose their own professions, and never pressed them to follow any pursuit prescribed for their caste. Moreover, he tried to master many activities prohibited for his caste, such as the work of a scavenger, barber, washer-man, cobbler, tiller and tailor. It is also interesting to note that at two occasions when Gandhi was arrested (10th March 1922<sup>196</sup> and 1st August 1933) and asked about his occupation, he replied saying, "I am by occupation a spinner, a weaver and a farmer."<sup>197</sup> According to Ramachandra Guha, Gandhi's self-description was accurate, for in the Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi did not trade, but he did spin daily and experimented with crops and livestock rearing. That statement to an Ahmedabad court was a striking example of Gandhi's lifelong commitment to making his caste origins irrelevant to his personal and public life.<sup>198</sup>

Moreover, none of Gandhi's *ashrams* were built on the basic principle of caste system or *varnashram-dharma*. And none of the caste restrictions were observed in

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<sup>192</sup> Devadas married Lakshmi, a *Brahman* girl who belonged to a different *varna*, in 1933.

<sup>193</sup> Lakshmi married Marui, a *Bhaman* orphan boy on March 1933.

<sup>194</sup> Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'?', pp. 43-44.

<sup>195</sup> Gora & Lindley, *Gandhi As We Have Known*, p. 105.

<sup>196</sup> In March 1922, Gandhi was arrested on charges of sedition. When he was produced in court, the Magistrate, after the law then prevalent, asked the prisoner to identify himself by caste or profession. Gandhi answered that he was "a farmer and weaver". The Magistrate was startled; so, he asked the question again, to get the same answer. Guha, 'Does Gandhi Have A Caste?', *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted in Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'?', p. 44.

<sup>198</sup> Guha, 'Does Gandhi Have A Caste?', *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

his *ashram*. It seems difficult to accept that a man, who violated almost every caste restriction throughout his life and who built *ashrams* where no caste restriction was observed, held the caste system or *varnashram-dharma* as an ideal form of organising human society. When one looks at his socio-political activity, one does not find him attempting to restore the *dharma* of the discredited *varnashrama*. Gandhi himself rejected such a possibility when he said: “I have gone no-where to defend *varnadharma*. I am the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of *khadi*, establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity, and removal of untouchability, the three pillars of *Swaraj*. But I have never placed establishment of *varnashram-dharma* as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing a wrong emphasis on *varnashram-dharma*.”<sup>199</sup> Nishikant Kolge, therefore, asserts that if “there are inconsistencies between Gandhi’s writings and practices,” the reader should “[reject] writings that fail to do justice to his general philosophical outlook.”<sup>200</sup>

The critics, who focus entirely on Gandhi’s writings and ignore his practice, which speaks otherwise, thus, reach an erroneous conclusion that Gandhi never decisively renounced his belief in *chaturvarna*. Even while focusing on Gandhi’s writings, critics treat these as part of the sermon of a *saint*,<sup>201</sup> and take them literally. They forget that Gandhi was a politician too. The critics miss to notice the possibility of a kind of strategy in Gandhi’s defense of some of the positive aspects of the caste system. What they miss can be understood in Rajmohan Gandhi’s metaphorical explanation. He writes, “I see the *varnashrama* remarks as sugar-coating for [Gandhi’s] pill for caste-Hindus. He wants them to swallow his reforms.” The “caste system [Gandhi] was ‘defending’ was non-existent. Attacks on his ‘defense’ by his foes of the caste system only assured caste-Hindus that Gandhi was not their enemy, which he was not.”<sup>202</sup>

In this context, Bhikhu Parekh argues that in the 1920s, Gandhi had criticised [untouchability] on the grounds that its continued existence hindered national unity and harmed the cause of Indian independence. Gandhi emphasised that “the Hindus must realise that, if they wish to offer successful non-cooperation against the [British]

<sup>199</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 35, p. 523, (emphasis mine).

<sup>200</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, pp. 42-43.

<sup>201</sup> Gandhi is referred to as the “saint” in the title of Arundhati Roy’s essay, ‘The Doctor’.

<sup>202</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, pp. 237-40.

Government they *must* make common cause with the [Untouchables], *even as* they have made common cause with the Musalmans.”<sup>203</sup> He repeatedly compared the Untouchables to the Muslims and asked the Hindus to make common cause with them *in the same way* that they have had done with the latter.

Gandhi asserted that “non-cooperation against the Government means cooperation among the governed, and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability there will be no *Swaraj* whether in one year or in one hundred years .... *Swaraj* is unattainable without the removal of the sins of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity.”<sup>204</sup> At this point of his career, says Parekh, “political considerations weighed far more with him, than moral and social reform.” Though Gandhi continued to argue against untouchability on political grounds, he increasingly began to feel that this was not enough. Parekh contends that “[the] political argument made only a limited impression on the orthodox Hindus, who neither believed that the struggle for independence required the abolition of untouchability nor cared for one bought at such a *heavy* price.” It made no impression on the illiterate masses either, “who were more concerned with religion than with independence and considered untouchability an integral part of it.”<sup>205</sup>

Critics of Gandhi generally fail to understand the deeper significance of Gandhi’s use of the religious idiom in politics, which, as historian Ravinder Kumar has argued, “was the result of a perceptive insight into the social loyalties of the individual and into the manner in which these loyalties could be invoked in political action.” Gandhi strongly believed that community and religion rather than class and professions constituted the dominant loyalties in India.<sup>206</sup> To make the reform an acceptable form, Gandhi made the entire anti-untouchability programme rooted in “religious” creed. He invoked the idea that those who offered “*seva*” (service) to the

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<sup>203</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 238, (emphasis mine).

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>206</sup> R. Kumar, (ed.), *Essays In Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 12ff.

Untouchables in the *Kali-Yuga* offered the best prayer.<sup>207</sup> According to Gandhi, “‘Harijan’ *seva* was *atmashuddhi*” to purify an individual from the soul, from within.<sup>208</sup> He went to the extent of declaring that the 1934 Bihar earthquakes were due to the sins of untouchability.<sup>209</sup> Further, in Gandhi’s conception of Hinduism “God denies Himself what the ‘Harijans’ are denied, because they are called the ‘Harijans’ (Children of God).”<sup>210</sup>

A corollary is Thomas Pantham’s assertion that for Gandhi “the participation of the caste-Hindus was necessary both for the effectiveness of the non-violent mass political movement for freedom from colonial rule and for the success of the movement against untouchability.”<sup>211</sup> After Vaikom, Gandhi had been feeling that he, even in his fight against untouchability, had to be seen as a protector of the caste-Hindus as well. Until about 1935, Gandhi did not share Ambedkar’s sense of urgency to extend the anti-untouchability programme into a wider public political programme that would include campaigns against caste-based discriminations on inter-dining, inter-marriages, etc. As noted by Parekh, Gandhi was “involved in several battles, that against untouchability being only one of them, and political exigencies inevitably dictated their order of importance.”<sup>212</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi’s writes: “[Gandhi] would unite pro-orthodox ranks, if he had started with an attack on caste, he chose to zero in on evil none could defend.” Light was thrown on Gandhi’s thinking on caste and untouchability by Nehru. He told the European journalist Tibor Mende in January 1956: “I asked [Gandhi] repeatedly: Why don’t you hit out at the caste system directly? He said that he did not believe in the caste system except in some idealised form of occupations and all that; but that the present system was thoroughly bad and must go. I am undermining it completely, he said, by my tackling untouchability ....

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<sup>207</sup> Cited in T. Nath, *Politics Of The Depressed Classes*, Delhi, Deputy Publications, 1987, p. 240. According to Gandhi, “‘Harijan’ *seva* was *atmashuddhi*.” ‘Speech At Quilon’, 22nd January 1934, *CWMG* (CD), Vol. 63, p. 13; *The Hindu*, 22nd January 1934.

<sup>208</sup> ‘Speech At Quilon’, 22nd January 1934, *CWMG* (CD), Vol. 63, p. 13; *The Hindu*, 22nd January 1934.

<sup>209</sup> *Harijan*, 16th February 1934.

<sup>210</sup> ‘Letter To M. Thiagarajan’, 14th January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 49.

<sup>211</sup> T. Pantham, ‘Against Untouchability: The Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, in G. Guru, (ed.), *Humiliation: Claims And Context*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 195.

<sup>212</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, p. 270.

If untouchability goes ... the caste system goes. So I am concentrating on that .... So he made untouchability the one thing on which he concentrated, which ultimately affected the whole caste system.”<sup>213</sup>

In this context, Suhas Palshikar argues that Gandhi was in favour of abolition of caste-based discriminations, but caste question did not occupy a place of urgency in his thought. He tended to emphasise untouchability more than the caste question because for Gandhi “untouchability formed the core of caste system.” Palshikar says that Gandhi was “right in identifying untouchability as the most abhorring expression of caste-based inequality and attendant inhumanity,” for it stood “for everything ugly in the caste system and therefore, it must go instantly.” According to Gandhi, untouchability was the root of “caste-consciousness,” and the “removal of untouchability would symbolically bury the caste system.”<sup>214</sup> Seen in this light, Palshikar says that though “caste question does not become the core of Gandhi’s discourse, there is no doubt about Gandhi’s ultimate preparedness to abolish caste.”<sup>215</sup>

Contrary to Coward’s assertion that Gandhi’s deference to Hindu orthodoxy led him to underplay his reformist goals, Parekh argues that “while asserting his loyalty to Hinduism, Gandhi did not wish to go soft on reform.” For Gandhi, “reforms were necessary, including the eradication of untouchability.” Gandhi therefore started with an assertion that Hinduism during its long history, though had suffered degeneration and decay, had been saved from extinction by the timely reforms of courageous individuals. Gandhi said that he was doing no more than follow in their footsteps. Parekh writes that Gandhi’s love for Hinduism, “far from preventing him from criticising it ..., *required* him to criticise and reform it, lest it should decay and

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<sup>213</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 241.

<sup>214</sup> S. Palshikar, ‘Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface:...When Shall The Twain Meet?’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 31 (Aug. 3, 1996), p. 2070. A. M. Shah argues that “ideas of purity/impurity [in other words, the practice of untouchability] were present all over Hindu society for centuries: In domestic as well as public life, in exchange of food and water, in practising occupations, in kinship and marriage, in religious action and belief, in temples and monasteries, and in a myriad different contexts and situations. These ideas played a crucial role in separating one caste from another, and in arranging them in a hierarchy, that is to say, in ordering the basic structure of the society.” A. M. Shah, ‘Purity, Impurity, Untouchability: Then And Now’, *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September-December 2007), pp. 355-56.

<sup>215</sup> Palshikar, ‘When Shall The Twain Meet?’, p. 2070.



die, ... so that its essential values could reassert themselves and bring forth historically appropriate forms.”<sup>216</sup> To Parekh, Gandhi was a true *Sanātanist*, for he reaffirmed the central values of Hinduism in a manner relevant to the new *yuga*. Gandhi said: “A *Sanātanist* is one who follows the *Sanātana Dharma*. According to the *Mahābhārata*, it means the observance of *Āhimsā*, *Satya*, non-stealing, cleanliness and self-restraint. As I have been endeavouring to follow these to the best of my ability, I have not hesitated to describe myself as a *Sanātanist*.”<sup>217</sup>

Gandhi, thus, gave a new lease of life to the *Sanātanist*. He used it to describe a person, “who upheld values Gandhi approved of, and who stood against whatever practices diverged from them, as a social critic.”<sup>218</sup> Further for Gandhi, all desirable forms were “holy,” and the Hindu tradition had been kept alive by a long line of “holy reformers,” thereby turning reform “into a religious activity.” Parekh asserts that the learned *Brahmins* who had spent their lives studying the *shāstras* could not have been hit hard. Gandhi’s indictment that “the anti-reform traditionalist was not only a traitor but utterly ignorant of his religion!” was the moot point here. Gandhi having “found a way of reforming tradition by traditionalising reform,” says Parekh, meant that his post-Vaikom, “discourse on untouchability was at once, more traditional and more reformist than before.”<sup>219</sup> In this, argues David Hardiman, “Gandhi was adopting a position to reform Hindu practice from within, rather than attack it from outside.”<sup>220</sup>

## [5]

Another charge is added in support of the above criticism by those proponents whose writings create the impression that Gandhi was the latest in a long tradition of privileged-caste-Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and so on. Although “they advocated ambitious social reform programmes (against child marriage, for the emancipation of women,

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<sup>216</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 247.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> D. Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time And Ours*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 129.

eradication of untouchability, etc.), they often tried to legitimise, as far as possible, the hierarchical principles on which their society was based.”<sup>221</sup>

According to C. H. Heimsath, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the *Arya Samaj*, introduced the argument that became important not only for Vivekananda, but for Gandhi as well. The *Vedas*, Dayananda Saraswati declared, provided no justification for any notion of superiority or inferiority among the four great divisions of Hindu society; each *varna* was equal to the rest, and passages from various texts were interpreted to maintain this position.<sup>222</sup> By distilling the spirit of Hinduism as found in the ideal of *varnashram-dharma*, Heimsath states that “Vivekananda urged on the Hindu community the gospels of social harmony.”<sup>223</sup> Not only, did Vivekananda respond to the needs of his own society by condemning the divisive influence of caste as “don’t touchism;”<sup>224</sup> he directed his response to the West as well. Like Dayananda, he incorporated the “alien concept” of social equality into the *varnashram-dharma* ideal; but unlike his predecessor, he declared that it was this very ideal which the West itself badly needed.

Beginning with a criticism of “that horrible idea of competition,”<sup>225</sup> which was not merely tolerated but idealised in the West, Vivekananda set the Indian against the Western theory of society: “Competition – cruel, cold and heartless – is the law of Europe. Our law is caste – the breaking of competition, checking its forces, mitigating its cruelties, smoothing the passage of the human soul through this misery of life.”<sup>226</sup> Like Vivekananda, Gandhi combined a strong criticism of “don’t touchism” with an insistence that India’s salvation could come only through a reconstruction of her own

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<sup>221</sup> Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 13. Also see, S. Bayly, ‘Hindu Modernisers And The ‘Public’ Arena: Indigenous Critiques Of Caste In Colonial India’, in W. Radice, (ed.), *Swami Vivekananda And The Modernisation Of Hinduism*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 93-137.

<sup>222</sup> Heimsath, *Hindu Social Reform*, pp. 299-300. See also, Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 56; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 154.

<sup>223</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works Of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. IV, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1970-73, pp. 474-80. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWSV* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 167, 173-5; Vol. V, pp. 22-23, 26-27, 311; Vol. VI, p. 394; Vol. VIII, pp. 136, 139.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, p. 278.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, p. 205.

traditional foundations, notably through the caste system. Vivekananda and Gandhi thus condemned “untouchability as impurity,” writes Coward, “while attempting to maintain but redefine caste so as to somehow uplift Untouchables to equality.”<sup>227</sup>

What reverberated in the avowals of every single one of these early twentieth century thinkers, writes Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “was a deeply held trust in a re-imagined caste system representing a moral social order that differentiated India from the modern Western modes of social organisation marked by class and conflict.” The single imperfection in this better “moral world was untouchability,” which was well thought-out to be more “an aberration than an integral part of *varnashram-dharma*,” and for that reason could be cured through “good willed social reform.”<sup>228</sup> This was a conviction shared by a wide range of Bengali social intellectuals from Swami Vivekananda to Rabindranath Tagore,<sup>229</sup> and it afterward found authority, says Bandyopadhyay, “in the thoughts of Gandhi, whose ‘Harijan’ campaign . . . , sought to dignify the Untouchables, but was reluctant to empower them.”<sup>230</sup> What all of them failed to perceive, asserts Bandyopadhyay, “was that the Depressed Classes were more interested in having access to political power, and not simply some social rights, as a necessary precondition for their true liberation.” It was no more than “wealth and power,” which they considered “could bring any effective and sustainable change in their ritual status.” Bandyopadhyay concludes that “[to] them, appeals for mere social reforms were to obfuscate the real issue.”<sup>231</sup>

Arundhati Roy blames the caste-Hindu reformers for cleverly narrowing the question of caste to the issue of untouchability, and Gandhi for narrowing it even further to the issue of removing prejudices regarding the works of *Bhangis*. The disturbing thing about all of this, asserts Roy, is that Gandhi, the Hindu Mahasabha and a number of Hindu reformist organisations before him, conflated the fight against

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<sup>227</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 44.

<sup>228</sup> S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture And Hegemony: Social Domination In Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2004, p. 67.

<sup>229</sup> For a discussion in greater detail on the thoughts of these intellectuals see S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics And The Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi, 1990, pp. 123-24.

<sup>230</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture And Hegemony*, p. 67.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

untouchability with the fight against caste. *The Doctor and the Saint* deals with the politics of this at some length.

Arundhati Roy says that vigorous proselytising against the practice of untouchability by privileged caste reformist outfits began towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the old ideas of Empire began to metamorphose into new ideas of the nation state and the concept of representative Government gained currency. It was then that a new, volatile question arose: Who had the right to represent whom?<sup>232</sup> Roy states that suddenly Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and Hindus began to disaggregate into what we today know as “vote-banks,” as demography became important. Suddenly it became imperative for the privileged-caste-Hindus to shore up their numbers by keeping the 44.5 million strong Untouchable communities in the “Hindu fold.” As a result, a raft of privileged-caste-Hindu reformist outfits appeared<sup>233</sup> to stem the flow of religious conversion, to win the Untouchables’ hearts and minds.

These reformers, most of whom believed in caste, had to find a way of retaining Untouchables in the “Big House,” but keeping them in the servants’ quarters. To this end, the *Arya Samaj*, founded in 1875, embarked on the *Shuddhi* programme of “purifying the impure” and bringing Untouchables “home” to Hinduism.<sup>234</sup> In 1899 Swami Vivekananda said, “[every] man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less, but an *enemy* the more.”<sup>235</sup> Around the time that Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, the reformers’ campaign against untouchability was at its peak. The Congress had passed a resolution against untouchability. Both Gandhi and Tilak called untouchability a “disease” that was anti-thetical to Hinduism.<sup>236</sup> The first All-India Depressed Classes Conference was held in Bombay. Arundhati Roy says that the All-India Anti-Untouchability Manifesto was signed by all of them, except Tilak.

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<sup>232</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 54.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

A. R. Wadia argues that the Untouchables, the fifth caste, were a logical appendage of caste. The “ancient Aryans refused to accept [Untouchables] within the Hindu fold and they naturally remained outsiders.” So the question: “Are Untouchables Hindus?” according to him, is neither meaningless nor superfluous. He, like Arundhati Roy, emphasises that in the age of democracy with its adult franchise, “the sixty million Untouchables came to be looked upon as a political asset.” It was in the interest of political Hindus, to claim that the Untouchables were Hindus, and “Gandhi as the greatest political leader of India,” asserts Wadia, “stood up against separate representation being accorded to them for that would reduce the number of Hindus.”<sup>237</sup>

## [6]

In this context, Vijay Prashad analyses the construction and deployment of nationalist and Hindu communalist discourses on untouchability: “The liberation of the Untouchables [relied] upon a reconstructed regime of castes, in which the Untouchables [were] urged to continue with their menial occupations only because they [had] been put to that work by the invading ‘Muslims’.” Given the “cultural” nature of the question of the Untouchables, says Prashad, the problem of untouchability was considered a problem of Indian society and not of the colonial state. To him, “[the] very search for a pure past, therefore, [demonstrated] the anti-Muslim character of Indian liberalism.”<sup>238</sup> Prashad, therefore locates the Untouchable problem within the framework of an anti-Muslim culturalist solution of nationalism.<sup>239</sup> He argues that Untouchable communities used every means available

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<sup>237</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 53.

<sup>238</sup> V. Prashad, ‘The Untouchable Question’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 9 (Mar. 2, 1996), p. 551.

<sup>239</sup> Prashad argues that the Untouchable question is posed as a *Brahmanical* one with the opposition between the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables being central to the inquiry. An important study of Untouchable ideology begins with the following methodological statement: “... from the [Untouchable’s] position ... all the powerful waves of social reform, radicalism, and revolt must finally crash within the same old Manu-ordained parameters.” (R. S. Khare, *The Untouchable As Himself: Ideology, Identity, And Pragmatism Among The Lucknow Chamars*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 4, quoted in *ibid.*) The problem with such a statement, according to Prashad, is that it approaches the problem of untouchability from a strictly cultural standpoint, one fashioned by the

to relieve themselves from their oppression, including conversion to Christianity, fleeing the farms onto which they had been bonded, as well as forming political associations that were often in opposition to the I.N.C. The Satnami Movement among the *Chamars* of Chattisgarh, the assertion of Raidas as the patron saint of the community and the building of temples in his honour, the insistence on education for their young, the close ties with national Untouchable movements of Ambedkar's political parties are all indicators of the resilience and dynamism of the community, writes Prashad.

This union of Untouchables, in opposition to the Congress, plagued elite Indian nationalists. Elite nationalists thus falsely insinuated, writes Prashad, that the mobilisation of lower castes was organised by outside agitators, locating the "enemy" outside the social consciousness of the Untouchables. For instance, Swami Shraddhananda warned of the influence of Protestant Missionaries upon the guileless *Chamars*. In Prashad's analysis, this discourse stemmed from the elite nationalist's worldview, which not only believed that "without leadership of the 'right' sort, the Untouchables would falter politically," but "in the eyes of elite nationalism, it was unthinkable for Untouchables to produce their own leaders," given the Untouchables' "own putative inability to produce an elite." This was fairly evident, says Prashad, during the deliberation over separate electorates for the Untouchables in 1932, when Gandhi confided to Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahadev Desai that political separation would "lead to bloodshed. Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and kill caste-Hindus." Gandhi argued that without Congress leadership, however, "I have no other means to deal with Untouchables." It was clear, says Prashad that "Gandhi wished to broaden the alliance of forces, but only in the Congress's rank and file, not in the leadership."<sup>240</sup>

The need to represent the Untouchables became a pressing question for the elite nationalists. Drawing on the sociological origins of the members of the Indian National Congress in terms of demographic data from the census the British argued that the Untouchables were not Hindus, and therefore the British need not assume that

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imperatives of Indology; the most important elements of the contemporary Untouchables, such as colonialism, the nationalist movement and capitalism, are left out.

<sup>240</sup> Prashad, 'Untouchable Question', p. 552.

they would be led by the Hindus in the Congress. The Congress was thus judged by the British in terms of representational democracy. In this context, elite nationalism posed the question of untouchability as a Hindu question, one which only impacted upon the Hindu community. Whether the Untouchables were Hindus or not, says Vijay Prasad, “was besides the point, given that elite nationalism viewed untouchability as a Hindu problem.” At its 1923 Conference in Benares on the issue of reform of “Hinduism” and abolition of untouchability, the Hindu Mahasabha declared: “With a view to keeping faith in Hinduism in the hearts of the Untouchables, it [was] necessary to make arrangements for their education on sanitation and religion, also to allow them to read in schools, to draw water from wells, to have ‘*darshan*’ in temples and to sit in public meetings.”<sup>241</sup>

Prasad asserts that “[if] nationalism discovered untouchability in order to silence the ideological reticence of colonialism, it, also discovered untouchability in an evolving turf battle between the religious communities (‘Hindu’, ‘Muslim’, and ‘Christian’).”<sup>242</sup> The Untouchables had to be secured within the “Hindu” community, it was argued, if the “Hindus” had to assert their dominance over other communities in the making of the Indian nation. Thus, for the Hindu Mahasabha, Untouchable uplift was important for building Hindu Sangathan, a politicised, unified community of Hindus to provide a bulwark against organised Muslim agitation for their political recognition.<sup>243</sup> Prasad also says that “independent political action on the part of the Untouchables themselves” threatened elite nationalism. This was evident from Gandhi’s 1927 speech, where he urged Untouchables to secure their rights by “sweet

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<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 553.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 554. The editor of *Pratap* summarises the Hindu reaction: “*Shuddhi* has become a matter of life and death for the Hindus. The Muslims have grown from a negative quantity into seventy million. The Christians number four million. 220 million Hindus are finding it difficult to live because of [seventy] million Muslims. If their number further increase, only God knows what will happen. It is true that *Shuddhi* should be for religious purposes alone, but the Hindus have been obliged by other considerations as well to embrace their other brothers. If the Hindus do not wake up now, they will be finished.” Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 554-55.

<sup>243</sup> P. Bapu, *Hindu Mahasabha In Colonial North India, 1915-1930: Constructing Nation And History*, London & New York, Routledge, 2013; J. Zavos, *The Emergence Of Hindu Nationalism In India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000, Ch. 6; D. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism And Communism In South India: Malabar, 1900-1948*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 106-08.

persuasion and not by Satyagraha, which [became] Duragraha when it [was] intended to give rude shock to the deep-rooted prejudices of the people.” This implied that “if the Untouchables [protested], it must be on the basis of falsehood.” Untouchables in this formulation, writes Prashad, “[were] unable to have access to truth, [which was] a *denial* of personhood and a denial of humanity.”<sup>244</sup>

Prashad says that the Untouchable was not discovered as a political actor or a member of a political community with interests and demands. The issue of “representation” was *only* seen in terms of the representation of Untouchables as “Hindus,” and so the community of Untouchables must be urged to abdicate their political rights in favour of their concerned caste-Hindu brethren. Untouchables were thus pre-political, since they had no rights but only duties. Political representation was once again occluded in favour of a re-presentation of Untouchables as socially inferior and in need of social change. Prashad moreover asserts that in the specific instance of the *Bhangi*, the question of labour was fore-grounded to prevent any advance in political representation. To allow the *Bhangis* to follow their political demands through meant to put at risk the fragile network of sanitation constructed since the 1880s.<sup>245</sup>

Thus, the crucial task before the elite nationalists, asserts Prashad, was therefore, “to organise a new social order, in which the *Bhangis* [were] liberated without losing their labour ....” To this end was constructed and deployed the nationalist (Swami Sundarananda of the Harijan Sevak Sangh) and Hindu communalist (Shraddhananda of the Arya Samaj) discourses on untouchability. A close reading of their tracts elaborates upon the denial of personhood to Untouchables. Caste was now clothed in *varna-dharma* and it was argued that “attributes and works, quality and action, character and conduct [determined] the *varna* among ancient Aryans.” In other words, conduct would determine one’s place in the system and not birth or hereditary status. Therefore, the need, was only to remove the observances of “certain superstitious formalities of caste.” To this end, says Prashad, the Muslims were “made to bear the burden for the perversion”<sup>246</sup> of the

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<sup>244</sup> Prashad, ‘Untouchable Question’, p. 555, (emphasis mine).

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 555-56.



ancient Aryan social polity. It was argued, emphasises Prashad, that "... the 'cruel bigotry of *Muslim* Emperors' and the practices of the foreigners who ruled over India for several centuries ...[,] ended [*varna*] perfection."<sup>247</sup>

The *Bhangi*, writes Prashad, for the militant Hindu as much as for Gandhi, served as the symbol for the *farcical* revision of the ancient *varna* model. The *Bhangis* existed in their forlorn state only because of the Muslims.<sup>248</sup> Prashad asserts that Gandhi's statements on the *Bhangi* of the 1930s must be read after the anti-Muslim mythology of the 1920s, for the rest of his language is the same. Gandhi argued that "the Hindu reformers have undertaken the work [of abolishing untouchability] not to do a favour to the Untouchables, certainly not to exploit them politically. They have undertaken the task because their conception of Hinduism peremptorily demands it." In this act of transference, writes Prashad, Gandhi naively shifted his own reasons onto those who had little faith in his ethics. Moreover, "when Gandhi spoke of *varnashram-dharma* in the 1930s, he did so *after* and *alongside* the polemics of militant Hinduism." Prashad adduces a few examples in support of his assertion. "The *Bhangi*," Gandhi wrote in 1936, "constitutes the foundation of all services. A *Bhangi* does for society what a mother does for her baby. A mother washes her baby of the dirt and insures his health. Even so the *Bhangi* protects and safeguards the health of the entire community by maintaining sanitation for it."<sup>249</sup>

Prashad argues that the connection made between a "mother" and a "*Bhangi*" was not accidental. It pointed to the gendered assumption that certain people in society have "duties" and not "rights." He says that just as Hegel placed "women" outside the realm of rights, Indian nationalists also considered the Untouchables "pre-political," who had a task to do as a duty. Moreover, the notion of "society," which Gandhi employed, writes Prashad, was given away in his analogy between the *Brahmin* and the *Bhangi*. According to Gandhi, "[the] *Brahman's* duty [was] to look after the sanitation of the soul, the *Bhangi's* that of the body of society." Prashad, thus asserts that Gandhi here alludes to the *varnashram* system, already elaborated at length by Hindu reformers akin to himself.<sup>250</sup> Therefore, the essence of the modern

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556, (emphasis mine).

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> *Harijan*, 28th November 1936, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 557.

<sup>250</sup> Prashad, 'Untouchable Question', p. 557.

*varnashram-dharma*, says Prashad, was that each social group must perform its own stipulated function.

Arundhati Roy also asserts that these social reform movements and, in particular Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign of 1933-34, was nothing but a "Big" political stunt. She explains that these privileged-caste-Hindu reform movements were carried out precisely "in order to detach caste from the political economy and from the conditions of enslavement, in which most Untouchables were forced to live and work, precisely in order to omit the questions of entitlement, land reforms and the redistribution of wealth, that Hindu reformers cleverly narrowed the question of caste to the issue of untouchability. They framed it as an erroneous religious and cultural practice that needed to be reformed. Gandhi narrowed it even further to the issue of '*Bhangis*' – a mostly urban and therefore somewhat politicised community."<sup>251</sup>

William Gould terms this as "a Hindu view of Indian minorities."<sup>252</sup> He argues that whilst Hinduism was narrowly defined as just another religious community, the separation of other religious groups could be asserted. But when Hinduism was also defined as a cultural force embracing the essence of modernity in India, "the plea for special minority rights made less sense."<sup>253</sup> It was the latter definition of Hinduism that was stressed upon. As the threat of Untouchables' secession from the Hindu fold became real, says Gould, "Hindu" unity became a totalising movement, involving social and cultural unification, and thus drawn away from the specifically religious domain. In this context, "one of its aims was to deny that Untouchable uplift, as a truly secular and rational project, could possibly have communal implications."<sup>254</sup>

Gould, moreover, argues that on the one hand, Hinduism was described as a rational system-absorbent, tolerant and accommodating, on the other, it was still a religion "under threat" from internal disintegration and external political challenge, (referring to the Communal Award that granted separate electorate to the Untouchables). For the Congress, writes Gould, "stress on rationality and absorbency

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<sup>251</sup> Roy, 'The Doctor', pp. 100-01.

<sup>252</sup> W. Gould, 'The U. P. Congress And 'Hindu Unity': Untouchables And The Minority Question In The 1930s', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Oct., 2005), p. 847.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 849.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 850.

allowed uplift to be detached from the taint of communalism.” He therefore argues that the idea of Hinduism as a crucible of secularism and toleration, threatened to undermine the very status of the political category “minority,” which depended upon narrower understandings of Hinduism. Such views of the Hindu body politic “encouraged a kind of blindness within the Congress towards the implications of uplift.”<sup>255</sup> Arundhati Roy, Wadia, Prashad, and Gould, therefore see Gandhian ‘Harijan’ welfare work as nothing but a “Hindu communal project,” intended to make India safe for caste-Hindus and Hinduism.

D. N. concludes that Gandhi’s objective was to keep the Hindus united as a political community, not, as conventionally argued, against the British. The “unity of Hindus as a political community was necessary in getting their politically dominant sections (upper caste-Hindus, landlords, professionals and, behind them, the important power of the pan-Indian bourgeoisie) a greater weight *vis-à-vis* the other communities, essentially Muslims, in the constitutional set-up leading to ‘self-rule’.” It was for this reason that Gandhi could unite behind him, at that time, all the organisations and representatives of upper caste-Hindus, ranging from Madan Mohan Malaviya of the Hindu Mahasabha to G. D. Birla. Gandhi’s objective clearly was to maintain, says D. N., “an upper caste hegemony over the whole Hindu community.”<sup>256</sup> Although Congress considered Untouchability a social rather than political issue, it was, in its own way, about building a national community through a community of Hindus.<sup>257</sup>

What was then Gandhi’s aim? Was it to save the Hindu caste system? Or to preserve Hindu numbers? Or to win the Untouchables over to his side against the British? Or was he bidding, as Gandhi claimed, “to remove ‘a stain on India’s forehead’?”<sup>258</sup> Mukut Behari Verma argues that though Gandhi included the eradication of untouchability in his programme for the war of independence, he

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<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 852.

<sup>256</sup> D. N., ‘Separate Electorates Issue’, p. 1330.

<sup>257</sup> W. Gould, *Hindu Nationalism And The Language Of Politics In Late Colonial India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004; G. Pandey, *The Construction Of Communalism In Colonial North India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990; G. Pandey, *The Ascendancy Of The Congress In Uttar Pradesh, 1926-34: A Study In Imperfect Mobilisation*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1978.

<sup>258</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 237.

always thought untouchability essentially as an evil social practice of the Hindus. The parts of the Congress programme relating to untouchability only applied to the Hindu members. Gandhi fought for the eradication of untouchability because he considered it evil. He could not countenance conversion of the Untouchables by the Christians or the Muslims because that would have harmed the Hindu community. In this respect, his views had a religious angle. He considered 'Harijan' service as a religious obligation, as a sacrifice and penance for the persecution of centuries. "It would be wrong however to conclude," asserts Verma, "that he [Gandhi] was merely interested in 'Harijan' welfare work because of the numbers involved." Gandhi said: "Do *not* for one moment believe that I am interested in the *numerical strength* of the Hindus. I have always insisted upon *quality* at the sacrifice of quantity. A million false coins are worthless and one true coin would be worth its value."<sup>259</sup>

Although Gandhi was redefining Hinduism and appeared on the scene as revolutionising Hinduism,<sup>260</sup> he had not started the campaign out of any concern for the survival of Hinduism. He said, "I am wholly indifferent whether Hindu religion is strengthened or weakened or perishes.... I have so much faith in the correctness of the position I have taken up that, if my taking up that position results in weakening Hinduism, I cannot help it and I must not care."<sup>261</sup> He asserted that the object of the Harijan Movement was *neither* to score a victory over any other community *nor* to increase the number of Hindus. It was essentially a movement of self-purification and of ridding Hinduism of the blot of untouchability.<sup>262</sup> Gandhi admitted that the movement was liable to exploitation for political purposes, and was aware of the assertions voiced by N. N. Sirkar that its purpose was to consolidate Hinduism against other minorities. He firmly and emphatically denied that he had any such object. In fact, he declared that he differed from Hindu Mahasabha in this regard. The

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<sup>259</sup> M. B. Verma, *History Of The Harijan Sevak Sangh: 1932-1968*, (trans., Viyogi Hari), Delhi, Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1971, p. 27, (emphasis mine).

<sup>260</sup> 'Interview With Members Of Self-Respect Party', 23rd January 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, p. 43.

<sup>261</sup> 'Speech At Public Meeting, Alleppey', 18th January 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, p. 17.

<sup>262</sup> *The Tribune*, 18th July 1934, (emphasis mine); 'Speech At Public Meeting, Lahore', 15th July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 193, (emphasis mine). Again addressing a public meeting at Kanpur, Gandhi said that "[this] is a movement of purification. It has *nothing* to do with the counting of heads. It is *not* a movement designed to fight Muslims or others." 'Speech At Public Meeting, Kanpur', 22nd July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 227, (emphasis mine); *Harijan*, 3rd August 1934, (emphasis mine).

Mahasabha's activities were essentially communal, he said, and were designed to further Hindu interests as distinguished from other. The Harijan Movement had no communal bias. It aimed at the internal reform of Hinduism, at ridding it of artificial distinctions of high and low. Gandhi said, "I am fighting for the same rights, without reservation, for the 'Harijans' that the caste-Hindus have in matters religious, social and political." Gandhi said, "[so] far as one single person can, I am trying to keep this movement entirely free from politics,"<sup>263</sup> thus not aimed at garnering the number of Hindu voters.

Moreover, Gandhi emphasised that he wanted to absorb the Christians, the Muslims and others, into one indivisible nation, having a common interest; so that the minorities would not feel themselves to be minorities. "If untouchability is abolished," he assured, "the bar to closer intercourse between the Hindus and the minorities will disappear, and with its disappearance will come a new unity of aim and interest, a new oneness."<sup>264</sup> He thus declared that the eradication of untouchability would not only purify Hinduism, but also "would *transmute* our national weakness into national strength, and bring about greater solidarity among our people professing different religious faiths."<sup>265</sup> A united nation of sixty million people, united in knowledge, in progress, in ambition, in spiritual desire for self-Government, he said, could not be held in bondage, either by own countrymen, or by another powerful nation.<sup>266</sup> The Harijan Movement was thus inclusive. It aimed at removing untouchability in every shape and form. When reminded that B. S. Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha had similarly declared that Hinduism included all, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and the rest, Gandhi replied: "The object of Dr. Moonje differs greatly from mine. They are haggling over seats in the Legislature. That movement is solely political, mine is non-political."<sup>267</sup> Moreover, charged with using the Harijan Movement to strengthen Civil Disobedience and also of abandoning Civil

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<sup>263</sup> 'Interview To "Madras Mail"', 22nd December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, pp. 383-84; *Madras Mail*, 22nd December 1933.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384; *ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> 'Speech At Public Meeting, Tumkur', 4th January 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 435, (emphasis mine); *The Hindu*, 5th January 1934, (emphasis mine).

<sup>266</sup> 'An American Criticism', 22nd July 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 285; *Harijan*, 22nd July 1933.

<sup>267</sup> 'Interview To "Madras Mail"', 22nd December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 384; *Madras Mail*, 22nd December 1933.

Disobedience for the sake of the Harijan Movement, he could only say: “I am between two cross-fires. Congressmen accuse me of having damaged the cause of Civil Disobedience by taking up this whirlwind campaign. Those who suspect me of ulterior motives accuse me of strengthening Civil Disobedience.”<sup>268</sup>

In Dennis Dalton’s analysis, the aforementioned criticisms of Gandhi ignore “the significance of “style” in Gandhi’s approach to caste reform, and thus misses much of his purpose as he saw it.” The distinction between caste and *varna*, and the subsequent idealisation of *varnashram-dharma* as an order of equality and harmony, emerged in Gandhi’s thought in the 1920s, and it eventually provided the basis of his approach to the caste problem. A similar approach to caste by Dayanand and Vivekananda has already been observed. Indeed, Vivekananda and later Gandhi too, says Dalton, “pointed to the ancient roots of this position on caste in the teachings of Buddha;”<sup>269</sup> and a noted Indologist has confirmed the similarity between Gandhi’s views of caste and that of Buddha and many of his successors.<sup>270</sup> Except for the element of style,<sup>271</sup> there was little novelty in Gandhi’s position on caste and, according to Dalton, “this makes all the difference, [for] Gandhi amplified this aspect of style with all the force of his creative skill, and the symbols he conceived were unknown to his predecessors.”<sup>272</sup>

Dalton says that Vivekananda and the subsequent social reformers relied on “uninspired terminology,” such as *pariah* or the victims of “don’t touchism” to mobilise the Untouchables in their movements against untouchability. Gandhi’s genius lies in coining the term ‘Harijan’ (man of God) for the Untouchables. He would say, “the ‘Untouchable’, to me, is, compared to us, really a ‘Harijan’ – a man of God, and we are ‘Durjan’, men of evil.” Gandhi also said: “When caste-Hindus have of their own inner conviction and, therefore, voluntarily, got rid of the present-

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<sup>268</sup> *The Hindu*, 18th December 1933; ‘Interview To “The Hindu”’, 17th December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 346.

<sup>269</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 168.

<sup>270</sup> L. Renou, ‘Gandhi And Indian Civilisation’, in K. Roy, (ed.), *Gandhi Memorial Peace Number*, Visva-Bharati Peace Quarterly, Santiniketan, 1949, p. 237.

<sup>271</sup> See the approach of I. Rothermund, *The Philosophy Of Restraint*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1963, Ch. II.

<sup>272</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 168.

day untouchability, we shall *all* be called ‘Harijans’, the caste-Hindus will then have found favour with God and may therefore, be fitly described as His men.” By 1933, the famous ‘Harijan’ journal had been founded as the main vehicle of Gandhi’s ideas, ‘Harijan’ Boards have been formed, ‘Harijan’ Day proclaimed, and the Harijan Sevak Sangh organised, all to promote the reform of untouchability. The most noteworthy, according to Dalton, was Gandhi’s decision in 1932, to “employ his ‘fiery weapon’, the fast, on behalf of the ‘Harijans’,” thus reinforcing symbolic language by symbolic action. “It is in terms of such a style,” Dalton contends, “that the significance of [Gandhi’s] use of *varnashram-dharma* itself lies.”<sup>273</sup>

In this context, Anthony Parel argues that Gandhi, being a “prophetic-religious type of man,”<sup>274</sup> needed symbols to communicate his values and to exercise his leadership. He says that “rational and utilitarian political theories cannot adequately explain the aims and methods of the politics of such men.”<sup>275</sup> Gandhi claimed religious or transcendental sanctions for the values he pursued in his practice of Indian politics. And Gandhian symbols supplied the link between his value system and his practice of politics. Parel in his study of “symbolism” in Gandhian politics argues that “the ‘Harijan’ symbol represented many values: Equality, liberty, national unity, empathy.”<sup>276</sup> He writes that ‘Harijan’, which itself denoted reverence and dignity, also meant that like the “superior” caste-Hindus, ‘Harijans’ were God’s people; and they had “God-given” rights, which no human institution, such as the caste system, may violate.

‘Harijan’ is also the key to the understanding of the Gandhian conception of social order, says Parel, for it “denoted the paramount *need* for reform of Hindu society on the basis of equality, liberty, and unity.”<sup>277</sup> Gandhi recognised the value of functional differences based on occupations, of individuals and groups in society. The ancient Hindu seers, according to Gandhi, wanted to enshrine these differences in a social structure. According to this vision, Parel writes, “occupation was not to be a

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<sup>273</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 169.

<sup>274</sup> J. Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London, John Lane, 1936, p. 253.

<sup>275</sup> A. J. Parel, ‘Symbolism In Gandhian Politics’, *Canadian Journal Of Political Science/Revue Canadienne De Science Politique*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Dec., 1969), p. 513.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 524.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

title to social distinction any more than it should be a badge of social inferiority. Occupational differences were functionally necessary. These functional differences were consistent with social and political equality.” Parel further argues that the caste system, being a corruption of the ideal system, had to be reformed. And the abolition of the caste system, according to Parel, “was the chief objective of the ‘Harijan’ symbol.”<sup>278</sup>

Symbolic language was further reinforced by symbolic action. Gandhi founded the weekly newspaper, *Harijan*, which remained the voice of Gandhi from 1933 till his death in 1948. Its columns were devoted to issues connected with social reform and the uplift of the social and material conditions of ‘Harijans’. He also founded in 1932 the Harijan Sevak Sangh. It had a network of branches all over India. Gandhi’s most celebrated fasts, those of 1932 and 1933, were undertaken on behalf of the ‘Harijan’ cause. His adoption of the loincloth as the “official” Gandhi dress was because of his empathy for the outcastes.

While on tours, Gandhi would visit ‘Harijan’ ghettos, and in later years, even live in such ghettos. He encouraged inter-caste marriages, and inter-dining between caste-Hindus and outcastes – the two controlling devices of the caste system. It was due to “Gandhi’s conception of social equality of all Hindus, symbolised in ‘Harijan’, he was able to prevent a permanent political division within Hinduism between the caste-Hindus and the outcastes.”<sup>279</sup> Gandhi integrated the outcastes socially and politically into the main body of Hindu society. Symbolic or rather the entering wedge in the former respect was to be the throwing open of all temples to ‘Harijans’. Gandhi believed that “temple-entry [was] a spiritual act, transforming the whole society by one single act of admission,”<sup>280</sup> as it was one way of achieving equality by taking steps that would enable Untouchables to become equals. With regard to the latter, a major theme running in Gandhi’s writings and speeches was the need for caste-Hindus to do “penance” and “make reparations ... for the untold hardships to which [caste-Hindus] have subjected [the ‘Harijans’] for centuries.” And it was this strong theme of “penance,” asserts Chandra, which “largely explains why caste-

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<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 525.

<sup>280</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 59, p. 103.



Hindus born and brought-up in post-1947 India so readily accepted large scale reservations in jobs, enrollment in professional colleges, and so on for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes after independence.”<sup>281</sup> And finally, says Parel, “the ‘Harijan’ symbol in Gandhi’s own time played an important political role in pushing Hindu society towards political freedom, political equality, and political unity.”<sup>282</sup>

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There was another significant difference between Gandhi’s method and the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century caste-Hindu reformers’ method to deal with the issue of caste. Though it is true that Gandhi’s methods to deal with the issue of the caste were similar to the social reform movements launched by mostly the caste-Hindu reformers. The differences between the methods of Gandhi and caste-Hindu reformers’ social reform movements are too fundamental. Most of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century social reform movements worked on the principle of “Sanskritisation.”<sup>283</sup> For example, Vivekananda was up in arms against untouchability, but he considered the caste system as “the most glorious social institutions” of India, untouchability being only a later day aberration, arising out of the machinations of the blood-sucking priests.<sup>284</sup> The ideal caste system of the past, Vivekananda believed, was based on *guna* or qualities and not on birth or heredity. So he did “not propose any *levelling* of caste,” but wanted to “*raise* the [Untouchable] up to the *Brahmin*” through the attainment of “Brahmanya qualities.”<sup>285</sup> In this method, individuals or groups from the Untouchable community were required to imitate the customs and practices of the caste-Hindus in order to get rid of notions of pollution attached to them. This ensured their admission into the Hindu four-fold system. This also required individuals or groups of people from the Untouchable caste to undergo a

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<sup>281</sup> B. Chandra, et al., *India’s Struggle For Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 293.

<sup>282</sup> Parel, ‘Symbolism’, p. 525.

<sup>283</sup> Sanskritisation is the process by which “a low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the [caste] hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritising its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the *Brahmins* ....” M. N. Srinivas, ‘A Note On Sanskritisation And Westernisation’, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Aug., 1956), p. 481.

<sup>284</sup> *CWSV*, Vol. V, p. 198; Vol. VI, pp. 210, 253-54, 394-95.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 295-96; Vol. V, pp. 214, 377, 454-57, (emphasis mine).

purification ceremony in order to free themselves of the impurities attached to them; they would then be admitted into the Hindu four-fold system. This would not be difficult, Vivekananda hoped, as “the *Satya-Yuga* will come when there will be one caste (*Brahman*), one *Veda*, and peace and harmony.”<sup>286</sup> Later in the early twentieth century, his Ramakrishna Mission movement undertook a number of philanthropic projects for the distressed masses, either disease-stricken or famine stricken.<sup>287</sup> Hardly ever there was any definite programme focused, specifically, on the question of removing untouchability.

Gandhi from the beginning of his struggle with caste prejudices, rejected the logic of ‘Sanskritisation’ as an effective method to deal with the issue of caste differences and hierarchy present in Hindu society not because it failed to bring any substantial changes in the socio-economic status of Untouchables. His disagreement with such method was much more fundamental. He rejected it because he could see that the principle of ‘Sanskritisation’ failed to challenge or weaken the false consciousness of caste differences and hierarchies in Hindu society. The logic of ‘Sanskritisation’ did not attack the ideological and moral foundations of the caste system but was limited to achieving acceptance of Untouchables within Hinduism’s four-fold division. To Gandhi, the logic of ‘Sanskritisation’ seemed to have a reverse effect – by accepting superiority of *Brahminical* tradition, culture, and practices – it consciously or unconsciously strengthened, legitimised and validated the false consciousness of caste differences and hierarchies rather than weaken or eradicate it.

On the other hand, Gandhi adopted a method that can be described as “downward mobility.”<sup>288</sup> In his thirty years’ long struggle against caste differences and hierarchies, Gandhi through personal example, persuasion, argument and propaganda, tried to educate caste-Hindus to give up their caste prejudices of purity and pollution in order to purify themselves. He said that “I myself have become a ‘Harijan’ by choice ...,”<sup>289</sup> and also urged “the Hindus to become *Ati-Shudras* not

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. V, pp. 31-32.

<sup>287</sup> K. P. Gupta, ‘Religious Evolution And Social Change In India: A Study Of Ramakrishna Mission Movement’, *Contributions To Indian Sociology*, New Series, No. 8, 1974, pp. 42-43.

<sup>288</sup> N. Kolge, ‘The Politician: A Response To Arundhati Roy’s The Doctor And The Saint’, *Gandhi Marg Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, April-June 2014, pp. 145-64.

<sup>289</sup> ‘Speech At Prayer Meeting’, 31st May 1946, *CWVG*, Vol. 84, p. 247.

merely in name but in thought, word and deed,”<sup>290</sup> “if the canker of caste feeling is to be eradicated from Hinduism and Hinduism is not to perish from the face of the earth.”<sup>291</sup> According to him, this constituted real *Shuddhi* and upward mobility. He wrote: “I must tell the [caste]-Hindus to wash off the stain of untouchability. This will be true *Shuddhi*.”<sup>292</sup> “Finally there will be only one caste, known by the beautiful name *Bhangi*, that is to say, the reformer or remover of all dirt. Let us all pray that such a happy day will dawn soon.”<sup>293</sup> At another time, when asked whether Untouchables should go through the sacred thread ceremony, he replied “no,” adding that “it involves the assumption that they are low and that they have got to be raised to a higher status.” He goes on arguing that indeed “[caste-Hindus] must come down from the high pedestal we have occupied all these years and take our natural place with them.”<sup>294</sup>

Gandhi idealised the work and position of *Bhangis* and asked every Hindu to become a *Bhangi* in his thought, words and action. It is something very different from the logic of ‘Sanskritisation’ that accepts superiority of the *Brahminical* tradition, culture, and practices and, strengthens the caste differences and hierarchy. Gandhi’s method of downward mobility was something very radical, for by doing so, he was refusing to accept the superiority of *Brahminical* tradition, culture, and customs from which justification for caste differences was derived. By rejecting the superiority of *Brahminical* culture, Gandhi indeed attacked the very root of the caste system, perhaps better than any other social reform movement or anti-caste movement. This is a basic difference between Gandhi’s method and the caste-Hindu reformers’ social reform movement’s method to deal with the issue of caste differences and hierarchy.

Moreover, many caste-Hindu reformers’ social reform movements were not just concerned with the removal of untouchability. Rather, the removal of untouchability was an approach designed to establish the spiritual superiority of Hinduism in the midst of challenges posed by Christianity and Islam, and to nurture the self-confidence and pride of Hindus. The method adopted by these late-nineteenth

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<sup>290</sup> *Harijan*, 14th April 1946.

<sup>291</sup> ‘Speech At Prayer Meeting’, 31st May 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. 84, p. 247.

<sup>292</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 32, p. 540.

<sup>293</sup> *Harijan*, 7th July 1946.

<sup>294</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 61, p. 160.

and early-twentieth century social reform movements was that of mobilising a sense of pride among the upper caste-Hindus to remove certain practices in order to rediscover their glorious past. Lajpat Rai writes that Dayananda's objective was not to give the Hindu matter an occasion for boasting, but to lift the Hindu from that slough of despondency into which he had fallen, and to give him leverage for the removal of the great burden that lay on his mind. Lajpat Rai adds that Dayanand "wanted to inspire the Hindu with just pride and with confidence in the great value of his heritage."<sup>295</sup>

On the other hand, Gandhi wanted to remove the false consciousness of caste hierarchies and differences from Hindu society. He therefore rejected this method of some of the caste-Hindu reformers' reform movements, which created and fostered militancy among Hindus about their religion and caste superiority. According to him, this fake consciousness about caste superiority was the main source of the practice of untouchability and hierarchies present in Hinduism. Gandhi believed that the best method of reform would be one, which did not evoke any false sense of caste superiority in the Hindus. The method he adopted was to mobilise the feelings of "shame" and "guilt" among the upper caste-Hindus, and his movement against the practice of untouchability was a "penance" for them. He demanded that upper caste-Hindus should not just abandon their false consciousness but also should participate in the social, economic and political upliftment of the Untouchables as part of their penance.

This was important because, according to Suhas Palshikar, even if the Depressed Classes were to politically delink themselves from the upper-caste-Hindu society, the social issue would remain unresolved until the "practice" of untouchability was removed/abandoned. *It was not the Untouchables but the caste-Hindus who were practicing untouchability. They had to change themselves.* Gandhi thus engaged the caste-Hindus, coaxing them and convincing them occasionally by going on fasts. For him, the responsibility of removing the evil of untouchability lay with the beneficiaries of inequality.<sup>296</sup> The practice of degradation could not cease

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<sup>295</sup> Lajpat Rai, 'Religious Ideals And Aims', in J. B. Sharma & S. P. Sharma, (eds.), *Arya Samaj And Regeneration Of India*, Jaipur, Sublime Publications, 1999, p. 99.

<sup>296</sup> S. Palshikar, 'Ambedkar And Gandhi: Limits Of Divergence And Possibilities Of Conversation', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, No. 15 (April 11, 2015), p. 47, (emphasis mine).

merely by confronting their oppressors, but by recognising the dignity of the wrongdoers. So, it becomes necessary, emphasises Palshikar, “to converse, coerce and *convert* the wrongdoers.”<sup>297</sup>

But, Palshikar argues further that “the pace and content of that conversation-coercion and the nature of that conversion becomes dependent on the acceptance and willingness of the wrongdoers themselves.”<sup>298</sup> He also asserts that apart from practicing untouchability, the caste society presents a number of other possible forms of injustice where different castes may be located in antagonistic situations. Gandhi’s discourse does not direct intellectual attention and political energies against castes deriving advantages from the caste system. Instead, writes Palshikar, “Gandhi tends to search possible areas of co-operation and integration of castes.”<sup>299</sup> Hence, Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ movement included a programme of internal reform by ‘Harijans’: Promotion of education, cleanliness and hygiene, giving up the eating of carrion and beef, giving up liquor and the abolition of untouchability among themselves. But it did not include a militant struggle by the ‘Harijans’ themselves through satyagraha, breaking of caste taboos, mass demonstrations, picketing, and other forms of protests. At the same time, he was aware that his ‘Harijan’ Movement “must cause daily increasing *awakening* among the ‘Harijans’ [and] whether the *savarna* Hindus like it or not, the ‘Harijans’ would make good, their position.”<sup>300</sup>

Gandhi believed that the political separation of Untouchables from the Hindu society, or in Nagaraj’s words, the translation of “the problem of the Untouchables into the parlance of modern day democratic processes in a colonial context,” would prevent the “natural growth” of the suppressed classes and would “remove the incentive to make honourable amends from the suppressors.” This was a product of a firm belief in an organic community, which “is essentially different from a modern democratic society.” The very notion of an organic community had special appeal for Gandhi, and he thought that contradictions of this society are not irreconcilable. To Gandhi, they can be reconciled “[in] the framework of an organic community for

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<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49, (emphasis mine).

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> Palshikar, ‘When Shall The Twain Meet?’, p. 2070.

<sup>300</sup> Quoted in Chandra, *Struggle For Independence*, p. 295, (emphasis mine).

there is scope for natural resistance which leads to equally natural ways of solving a problem.”<sup>301</sup> Such an arrangement would not wreck the fabric of a given society.

Ramashray argues that to Gandhi “*samadrishiti*<sup>302</sup> [was] the foundation of community.” Such a community signifies a *yajna* (sacrifice) requiring different function and their performers. Looking from this perspective, Ramashray emphasises that the Untouchables are an integral part of the Hindu social order and the solution to their existential problems must be sought within the fold of the Hindu social order. This also required the removal of all social, ritual, economic distortions affecting the Untouchables. It is not surprising, writes Ramashray, that Gandhi chided Ambedkar for his particularistic obsession with the good of the Untouchables alone, ignoring the larger claim of the whole, of which the Untouchables formed only a part.<sup>303</sup>

Gandhi’s take-off point was that “the problem of untouchability was a problem of the collective Hindu ‘self’, and the Untouchable was a part of the ‘self’.” Thus, Gandhi saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of “self-purification.”<sup>304</sup> Since, he held as crucial the mutual interdependence of Untouchable and the caste-Hindu society, he invested the inseparability of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, (caste-Hindu), writes Nagaraj, “with a new kind of radical militancy.” The radical militancy was that, “there is no point in changing ‘myself’, by excluding the ‘other’. The ‘other’ should experience a process of change.”<sup>305</sup> Nagaraj argues that as Untouchable and caste-Hindu societies are organically intertwined, the notion of untouchability has to disappear from the mind and heart of caste-Hindu society. The ‘other’ should change. An attempt to eradicate untouchability will not be fruitful without a constant and deep interaction with the ‘other’. Change is possible only when one clings to the ‘other’ and struggles *with* the ‘other’ in a unified state. This is the essence of the Gandhian approach.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 48.

<sup>302</sup> *Samadrishiti* is the act of looking at equally or impartially, impartial and equal regard.

<sup>303</sup> R. Roy, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And The Untouchables’, *Gandhi Marg*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Jan.-Mar., 2005, p. 403.

<sup>304</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 35.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Parekh argues that this also derived from the fact that Gandhi was, in principle, “opposed to state-imposed and even state-initiated reforms,” be the state foreign or indigenous, and wanted it to intervene only after society had by means of its own resources created the necessary consensus and climate. Though uneasy about the very institution of the state, which he took to be nothing more than concentrated and organised violence, Gandhi was prepared to accept it as an instrument of *order* but not as an agency of social change or *reform*.<sup>307</sup> He thought, too, that when reforms were externally imposed and did not grow out of the community’s own internal moral struggle; they lacked roots and remained fragile and were ignored at the very first available opportunity.<sup>308</sup> In this context, Parekh argues that Gandhi refused to use the “Western method” of asking the Government to legislate against untouchability. According to Gandhi, millions of caste-Hindus sincerely believed that untouchability was integral part of their religion. So long as they held that belief, they were bound bitterly to resent its abolition, and an unpopular reform was either likely to be fiercely resisted or deviously circumvented. By requiring them to act against their belief also violated their integrity and created a lie in their souls and thus, according to Gandhi, “be guilty of one of the most unacceptable forms of violence.”<sup>309</sup> Parekh, however, argues that to Gandhi state intervention implied that Hindus had become morally so degenerate that they were incapable of recognising the inhumanity of untouchability, and mounting a campaign against it. Gandhi disagreed this to be the case. He was prepared to devote his own life to fighting against untouchability, and felt sure that “he could both organise a committed cadre and mobilise the moral energies of the Hindu masses.”<sup>310</sup>

## [8]

Later scholars added an exciting dimension to the analysis of Gandhi’s position on caste. They added the important evolutionary nature of Gandhi’s views on the subject. The writings of these scholars range from Louis Fischer, B. R. Nanda,<sup>311</sup> and Thomas Pantham. These range from a simplistic understanding of Gandhi’s

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<sup>307</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 253.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>311</sup> Nanda, *Gandhi And Critics*.

conception of caste, as undergoing a rational evolution, to moving gradually from an orthodox stance to more liberal views, and culminating in a radical position, to a more nuanced interpretation. Dalton argues that Gandhi's deference to Hindu orthodoxy in the initial phase was due to the weight of reality, which compelled him to move about cautiously while assessing the alignments in India. It was a *tactical* move and not *lack* of radical ideals. Dalton subscribes to the view that Gandhi gradually moved, from earlier conservative stance, to liberal and even revolutionary positions subsequently.

Fischer argues that for many years Gandhi defended caste restrictions. Defending the four Hindu castes, writes Fischer, "Gandhi said in 1920, 'I consider the four divisions to be fundamental, natural and essential'." "Hinduism," he wrote in *Young India* of 6th October 1921, "does most emphatically discourage inter-dining and inter-marriage between divisions .... Prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dining is essential for the rapid evolution of the soul." This was according to Fischer, the "orthodox" Gandhi. He, however, argues that to the same man to whom in 1921 the prohibition of inter-marriage and inter-dining was "essential" to the soul, it was "weakening Hindu society" in 1932. Gandhi, thus, moved to a more liberal phase, and he claimed, asserts Fischer, that "restriction on inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage [are *not*] part of the Hindu religion. It crept into Hinduism when perhaps it was in its decline, and was then probably meant to be a temporary protection against the disintegration of Hindu society. Today those two prohibitions are *weakening* the Hindu society."<sup>312</sup>

Even this, says Fischer, was not Gandhi's final position. Gandhi having broken with the orthodox tradition, continued to travel further and further away from it, and he declared in 1946: "I therefore tell all boys and girls who want to marry that they cannot be married at Sevagram Ashram unless one of parties is a 'Harijan'." Thus in 1946, Fischer contends that Gandhi had refused to attend wedding unless it was an inter-caste marriage. Thus emerged, Fischer's "radical" Gandhi. He concludes that "from 1921 to 1946 Gandhi had gone full circle: From utter disapproval of inter-caste marriages to approval of *only* [inter-]caste marriages."<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Fischer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 363, (emphasis mine).

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).



According to Dennis Dalton, this interpretation suffers from oversimplification. He argues that by emphasising the evolutionary nature of Gandhi's approach to caste, it moves too far, thus projecting too much orthodoxy into his earlier position, and purging his later ideas of all orthodoxy. Dalton posits that "the pace as well as the content of Gandhi's views on caste must be seen in the context of his response to the Indian orthodoxy as well as to Western liberalism."<sup>314</sup> He says that 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 made India turn [her] back on truth and embrace falsehood."<sup>315</sup>

Shortly after he returned to India, Gandhi was faced with the problem both to counter the Western attack on caste, and also not to overawe the orthodox. This shaped his views on the problem in the decade of the 1920s. B. R. Nanda, a biographer and Gandhian scholar writes, "Gandhi's reluctance to make a frontal assault on the caste system in the early years may have been a matter of tactics."<sup>316</sup> Apart from Nanda, there are other scholars like Ramchandra Guha,<sup>317</sup> Judith M. Brown,<sup>318</sup> and Joseph Lelyveld<sup>319</sup> who have argued that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to the caste system. As a result, in the prevailing circumstances "Gandhi emphasised," Dennis Dalton contends, "the generally beneficial aspects of caste," and defended it "for its wonderful powers of organisation," and upheld "caste prohibitions on inter-dining and inter-marriage [as fostering] '*self-control*'; and [regarded] the system itself ... as a beneficial, natural institution."<sup>320</sup> As Judith Brown writes: "Though he [Gandhi] had rejected the whole idea far earlier and inveighed and worked against it even in South Africa, once home in India, having tested the temper of public opinion, he was aware of the strength of Hindu orthodoxy and he took care not to equate his campaign against untouchability with the question of caste as a

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<sup>314</sup> Dalton, 'Caste After Gandhi', p. 173.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170, (emphasis mine).

<sup>316</sup> Nanda, *Gandhi And Critics*, p. 36.

<sup>317</sup> R. Guha, 'Gandhi's Ambedkar', in R. Guha, (ed.), *An Anthropologist Among The Marxists And Other Essays*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, p. 94.

<sup>318</sup> J. M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner Of Hope*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 205.

<sup>319</sup> J. Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India*, New Delhi, HarperCollins India, 2011, p. 204. p. 185.

<sup>320</sup> Dalton, 'Caste After Gandhi', p. 170, (emphasis mine).

whole.”<sup>321</sup> A direct assault on caste by Gandhi would mean *playing into the hands of Western Imperialism*. On the other hand, he understood that the conservative but articulate and powerful section of Hindus was not yet ready for radical reforms and he also realised that he could not sustain his movement for political and social reforms *without* their help. For Gandhi, not conceding the sentiments of the majority of traditional Hindus would have been suicidal, since a change among caste-Hindus was the critical element of the anti-untouchability programme. Apart from this, “the argument that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to caste resolves,” argues Nishikant Kolge, “the seeming contradiction between Gandhi’s personal practices where he violates several caste restrictions, and his emphasis on some of the positive aspects of the caste system in some of his writings and speeches.”<sup>322</sup> Through the three decades of his work in India, Gandhi steadily and persistently attacked the practice of untouchability. To be sure, he moved in stages. While, in his own *ashram*, all members ate and mingled together regardless of caste, he did not at first advocate inter-dining or intermingling to society at large. However, as he grew more popular, and more sure of his public influence, he urged every Hindu not just to abolish untouchability from their minds and hearts, but to disregard matters of caste in where they lived, whom they ate with or befriended, and whom they married.<sup>323</sup>

At an early undeveloped stage, Gandhi had synonymously used “caste and *varnashram-dharma*, with no attempt to distinguish between them.” However, he was also searching for an approach to caste that would allow him to reform it effectively from within, without alienating the orthodox. He thus suggested that “a beginning should be made with inter-marriage not among different *varnas* but among members of different sub-castes.”<sup>324</sup> “This would satisfy,” says Dalton “the most ardent reformers as a first step and enable [orthodox] men like Pandit Malaviya to support it.”<sup>325</sup> A vigorous attempt to disassociate the concept of *varna* from caste, however, marked Gandhi’s endeavours in the early twenties. Gandhi not only distinguished between “the four divisions” and “the sub-castes” but also stressed on equality among

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<sup>321</sup> Brown, *Prisoner Of Hope*, p. 205.

<sup>322</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, pp. 49-50.

<sup>323</sup> Guha, ‘Does Gandhi Have A Caste?’, *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

<sup>324</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 170.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170-71.

the four orders: “I consider the four divisions alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better .... 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 ....”<sup>326</sup>

Dalton explains that Gandhi did not deviate from the orthodox belief in the law of *varna* based on heredity, but he also did not share Ambedkar’s viewpoints who was clamouring for abolition of the functional basis of *varna* and removal of restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage. Gandhi did not oppose the pillars of caste system. “He maintained his support of restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage,” yet he asserted that closed-dining and closed-marriages, though useful, were minor parts in *varnashram*, for “Hinduism does not empathically discourage inter-dining and inter-marriage between divisions.”<sup>327</sup> “A *Brahman* may remain a *Brahman*, though he may dine with his *Shudra* .... The four divisions define a man’s calling, *they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse.*” Unlike its excrescence, the contemporary caste system, asserted Gandhi, which was rigid about the observance of these restrictions. By asserting that “since a man’s *varna* is (as the orthodox contend) inherited, inter-dining or even inter-marriage [does *not*] necessarily deprive a man of his status that birth has given him,” Gandhi separates “the two key pillars of caste, inter-dining and inter-marriage, from the concept of *varnashram.*”<sup>328</sup> He now was able to overcome his inhibitions regarding inter-marriage, and his glory on its acme, could speak what sounded like blasphemy to the ears of Hindu orthodoxy.

The second-half of the twenties represented a combination of Gandhi’s success in separating *varna dharma* from caste system on the one hand, and from restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage on the other. Gandhi had made a clear distinction between *varnashram dharma* and caste from the beginning of the twenties. But now, Dalton contends, Gandhi reinforced his arguments with greater vigour in

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<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>327</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 172. In that article he held that there was nothing in *varnashram* “to prevent the *Shudra* from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes. Only he will best serve with his body.” *Young India*, 6th October 1921.

<sup>328</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 172, (emphasis mine).

favour of *varna dharma* which was to move in “to fill the vacuum replacing one traditional concept with another.”<sup>329</sup> It was precisely on this basis that as early as 1927, Gandhi was able to argue that “*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.” Dalton says that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gandhi was re-interpreting original sources to gather ammunition for an attack against the rigidity, exclusiveness, and prejudices of caste system, and for bringing about a renaissance of Indian society. What was his line of defense earlier became his line of offence later. A typical example of his defiance of orthodoxy is an extract from Gandhi’s journal, *Young India*: “Fight by all means the monster that passes for *varnashram* today, and you will find me [Gandhi] working side by side with you. My *varnashram* enables me to dine with anybody who will give me clean food, be he Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, whatever he is. My *varnashram* accommodates a Pariah girl under my own roof, as my own daughter. My *varnashram* accommodates many [Untouchable] families, with whom I dine with the greatest pleasure, to dine with whom is a privilege.”<sup>330</sup> Gandhi’s earlier ideas had now become extinct.

As Gandhi’s maturity expanded, awareness of his power to manipulate change was realised, and particular dimensions of the problem were comprehended. He moved towards a radical conception of caste during the last two decades of his life. A mere decade ago, Gandhi’s views on caste seemed loaded with orthodox overtones. But now he frequently re-iterated that he would suffer no deviation from fundamental ethics, whatever might be its scriptural sanction. Dalton thus emphasises that initially though Gandhi accepted the “caste ideal as the right path to social harmony,” but he then steadily undermined it and replaced it with *varna dharma*.

It was in 1932 that the vestiges of orthodoxy, seen in Gandhi’s support of caste restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining, disappear. Dalton states that these restrictions were now criticised by Gandhi, “as being no part of Hindu religion, serving only to ‘stunt’ Hindu society.” He says, “writing in 1935 on this issue under the title *Caste Must Go*, [Gandhi insisted] that in *varnashrama* there was and should

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<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173. When Gandhi started living in Segaoon near Wardha, Govind, a man who was an Untouchable by caste, generally prepared food for him. B. Sinha, *Under The Shelter Of Bupu*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1962, p. 93.

be no prohibition of inter-marriage and inter-dining.” It took almost a decade to make such an announcement by Gandhi because building a new consensus was a difficult undertaking. The revolutionary destroys the old, and a conservative refuses to abandon the old even when confronted with a different reality. Gandhi’s frame of reference, which recognised the need for change without losing sight of advantages of continuity, enabled him to develop a theory of *varna* which sought to adjust the old fabric of socio-political organisations to the needs of the twentieth century India, caught in two streams of Hindu orthodoxy and Western liberalism. His views on inter-marriage, once loosened, culminated in the announcement in 1946 that couples “cannot be married at Sewagram Ashram unless one party is a ‘Harijan’. ... I would persuade all caste-Hindu girls coming under my influence to select ‘Harijan’ husbands.”<sup>331</sup> Gandhi’s transformation, to Dalton, was now complete. Also, as has been noted by Nagaraj and Rodrigues, Gandhi’s later-day insistence on inter-caste marriage may be seen as cutting at the root of the caste system.<sup>332</sup> Ashis Nandy has argued that it was Gandhi’s insistence on inter-caste marriage that made him so dangerous, to his adversaries in the Hindu Right, along with his defense of Indian Muslims. His assassin, Nathuram Godse, was an orthodox *Brahmin* from the purest of *Brahmin* categories.<sup>333</sup> Sudarshan Kapur argues that “*Hindutva* philosophy was totally against Gandhi’s attempt to bring the Dalits and low caste-Hindus to the centre of national life.” Gandhi’s lifting up of the marginalised was dangerous for “it weakened upper caste-Hindu control of institutions of political cultural power. Hindu nationalists’ argued that Gandhi ‘had undermined Hinduism by giving Dalits, low caste-Hindus, and Muslims a formal, legal, and political place in the new nation’.” In other words, Gandhi had gone too far in those unorthodox democratic directions and was a threat “to the position and power that caste-Hindus traditionally held.”<sup>334</sup> As

<sup>331</sup> Dalton, ‘Caste After Gandhi’, p. 174.

<sup>332</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*; Rodrigues, ‘The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate’, pp. 56-66.

<sup>333</sup> A. Nandy, *At The Edge Of Psychology: Essays In Politics And Culture*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1980, Ch. ‘The Final Encounter: The Politics Of The Assassination Of Gandhi’. Sudarshan Kapur adds that Gandhi by bringing those on the periphery to the center and lifting the traditionally beaten down people to a participatory position in their society, threatened the power that the his caste-Hindu elite enjoyed. “*It was a frontal attack on Brahminical Hinduism.*” S. Kapur, ‘Gandhi And Hindutva: Two Conflicting Visions Of Swaraj’, in A. J. Parel, (ed.), *Gandhi, Freedom And Self-Rule*, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2000, p. 121, (emphasis mine).

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin, said: "All [of Gandhi's] experiments were at the expenses [*sic*] of the Hindus."<sup>335</sup> Gandhi had "failed in his duty as the Father of Nation;" he was "the Father of Pakistan," Godse concluded.<sup>336</sup> Viewed thus, Gandhi stood in the way of the true glory and greatness of India and the Hindus.<sup>337</sup>

Yet, "what is most remarkable," Dalton says, "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." He however contends that although Gandhi asserted that in the perfect social order, all men would be 'Harijans', Gandhi's re-interpretation of *varnashram-dharma* retained an element of orthodoxy in it. Dalton maintains that Gandhi never converted his view of the hereditary nature of *varna*, that he explained it as "following on the part of all of us all the hereditary traditional calling of our forefathers, in so far as the traditional calling is not inconsistent with the fundamental, and this only for the purpose of earning one's livelihood'." Dalton thus concludes that such an egalitarian society that Gandhi strove to create, "in which no one was oppressed or driven to envy by the privileged status of another, would foster a co-operative spirit[,]""<sup>338</sup> and since "no energy would be wasted in a competitive spirit of material gain[,] it would be turned instead into some form of social service."<sup>339</sup>

## [9]

Gandhi's critics have argued that when he was carrying out his campaigns against untouchability, he was not attacking the caste system. It is not generally known that Gandhi moved to this position in the mid-1940s. It is also generally understood that while Gandhi opposed untouchability and criticised caste, he defended '*varna-vyavastha*', the four-fold *varna* order. This understanding does not explain an important Gandhian trajectory on the issue. For example, Gandhi's own critique of the *varna* order, which unfurled over time, is usually overlooked by his critics. In this context, a crucial breakaway in Gandhian historiography of caste and

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<sup>335</sup> V. D. Savarkar, *The War Of Independence Of 1857*, Bombay, Pheonix, 1947, p. x.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>337</sup> S. Kapur, 'Gandhi And Hindutva', p. 121.

<sup>338</sup> Dalton, 'Caste After Gandhi', p. 175.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

*varnashram-dharma* comes from Anil Nauriya.<sup>340</sup> His writings establish a new interpretation of Gandhi's treatment of the question of caste and *varnashram-dharma*.

Nauriya argues that Gandhi's unfolding critique of the four-fold order has often been overlooked by scholars, especially by contemporary scholars, partly because of the traditionalist nature of the concepts with which Gandhi dealt. Nauriya says that "Gandhi incrementally unfurled a critique of the four-fold *varna* order ... to [a] vanishing point" by the mid-1940s. Even in the early years, when he defended the four-fold order, Gandhi said that it was not observed in his own circle: "In the *ashram* ..., from the beginning, it has been our rule not to observe the *varna-vyavastha* because the position of the ashram is different from that of the society outside." Contrary to Dalton's understandings that Gandhi never converted "his view of the hereditary nature of *varna*," Nauriya says that as early as 1927, Gandhi had declared that "if *varnashrama* goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear."<sup>341</sup>

Gandhi also did not rule out a later struggle against the four-fold *varna* order. However, "at the present moment," Gandhi emphasised that "it is the 'Untouchable', the outcaste, with whom all Hindu reformers, whether they believe in *varnashrama* or not, have agreed to deal with. The opposition to untouchability is common to both. Therefore, the present joint fight is restricted to the removal of untouchability .... It is highly likely that at the end of it we shall all find that there is nothing to fight against in *varnashrama*. If, however, *varnashrama* even then looks an ugly thing, the whole of Hindu society will fight it .... At the end of the chapter, I hope that we shall all find ourselves in the same camp. Should it prove otherwise, it will be time enough to consider how and by whom *varnashrama* is to be fought."<sup>342</sup> These are quotations from Gandhi's writings of 1927 and 1933 in *Young India* and *Harijan*, respectively, which Gandhi's critics cannot afford to ignore. This invalidates their charge of Gandhi being haughty about the *varna* system. Many other proofs, equally conclusive, can be adduced to show that Gandhi always stood for the complete removal of the bar against the Untouchables.

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<sup>340</sup> A. Nauriya, 'Gandhi's Little Known Critique Of Varna', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 19, (May 13-19, 2006), pp. 1835-38.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1835.

<sup>342</sup> *Harijan*, 11th February 1933.

According to Nauriya, Gandhi's first salvo attack on the concept of *varna* came in 1933 and, though he did not repudiate birth as a criterion for *varna*, it nevertheless took away the conclusive element attached to birth. In that year, Gandhi declared "on the basis of some authoritative texts that *varna* could not be perpetuated or determined merely by birth," and urged that "these and numerous verses from the *shastras* unmistakably show that mere birth counts for nothing."<sup>343</sup> Nauriya thus rightly emphasises that "it is inaccurate and erroneous to say that Gandhi defended the four-fold *varna* order or *varna-vyavastha*"<sup>344</sup> after the 1930s. Further, in 1934, Gandhi said that "he could not accept [that] there should be a single human being considered lower than myself," and in 1935, he described "the restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining imposed in relation to the *varna* system as 'cruel'." "These are clearly *not* the words," Nauriya states, "of one who is smug about the *varna* system."<sup>345</sup>

In 1945, in a new foreword to an older Gujarati language compilation of articles on the subject, Gandhi invited the reader "to discard anything in this book which may appear to him incompatible" with his latest formulations. Discarding his previous formulations, including on hereditary occupations, Gandhi wrote: "There prevails only one *varna* today, that is, of *Shudras*, or you may call it, *Ati- 'Shudras'*, or 'Harijans' or Untouchables. I have no doubt about the truth of what I say. If I can bring around the Hindu society to my view, all our internal quarrels will come to an end." Gandhi's position against the four-fold *varna* order became more emphatic and close to Ambedkar's, says Nauriya, as he in reversal of his earlier understanding that untouchability could be fought separately from caste and the four-fold *varna* order, claimed that "castes must go if we want to root out untouchability."<sup>346</sup> He added that "it was better for Untouchables to fight against high-caste *Savarnas* than to live as wretched slaves," validating, implicitly, Ambedkar's alternative. More significantly, Gandhi said, "[if] this kind of untouchability were an integral part of *Sanatan Dharma*, that religion has no use for me."<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Nauriya, 'Critique Of Varna', p. 1835.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1836.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> Sarkar, 'Social Relations', p. 183.



Meanwhile, persistent with the one *varna* idea, the notion of repudiating one's *varna* entered Gandhi's mind. He said that "I myself have become a 'Harijan' by choice ...,"<sup>348</sup> and also urged "the Hindus to become *Ati-Shudras* not merely in name but in thought, word and deed,"<sup>349</sup> "if the canker of caste feeling is to be eradicated from Hinduism and Hinduism is not to perish from the face of the earth." He also said, "if the caste-Hindus would become *Bhangis* of their own free will, the distinction between 'Harijans' and caste-Hindus would automatically disappear."<sup>350</sup> Speaking in July 1946, he encouraged marriages between 'Harijans' and others. Nauriya thus states that by 1945-46, Gandhi had denuded the conceptual category of *varna*, as implied in the *Gita*, both of its sociological implication and of its original connotation of fixed classes of humanity determined by birth and distinguished by four categories of occupations.

Nauriya argues that Gandhi's penultimate blows to the *varna* concept were delivered in February 1947. Saying that caste must go if Hinduism is to survive, Gandhi went on to say that "there was room for *varna*, as a duty." On the same occasion, Gandhi also laid to rest the idea of hereditary occupations which was the essence of the four-fold *varna* order. Nauriya writes that when asked whether Gandhi favoured inter-caste marriages and whether the monopoly of occupations of specific castes should be abolished, he reiterated his long-standing position in favour of inter-caste marriages and proceeded to say: "The question did not arise when all became casteless. When this happy event took place, monopoly of occupations would go."<sup>351</sup>

Nauriya closes his discussion by saying that "Gandhi was conscious of the vital need to take society with him, for merely taking an advanced position without having an impact on society held *no* attraction for him."<sup>352</sup> Gandhi had told a questioner: "It is one thing for me to hold certain views and quite another to make my views acceptable in their entirety to society at large. My mind, I hope, is ever growing, ever moving forward. All may not keep pace with it. I have therefore to exercise utmost patience and be satisfied with hastening slowly." Nauriya says that

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<sup>348</sup> Nauriya, 'Critique Of Varna', p. 1837.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1836-37.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1837.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

Gandhi's approach and method were well understood by the famous atheist, G. Ramachandra Rao, 'Gora'. Gora has written: "When [Gandhi] first undertook to remove untouchability, the problem of *varna-dharma* was also there. It was easy to see intellectually, even then, that caste ought to go root and branch if untouchability was to be completely eradicated. But as a practical proposition, caste was not the immediate problem then. The problem was only the removal of untouchability. So he allowed caste to continue, though personally he observed no caste even then. Thus the work of the removal of untouchability progressed through the early stage, leaving the contradictions of the caste system untouched, and, therefore, without the complication of opposition from those who would resist the abolition of caste. When the stage had come where he found caste was a serious hindrance for further progress, [Gandhi] said that caste ought to go root and branch and proposed not only inter-dining but inter-marriages as the means. A mere intellectual might read inconsistency in [Gandhi's] tolerance of caste earlier and his denunciation of it later. But to a practical man of non-violent creed these are stages of progress and not principles of contradiction."<sup>353</sup>

### [10]

Scholars of Gandhian thought differ widely in their interpretation of Gandhian solution to the problem of caste and untouchability. The sympathetic critics consider Gandhi's espousal of the cause of the depressed as noble but ineffectual and impractical way of organising Hindu social orders. The hostile critics question his sincerity in the matter, accuse him of defending the *status quo* and appeasing the Hindu orthodoxy. They charge him of derailing the development of humanistic values by making a subtle distinction between original *varna* system and its present-day caste variations, and point out the persisting grip of the tradition over, and find in his arguments not only ambivalence and inconsistencies but also articulation of the ideas expressed earlier by reformers like Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekananda. All these cumulate into an imposing body of grievances. On the other hand, his sympathetic interpreters account his deference to orthodoxy in the initial phase to the weight of reality, which compelled him to move about cautiously while assessing the

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<sup>353</sup> G. R. Rao (Gora), *An Atheist With Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1951, p. 57, quoted in *ibid.*

alignments in India; it was a tactical move and not lack of radical ideals. They subscribe to the view that Gandhi gradually moved from earlier conservative stance to liberal and even revolutionary positions subsequently.

The interpretation, which emphasises the evolutionary nature of Gandhi's stand, is a viable line of enquiry. It is, therefore, possible to analyse Gandhi's ideas on caste in historical perspective.<sup>354</sup> It is relevant to point out that most of Gandhi's critics, past and present, have been inspired by humanistic and rational traditions of the West. The critics are convinced that both the ideal *varna* system and the not so-ideal caste system tended to perpetuate inequality in Hindu social system. They have tried to provide a secular, rational, scientific, humanistic set of values by attacking the traditional set of values of Hindu society. The influence of Gandhi, in their opinion, has stunted the growth towards the desired utopia. The Kannada critic D. R. Nagaraj once noted that in the narrative of Indian nationalism, the "heroic stature of the caste-Hindu reformer," Gandhi, "further dwarfed the 'Harijan' personality" of Ambedkar. In the Ramayana there is only one hero but, as Nagaraj points out, Ambedkar was too proud, intelligent and self-respecting a man to settle for the role of Hanuman or Sugreeva. Ramachandra Guha argues that by the same token, Dalit hagiographers and pamphleteers generally seek to elevate Ambedkar by diminishing Gandhi. For the scriptwriter and the mythmaker there can only be one hero. "But," emphasises Guha, "the historian is bound by no such constraint."<sup>355</sup> "To criticise Gandhi," laments Gopal Guru, "has not only become customary for some Ambedkarites, but has been treated as the only premise to establish Ambedkar as the pre-eminent thinker." But the rejection of Gandhi, to Guru, "as an anti-Dalit thinker by Ambedkar's adherents is unreflective; finding faults with Gandhi (dismissive criticism) without a reflexive acknowledgement of that which is affirmative in Ambedkar's reading of Gandhi (redemptive and enabling critique)."<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Dennis Dalton emphasises that "the distinctive qualities of [Gandhi's] ideas [must be] explained by their historical context, the colonial situation of British Indian." D. Dalton, 'Gandhi On Freedom, Rights And Responsibility', *International Seminar On Gandhi And The Twenty First Century* (30th January - 4th February 1998) New Delhi-Wardha, (<http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/freedom.htm>).

<sup>355</sup> Guha, 'Gandhi's Ambedkar', p. 100.

<sup>356</sup> G. Guru, 'Ethics In Ambedkar's Critique Of Gandhi', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 15, 15 Apr., 2017, p. 95.

There is a point in the criticism that Gandhi learned heavily on the ideas earlier expressed by stalwarts like Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and others. However, such criticism overlooks the point of ‘style’ and ‘charisma’, which clearly distinguished Gandhi from his predecessors. Those who dismiss Gandhi’s insistence on going back to the imagined pure state of Hindu society, viz., the *chaturvarna* scheme, without giving an adequate programme as to how he intended to achieve it, also question the very basis of his being. The critics overlook the practical idealist in Gandhi who realised that in a tradition-bound society man was an unconscious prisoner of his ecology and would not readily succumb to conscious efforts at manipulating change. Therefore, he advocated, not violence, nor governmental intervention, but relied on change of heart of the higher castes through persuasion and appeal to his conscience. Gandhi said: “Our motto must ever be conversion by gentle persuasion and a constant appeal to the head and the heart. We must therefore be ever courteous and patient with those who do not see eye to eye with us.”<sup>357</sup> The goal of converting an opponent’s views entailed, in Gandhi’s opinion, a preparedness to suffer deprivation, imprisonment and even death: “Suffering is the law of human beings ...; [it] is infinitely more powerful ... for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the *voice of reason*.”<sup>358</sup> Gandhi believed that the suffering a *satyāgrahi* would voluntarily undergo to convert an opponent was consistent with the pursuit of “truth,” and was certain to “melt the hearts of even the most implacable of opponents:” “The *satyāgrahi*’s course is plain .... He must know that his suffering will melt the stoniest heart of the stoniest fanatic.”<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> *Selected Works Of Gandhi*, p. 202. Gandhi refers to three pre-requisites for *satyagraha*: non-cooperation, tolerance and suffering. *Young India*, 8th January 1925.

<sup>358</sup> *Young India*, 5th November 1931.

<sup>359</sup> *Young India*, 4th June 1925.

## Gandhi and the Abolition of Untouchability A Reappraisal

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*“Well, that is the seductive charm of history; she convinces one that a partial view is the total view[,] and drives the passionate to act. Here lies, precisely, the liberatory potential of history. One who waits for the total view[,] will never act[,] nor even take a plunge into history.”*<sup>1</sup> – Doddaballapur Ramaiah Nagaraj

### [1]

What we call the “caste system” today is known in Hinduism’s founding texts as *varnashram-dharma* or *chaturvarna*, the system of four *varnas*. The endogamous castes and sub-castes (*jatis*) in Hindu society, each with its own specified hereditary occupation, are divided into four *varnas* – *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (servants). Outside these four *varnas* are the *avarna* castes, the *Ati-Shudras*, sub-humans, arranged in hierarchies of their own – the Untouchables, the unseeables, the unapproachables – whose presence, whose touch, whose very shadow is considered to be polluting by the *savarna* Hindus. The word “Untouchable” refers to the aspect of Hinduism known as “pollution.”<sup>2</sup> Coming into physical contact with the Untouchables, who numbered

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<sup>1</sup> D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet And Other Essays: The Dalit Movement In India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2014, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> A. M. Shah argues that “ideas of purity/impurity [in other words, the practice of untouchability] were present all over Hindu society for centuries: In domestic as well as public life, in exchange of food and water, in practising occupations, in kinship and marriage, in religious action and belief, in temples and monasteries, and in a myriad different contexts and situations. These ideas played a crucial role in separating one caste from another, and in arranging them in a hierarchy, that is to say, in ordering the basic structure of the society.” Thus, Shah aptly puts it: “The Hindu civilisation is sometimes called a civilisation of purity and pollution, and the Hindu psyche is believed to be pathologically obsessed with them.” A. M. Shah, ‘Purity, Impurity, Untouchability: Then And Now’, *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September-December 2007), p. 355-56.

between forty and sixty million individuals in 1940, polluted a Hindu of a higher rank.<sup>3</sup>

Traditionally forced to live in segregated settlements, the Untouchables were not allowed to use the public roads that privileged castes used, they were not allowed to drink from common wells, they were not allowed into Hindu temples, they were not allowed into privileged-caste schools, they were not permitted to cover their upper bodies, and they were only allowed to wear certain kinds of clothes and certain kinds of jewellery. As if the *dharma* of *varnashram* was not enough, there is also the burden of *karma*. Those born into the subordinated castes are supposedly being punished for the bad deeds they have done in their past lives. In effect, they are living out a prison sentence. Acts of insubordination could lead to an enhanced sentence, which would mean another cycle of rebirth as an Untouchable or as a *Shudra*. This chapter attempts to examine Gandhi's practices with regard to different caste restrictions and associated religious ritual obligations to obtain a better understanding of his views on caste and related issues. It explores Gandhi's own personal practices related to caste restrictions and religious obligations. It also explores how community life was organised in Gandhi's *ashrams*.

## [2]

Gandhi had overcome caste prejudices from a very young age. Though “the Gandhis [belonged] to the *Bania* caste and seem to have been originally grocers”<sup>4</sup> – a ritual mediocrity in caste status – Gandhi in his early life showed a remarkable irreverence for caste orthodoxy. His boyhood training and recollection of untouchability had left a deep impression on his mind. Gandhi, at a conference in Ahmedabad on 13th April 1921, narrated an incident from his childhood that he “was hardly twelve when [the] idea” that “untouchability [was] the greatest blot on Hinduism” “had dawned upon [him].” He recounts that a scavenger named Uka, an Untouchable, used to attend their house for cleaning latrines. He often asked his

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<sup>3</sup> P. Kolenda, *Caste, Cult And Hierarchy*, New Delhi, Hans Raj Gupta & Sons, 1981, pp. 22-23; B. R. Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi And The Emancipation Of The Untouchables*, New Delhi, Critical Quest, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography Or The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Trust, 1927, (Reprint 2011), p. 3.

mother “why was it wrong to touch Uka and why was he forbidden to touch him.” He was asked to perform ablutions if he accidentally touched Uka, and though he obeyed, it was not without protesting that “untouchability was not sanctioned by religion, that it was impossible that it should be so.” He told his mother that “she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.” Referring to this story, Pyarelal Nayar, Gandhi’s personal secretary and biographer, writes that this event planted in Gandhi’s soul a seed of rebellion against the institution of untouchability.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Gandhi recalled that while at school he would often happen to touch Untouchables. As he never would conceal the fact from his parents, Gandhi “... simply out of reverence and regard for [his] mother ...” followed his mother’s advice “... to purification after the unholy touch, ... to cancel the touch by touching any Mussalman passing by, ... but never did so believing it to be a religious obligation ....” How, Gandhi recalled thinking as a child when readings of epics were occasions for family gatherings, “can the *Ramayana* in which one who is regarded nowadays as an Untouchable took Rama across the Ganges in his boat, countenance the idea of any human beings being ‘Untouchables’ on the ground that they were polluted souls?”<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi, who at the age of twelve years opposed the doctrine of untouchability, also opposed other codes of the caste system at a very early age. His autobiography tells us that during his time, his caste was prohibited from travelling abroad. At eighteen, Gandhi got into trouble with his *Modh Bania* caste council when he defied it to go abroad. In September 1888, Gandhi decided to sail to England to study law. This horrified his orthodox *Modh Bania* community, whose head warned Gandhi that he would be excommunicated if he travelled overseas. In the days before his departure, recalled Gandhi in his autobiography, he was “hemmed in by all sides. I could not go out without being pointed and stared at by someone or other. At one time, while I was walking near the Town Hall, I was surrounded and hooted by them, and my poor brother had to look at the scene in silence.”<sup>7</sup> Gandhi still sailed for England to study

<sup>5</sup> P. Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Early Phase*, Vol. 1, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1965, p. 217.

<sup>6</sup> *Young India*, 27th April 1921 & 4th May 1921; ‘Speech At Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad’, 13th April 1921, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 19, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, pp. 569-75. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in R. Guha, ‘Does Gandhi Have A Caste?’, *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

law. He was outcasted, and he refused to perform penance.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's family belonged to the *Vaishnava* sect of Hinduism, and in his childhood, he had worn the *shikha* and the *tulasi-kanthi* (necklace of *tulasi* beads) that were considered obligatory. Gandhi writes: "On the eve of my going to England, however, I got rid of the *shikha*." He also gave up his sacred thread – *upavita*. He also says, "I got my cousin Chhaganlal Gandhi, who was religiously wearing the *shikha*, to do away with it."<sup>9</sup> While in South Africa, he also gave up his *tulasi-kanthi*.<sup>10</sup>

Defiance sharpened in South Africa where Gandhi worked closely with low-caste coolies and invited Untouchable colleagues to live on his farms. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes that "in South Africa Untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me."<sup>11</sup> He did 'unclean' work himself and forced it on his family, and he accepted Untouchables in his social and domestic circles on equal terms. He made his family and associates break pollution taboos and engage in labour that was considered very profoundly polluted: Shoemaking, leatherwork, cleaning of toilets. In fact, cleaning toilets – work profoundly polluting to caste-Hindus – persisted all his life.<sup>12</sup> In South Africa, Gandhi and his wife Kasturba shared a home and kitchen with Henry, a Jew, and Millie Polak, a Christian, both White. Johannesburg was then the most racist city in the most racist country in the world. By their remarkable act, "the Gandhis and the Polaks defied both the casteism of the Indians and the racism of the Europeans."<sup>13</sup>

While engaged in plague relief work at Rajkot (India) in 1896, "the committee," Gandhi writes in his autobiography, "had to inspect the Untouchables' quarters also." Only one member was willing to accompany Gandhi to the Untouchables' homes. "To the rest it was something preposterous to visit those

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<sup>8</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> N. Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'? Reflections On His Practices', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 13, 01 Apr., 2017, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 360.

<sup>12</sup> T. Sarkar, 'Gandhi And Social Relations', in J. M. Brown & A. Parel, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion To Gandhi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Guha, 'Does Gandhi Have A Caste?', *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.



quarters.”<sup>14</sup> He candidly observed that the latrines of the caste-Hindus were indescribably filthy, while those of the Untouchables were a pleasant surprise, being spotlessly clean.<sup>15</sup> Another story, which brings to light Gandhi’s attitude towards the practice of untouchability, is contained in his autobiography. In Durban, South Africa, an Untouchable Christian clerk stayed in Gandhi’s house as a guest. When he commanded his wife to clean his chamber pot and she refused, Gandhi, in a fit of rage, almost turned her out of the house. Gandhi recalls “her chiding me, her eyes red with anger, and pearl drops streaming down her cheeks, as she descended the ladder, pot in hand.” Gandhi shouted against her anger, she shouted back, and Gandhi dragged Kasturba to the gate “with the intention of pushing her out,” when Kasturba uttered some home-truths and a “really ashamed” Gandhi shut the gate.<sup>16</sup> This incident, which took place in 1897<sup>17</sup> or 1898,<sup>18</sup> “is proof above all,” not only “of Gandhi’s temper and coerciveness on the occasion ...,” but also of his “opposition to untouchability ....”<sup>19</sup>

A different kind of untouchability related to menses is generally practised among many Hindu orthodox communities. Here, women are treated as Untouchable during their periods. During this time, they are not allowed to enter places of worship or even the kitchen. Also, their touch is considered to be polluting. In one of his letters to Mirabhen, Gandhi described his views on these practices: “I think I told you that so far as I am concerned, I never respected the rule even with reference to Ba herself. And when I began to see things clearer, I never felt the call to have the rule observed.”<sup>20</sup> Several of his letters to different persons show that he did not practise this kind of menstruation-related untouchability with other women either.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> If we go by Gandhi’s letter to C. F. Andrews, dated 29th January 1921, where Gandhi wrote to Andrews that “[it] was in 1897 that I was prepared in Durban to turn Mrs. Gandhi away from the house because she would not treat on a footing of equality[,] Lawrence who she knew belonged to the pariah class and whom I had invited to stay with me ....” *CWMG*, Vol. 19, pp. 288-90.

<sup>18</sup> If we go by Gandhi’s autobiography; Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 285-87.

<sup>19</sup> R. Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A Portrait Of Gandhi*, New Delhi, Viking, 1995, p. 231.

<sup>20</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 34, p. 401.

<sup>21</sup> Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 43.

From his South African days, Gandhi also learnt to couple untouchability with racism. In 1894, a Pretoria barber had refused to shave him there, fearing he would lose his White clients. Gandhi understood. He quenched his resentment by remembering that “we do not allow our barbers to serve our Untouchable brethren.” He was “rewarded” in South Africa, he writes in his autobiography, “not once but many times, and the conviction that it was the punishment for our own sins saved me from becoming angry.”<sup>22</sup> Gandhi repeated this after the Jalianwalla Bagh massacres. “Has not Nemesis overtaken us for the crime of untouchability? ... Have we not practiced Dyerism and O’Dwyerism on our own kith and kin? ... In fact, there is no charge that the ‘pariah’ cannot fling in our own faces which we do not fling in the face of Englishmen.”<sup>23</sup> Racism and untouchability are made equivalents, the inhumanity of one matching the other.<sup>24</sup> To Gopal Guru, this also reflects “truthfulness” in Gandhi,<sup>25</sup> as he had “[the] moral capacity to become humble in front of the experience of [the Untouchables].”<sup>26</sup> Both these virtues have been well described by Joseph Lelyveld, who quotes Gandhi as saying, “[Untouchables have] a right even to spit upon me, ... and I would keep on smiling if they did so.” Lelyveld asserts that “this resolutely smiling face was not a mask but a measure of the man.”<sup>27</sup>

There was no element of compromise in Gandhi’s attitude towards untouchability. In South Africa, he wrote in *Indian Opinion* in 1905 that in his eyes

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<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> *Young India*, 19th January 1921, cited in V. Geetha, (ed.), *Soul Force: Gandhi’s Writings On Peace*, Chennai, Tara Publishing, 2004, pp. 253-54.

<sup>24</sup> On another occasion, Gandhi suggested, for example, that “even the slavery of the Negroes is better than this [untouchability].” ‘A Stain On India’s Forehead’, After 5th November 1917, *CWMG*, Vol. 16, p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> According to Iyer, truthfulness is internal to Gandhian ethics, and embodied in confession. Such confession, in the Gandhian sense, would demand the declaration of one’s deception to those who one has deceived. (R. N. Iyer, *The Moral And Political Thought Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 201) Truthfulness in Gandhi has another meaning, which suggests restraining one’s emotions is being truthful (Iyer, *Moral And Political Thought*, p. 203).

<sup>26</sup> G. Guru, ‘Ethics In Ambedkar’s Critique Of Gandhi’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 15, 15 Apr., 2017, p. 99.

<sup>27</sup> J. Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India*, New Delhi, HarperCollins India, 2011, p. 204.

there was no distinction between *Brahmins* and Untouchables.<sup>28</sup> Two years later in 1907, he cautioned, in a letter to Chhaganlal Gandhi, "... not [to] allow the useless and wicked superstitions about untouchability to come in [his] way."<sup>29</sup> When satyagraha sent many Indians to prison, he rebuked as cowards those prisoners who refused to eat food touched by Untouchables or to sleep near them.<sup>30</sup> And he warned a Tamil meeting against reproducing in South Africa the strong caste divisions of their Madras province.<sup>31</sup> Work among South Africa's indentured and ex-indentured Indians, often of low or Untouchable caste, revealed, and shaped his outlook on caste and untouchability.

Defiance continued in India. The Satyagraha Ashram that Gandhi established in Ahmedabad in 1915, within months of his return from South Africa, had the abolition of untouchability as one of its aims. Contrary to Tanika Sarkar's assertion that while pollution taboos had not been tolerated at all in his South African farms, compromises began to appear in Indian *ashrams* where non-observance of pollution taboos was voluntary, as he sought to persuade the orthodoxy,<sup>32</sup> *ashramites* were *required* to take a vow against it. Gandhi "made discarding of untouchability one of the eleven vows, which every inmate had to take before he could be admitted to the *ashram* established by him at Ahmedabad in 1915."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Gandhi averred that "if it were proved to me that this is an essential part of Hinduism, I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself ...."<sup>34</sup> At Tagore's Shantiniketan school, Gandhi taught students to clean latrines. At annual Congress<sup>35</sup> sessions, where caste segregation appalled him, he did it again.<sup>36</sup> He told a *sadhu* that he would no longer wear the sacred thread: "[That] right can come only after Hinduism has purged itself of untouchability."<sup>37</sup> He began to pay for his defiance. When an Untouchable

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<sup>28</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 4, p. 430.

<sup>29</sup> 'Letter To Chhaganlal Gandhi', 21st April 1907, *CWMG*, Vol. 6, p. 435.

<sup>30</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 9, p. 181.

<sup>31</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 12, p. 495.

<sup>32</sup> Sarkar, 'Social Relations', p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> T. Nath, *Politics Of The Depressed Classes*, Delhi, Deputy Publications, 1987, p. 237.

<sup>34</sup> 'Speech By Gandhi', 3rd May 1915, *CWMG*, Vol. 13, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup> The Indian National Congress founded in 1885, is also referred to as the 'Congress' in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 206 & 357.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

family joined his *ashram* at Ahmedabad,<sup>38</sup> there were rumours of a citywide social boycott.<sup>39</sup> Money ceased to come to the *ashram*. Gandhi resolved to relocate the *ashram* at Untouchable quarters.<sup>40</sup> But the tide turned. Ambalal Sarabhai appeared quietly and gave ₹ 13,000 and the Untouchable family, showing considerable patience and forbearance, found growing acceptance from inmates and visitors.<sup>41</sup> The incident, wrote Gandhi, enabled him “to demonstrate the efficiency of passive resistance in social questions, and when [he would] take the final step, it [would] embrace *Swaraj* ....”<sup>42</sup> He thus redefined the *Brahmin* as impure, in need of self-purification because of his sinful adherence to purity pollution taboos. He inverted the conventional meanings of pure-impure, of sin and penance.

On 16th February 1916, a year after returning to India, this is what Gandhi said about untouchability in a public speech in Madras. “Every affliction that we labour under in this sacred land is a fit and proper punishment for this great and indelible crime that we are committing.”<sup>43</sup> The following year, he presided over the Gujarati Political Conference and a parallel Social Conference, where at Gandhi’s suggestion, a number of Untouchables had gathered along with caste-Hindus. Gandhi said: “Do not suppose that [the Dhed community] belongs to a lower status; let the fusion take place between you [caste-Hindus] and that community, and then you will be fit for *Swaraj* ....”<sup>44</sup> Gandhi here speaks as a caste-Hindu, and to caste-Hindus, though fully aware of the Untouchables present, and asks the caste-Hindus to initiate the fusion.

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<sup>38</sup> Early on, the *ashram* took in a family from the Dhed caste of “Untouchables,” consisting of Dudhabhai, his wife Danibehn, and their baby daughter Lakshmi. Guha, ‘Does Gandhi Have A Caste?’, *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to know that when Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, he brought with him an “Untouchable” boy name Naiker. Kolge, ‘Was Gandhi A ‘Champion Of The Caste System’?’, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 365.

<sup>41</sup> The Dhed family was prevented from drawing water from the common well, until Gandhi said, in that case, he would not avail himself of the well either. Guha, ‘Does Gandhi Have A Caste?’, *The Indian Express*, 13th June 2017.

<sup>42</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 13, pp. 127-28.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232-33.

<sup>44</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 14, pp. 71-72.

Gandhi's attitude was also revealed in Bijapur in 1918 where, at an Untouchables' Conference, he was asked to move a resolution asking Britain to accept the Congress-League political demands. Twice Gandhi asked if any Untouchables were present. Finding there were none, he refused to move the resolution. Gandhi said that the caste-Hindu well-wishers of Untouchables had no right to speak for them. "He who demands *Swaraj* must give *Swaraj* to others," he said, adding: "I would ask you to give up all this play-acting ...."<sup>45</sup> On another occasion, when an upper caste "Gandhian" invited him to address a public meeting held on the question of untouchability, Gandhi refused to speak from the stage. This was a protest against the local committee's act of segregating and marginalising the Untouchables at the meeting. He suggested a show of hands on his contention in favour of the inclusion of Untouchables in the main meeting space. However, the majority went against his proposal. Accepting the verdict of the upper castes, Gandhi joined the Untouchables and addressed them only.<sup>46</sup> Before the year 1920 ended, Gandhi ensured that the removal of untouchability was made an integral part of the political programme of the Congress. This had not happened until then. After the Non-Cooperation Movement for *Swaraj* was launched in 1920, and national schools were opened, Gandhi's orthodox foes in Gujarat attacked him in violent language because he refused to bar Untouchables from these schools. Through the press, in letters, and via a whispering campaign, these men warned Gandhi that unless Untouchables were excluded, they would support the Raj and kill the *Swaraj* movement. Gandhi however expressed confidence that "God will vouchsafe [him] the strength to reject *Swaraj*, which may be won by abandoning the [Untouchables]."<sup>47</sup>

Gandhi, at the height of his first Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921, spoke of his childhood in Gujarat. "After some time we shifted to Porbandar, where I made my first acquaintance with Sanskrit. I was not yet put into an English school, and my brother and I were placed in charge of a *Brahmin* who taught us *Ramaraksha* and *Vishnu Puja*. ... Now it happened that I was very timid then, and would conjure up ghosts and goblins whenever the lights went out, and it was dark. The old mother, to

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 386-87.

<sup>46</sup> D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life Of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol 2, Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1951, p. 209.

<sup>47</sup> *Navajivan*, 5th December 1920, *CWMG*, Vol. 19, p. 73.

disabuse me of fears, suggested that I should mutter the texts whenever I was afraid, and all evil spirits would fly away. ... I could never believe then that there was any text in the *Ramaraksha* pointing to the conduct of the “Untouchables” as a sin. I did not understand its meaning then, or understood it very imperfectly. But I was confident that *Ramaraksha*, which could destroy all fear of ghosts, could not be countenancing any such thing as fear of contact with the “Untouchables.” ... I claim to have understood the spirit of Hinduism. Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability.”<sup>48</sup> A few days earlier too, Gandhi had claimed, in as many words, “to have understood the spirit of Hinduism, and I hope to die for the defense of my religion at any moment but I should cease to call myself a Hindu if I believe for one moment that Hinduism requires me to consider it a sin to touch a single human being.”<sup>49</sup>

During this period, Gandhi also supported the use of satyagraha by the Untouchables against the caste-Hindus. In 1924, at the town of Vaikom, Travancore (Kerala), Gandhi backed an Untouchable satyagraha against a denial of the use of public roads adjacent to a temple and *Brahmin* residences.<sup>50</sup> Gandhi personally went to Vaikom – the first time he took part in a satyagraha against untouchability. Gandhi debated with the orthodox *Brahmins* against their interpretation of scripture and managed to get the road past the temple opened to all, although Untouchables were not allowed to enter the temple until 1936. An active part was played in the satyagraha by E. V. Ramaswami Naicker, who spoke of the removal of untouchability as “the cornerstone of the Mahatma’s programme.”<sup>51</sup> In a 1925 speech to Depressed Classes Conference at Bombay, Ambedkar recounted the Vaikom Satyagraha events and expressed appreciation for Gandhi’s involvement – the first politician in India to

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<sup>48</sup> *Young India*, 27th April 1921 & 4th May 1921; ‘Speech At Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad’, 13th April 1921, *CWMG*, Vol. 19, p. 570.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Speech At Public Meeting, Madras’, 8th April 1921, *CWMG*, Vol. 19, p. 547; *The Hindu*, 9th April 1921.

<sup>50</sup> R. Gandhi, *Revenge And Reconciliation: Understanding South Asian History*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 246.

<sup>51</sup> T. K. Ravindran, *Vaikkam Satyagraha And Gandhi*, Trichur, Sri Narayan Institute of Social and Cultural Development, 1975, p. 89.

support the Untouchables' cause.<sup>52</sup> Ambedkar had also said at a Bahishkrut Parishad in Belgaum in 1925: "Where no one else comes close, the sympathy shown by Mahatma Gandhi is by no means a small thing."<sup>53</sup>

Untouchability was, thus, one of Gandhi's central concerns. In both his words and his actions, he did attack untouchability in ways that were radical for a caste-Hindu. Eleanor Zelliott states that Gandhi "is said to have spoken and written more on untouchability than on any other subject."<sup>54</sup> In all historical fairness, writes Nagaraj, "it must be admitted that it was [Gandhi] who made untouchability one of the crucial questions of Indian politics ...."<sup>55</sup> He publicly put the abolition of untouchability, along with Hindu-Muslim unity, as the essential prerequisite for India's true independence. But critics writing on Gandhi do not allow their readers to know anything contained in the preceding paragraphs regarding Gandhi's attitude to caste and untouchability. It is also a fact, however, and one that Ambedkar would justifiably underline, that the fight against untouchability did not gather adequate momentum in the 1920s. It did not because of the rigidity of Indian society, and also because Gandhi and his colleagues had other tough goals which they were striving to reach, including *Swaraj* and Hindu-Muslim unity.

Yet, one of the charges levelled against Gandhi is that he never had any such object before him, nor he wanted to, and in fact, he could not "prepare the Untouchables to win their freedom from their Hindu masters, to make them their social and political equals." The origins of this critique can also be located in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's 1945 publication, "*What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*"<sup>56</sup> that contains a strong attack on Gandhi and on the Congress

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<sup>52</sup> For these events, see the recounting of E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit: Essays On The Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1992, pp. 160-63.

<sup>53</sup> G. Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar And The Dalit Movement In Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 151-52.

<sup>54</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 24. Sumit Sarkar also writes that Gandhi deserves all credit for bringing the issue of the removal of untouchability to the forefront of national politics for the very first time. S. Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, Delhi, Macmillan, 1983, p. 209.

<sup>56</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings And Speeches*, (ed., V. Moon), Vol. 9, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BAWS*, followed by volume and page(s).

movement led by him. “It is ironic,” writes Martin Deming Lewis in “*Gandhi: Maker Of Modern India?*,” despite the fact that “no aspect of Gandhi’s activities for social reform has been so widely acclaimed as his efforts on behalf of the Untouchables, ... one of his most bitter critics should have been a man who was himself an Untouchable, B. R. Ambedkar.”<sup>57</sup>

Ambedkar’s framework is in turn used by later critics to understand Gandhi’s conception of caste, and to make his caste reform programmes appear different and threatening. The noted writer and activist, Arundhati Roy, on reading Ambedkar’s “*Annihilation Of Caste*” remarked, “[when] I first read it, I felt as though somebody had walked into a dim room and opened the windows.”<sup>58</sup> And similar is the experience of other Dalit hagiographers and pamphleteers. The point being made is that the way the later critics look at Gandhi’s treatment of the question of caste and untouchability, is through the lens called *What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*. There is a kind of repertory of images that keep coming up in their writings, and this is really quite consistent with Ambedkar’s work. This interpretation is a product of the mental state that believed in the firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problem of Untouchables, and this has shaped the contours of themes and patterns of the critics of Gandhi. Therefore, the best way to begin is by a critical invocation of Ambedkar’s work.

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Writings of Ambedkar create the impression that Gandhi never had any such object before him, nor he wanted to, and in fact, he could not, Ambedkar writes, “prepare the Untouchables to win their freedom from their Hindu masters, to make them their social and political equals.” He wanted “Untouchables to remain as Hindus ...[,] not as partners but as poor relations of the Hindus.”<sup>59</sup> The Harijan Sevak Sangh, which Gandhi said was for the uplift of the Untouchables, is held by Ambedkar, to be

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<sup>57</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, ‘What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables’, in M. D. Lewis, (ed.), *Gandhi: Maker Of Modern India?*, Boston, D. C. Heath and Company, 1965, p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> A. Roy, ‘The Doctor And The Saint’, in B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, (ed., & annotated by S. Anand), New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 431.



political charity, intended to bring Untouchables into the Congress camp,<sup>60</sup> thereby “buying, benumbing and drawing the laws of the opposition of the Untouchables, which [was] the only force which would disrupt the caste system and would establish real democracy in India.”<sup>61</sup> Ambedkar’s assessment of Gandhi’s anti-untouchability campaign was that “after a short spurt of activity in the direction of removing untouchability by throwing open temples and wells the Hindu mind returned to its original state.”<sup>62</sup>

Also, the temple-entry movements, Ambedkar states, were often concerned more for Congress political success than for the well-being of Untouchables.<sup>63</sup> He criticised Gandhi and the Congress for maintaining separate wells and separate schools for Untouchables. That policy revealed to Ambedkar that “the Congress was not out for the abolition of untouchability,” but was only trying “to undertake amelioration of the condition of the Untouchables.”<sup>64</sup> He also wrote that the Congress washed its hands off the problem of Untouchables by calling upon the Hindu Mahasabha to join in the programme for the eradication of untouchability. Gandhi’s repeated statement that if his fellow caste-Hindus, who have taken pledges for the removal of untouchability, fail to make good on their pledges, then he would “have no interest left in life,” is judged by Ambedkar to be an empty vow, which Gandhi gives up to preserve political power.<sup>65</sup> Gandhi wanted Hinduism and the Hindu caste system to remain intact, for his main object, Ambedkar contends, was “to make India safe for Hindus and Hinduism.”<sup>66</sup>

Ambedkar, therefore adds that “the Untouchables are to be eternal scavengers” and, at best “classed as *Shudras* instead of being classed as *Ati-Shudras*.”<sup>67</sup> “Barring this illusory campaign against untouchability,” wrote Ambedkar, “Gandhism is simply another form of *Sanatanism* which is the ancient name for militant orthodox

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-25.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

Hinduism.”<sup>68</sup> Untouchables must continue to beware of Gandhi (and the Congress) for their attitude is, writes Ambedkar, “let *Swaraj* perish if the cost of it is the political freedom of the Untouchables.”<sup>69</sup> In *Mr. Gandhi And The Emancipation Of The Untouchables*, Ambedkar states that Gandhi’s Quit India programme was “not” a war for freedom, equality, justice, or democracy, but was in fact a war for “power,”<sup>70</sup> for the Hindu middle class and capitalists. Gandhi, like every Hindu, was for Ambedkar, “a social Tory and political Radical.” He concludes that Gandhi’s “liberalism is only a very thin veneer, which sits very lightly on him, as dust does on one’s boots.”<sup>71</sup>

In this context, Jaffrelot argues that since for Gandhi untouchability was essentially a Hindu religious issue, “... equality before God was in [Gandhi’s] eyes a priority,” even to the extent that “he would refrain from demanding social equality for Untouchables.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, “for [Gandhi] equality before God meant more than equality between men.”<sup>73</sup> This was evident, as Arundhati Roy argues, from the fact that Gandhi viewed Untouchables in need of missionary ministrations, and not political representation. “It was an antithetical, intimidating idea to Gandhi,” she asserts, to conceive “that [the Untouchables who] had been physiologically hardwired into the caste system ..., too, might need to be roused of thousands of years of being conditioned to think of themselves as sub-humans.”<sup>74</sup> Gandhi took a number of steps to ensure the missionary ministrations of the Untouchables. For a start, “he re-baptised [the] Untouchables and gave them a patronising name,” ‘Harijans’, which, according to Roy, “[infantilised] them even further,”<sup>75</sup> for it translated into “Children of God.” Wadia says that Gandhi, like other Indians, “was not above the *pathetic* faith in the power of words to overcome evils.” Gandhi’s belief that “by calling Untouchables

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 283-84.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.

<sup>72</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar And Untouchability: Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 61.

<sup>73</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise Of The Low Castes In North Indian Politics*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, pp. 129-30.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

‘Harijans’ ..., he would raise their status,” was naïve of Gandhi for “stony hearts cannot be changed by words ....”<sup>76</sup>

Also, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, argues Jaffrelot, “focused its activities on helping Untouchables in a ‘paternalistic’ manner,”<sup>77</sup> and took care, asserts Coward, “[not to] launch a civil rights movement for Untouchables, [or] to change the views of orthodox Hindus, but to ‘uplift’ or ‘civilise’ the unclean and immoral Untouchables.”<sup>78</sup> As Susan Bayly puts it, “the Untouchables were to be grateful to the caste-Hindu Gandhians of the Sevak Sangh on two counts: First, for having been made into clean, vegetarian, teetotaler sweepers; and second, for being allowed to act as instruments of repentance and spiritual cleansing for the high-caste benefactors who had uplifted them.”<sup>79</sup> Tanika Sarkar argues that “[if this] underlined upper-caste guilt, it also vested political activism solely in them, re-rendering the Untouchable as passive victim, incapable of effective action. Rejuvenated by penance, upper castes would rightfully reclaim trusteeship, returning to hierarchy on a higher plane.”<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, Nagaraj states that Gandhi’s movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification, placed a great deal of moral responsibility on the caste-Hindu “self.” A profound ethical halo thus enveloped the caste-Hindu, and this “heroic stature of the caste-Hindu reformer further dwarfed the ‘Harijan’ personality.” The Gandhian project of “self-purification thus also became its Achilles heel.”<sup>81</sup> The Sangh, says Wadia, “can certainly be credited with good will and a certain amount of

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<sup>76</sup> A. R. Wadia, ‘Gandhiji And Untouchability’, in K. S. Saxena, (ed.), *Gandhi Centenary Papers*, Vol. 4, Bhopal, Publications Division, Council of Oriental Research, 1972, p. 49. In his discussion with the representatives of the Depressed Classes, Gandhi said that he had no difficulty in showing them that the term ‘Depressed Classes’ had itself a bad odour which the name ‘Harijan’ had certainly not, *but he assured them that he would be the last man to impose even a term of endearment on those who did not like it. Harijan*, 10th August 1934, (emphasis mine); ‘Discussion With Representatives Of The Depressed Classes’, 21st July 1934, *CWMG* (CD), Vol. 64, p. 199, (emphasis mine).

<sup>77</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, p. 70, (emphasis mine).

<sup>78</sup> H. Coward, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And Untouchability’, in H. Coward, (ed.), *Indian Critiques Of Gandhi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 54.

<sup>79</sup> S. Bayly, *Caste, Society, And Politics In India: From The Eighteenth Century To The Modern Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 251.

<sup>80</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, p. 182.

<sup>81</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 45.

success, but negligible on the whole. Even financially it has not had requisite support.”<sup>82</sup> In this way, Gandhi “anchored Untouchables firmly to the Hindu faith,”<sup>83</sup> and that too in the servants’ quarters. His campaign against untouchability, “did [however] effectively ..., rub balm on injuries that were centuries old.”<sup>84</sup>

While a religious view of untouchability that made its eradication an exclusively Hindu responsibility had the great advantage of focusing on the centuries of Hindu oppression, writes Parekh, it also had “the demerit of treating ‘Harijans’ as passive objects helplessly waiting for their masters to get off their backs.” The Untouchables, argues Parekh, “were themselves expected to do little,” and were therefore never involved in the struggle for their liberation. This numbed the development of a “collective organisation, a corporate identity, an indigenous leadership, a tradition of struggle and memories of collective action” of the Untouchables. Parekh laments that “Gandhi spoke for them, but did not allow, let alone encourage, them to speak for themselves,” and thus “his mistaken strategy kept them almost just as dumb[,] as had the centuries of humiliation.”<sup>85</sup> Trilok Nath and Tanika Sarkar, both argue that “Gandhi had little time or patience for Untouchable politics,”<sup>86</sup> for neither did Gandhi carry out any political activity for creating political consciousness among the Untouchables, nor did he give any programme for the educated Untouchables.<sup>87</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay also asserts that even the lowest caste elites felt less attraction for Gandhi’s philosophy, “as his suggestion of going back to the *varna* system would certainly stifle their upward mobility.”<sup>88</sup>

Bhikhu Parekh further argues that Gandhi’s style of campaign not only prevented Untouchables from developing their own organisation but also “denied them an opportunity to work, and constantly interact with the caste-Hindus.” He says

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<sup>82</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 49.

<sup>83</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 129.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>85</sup> B. Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform: An Analysis Of Gandhi’s Political Discourse*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1999, p. 268.

<sup>86</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, p. 197.

<sup>87</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 250.

<sup>88</sup> S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics And The Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi, 1990, p. 172.

that since the Harijan Sevak Sangh, an all-Hindu organisation, worked “for, but not with the ‘Harijans’, the two communities lacked a common platform.” Devoid of any meaningful contacts at the social level, the two communities remained separate at the political level as well. By taking a narrowly religious view of untouchability, Parekh contends that “Gandhi not only reinforced ‘Harijan’ passivity, but also betrayed his own profound political insight that no system of oppression could be ended without the active involvement and consequent political education and organisation of its victims.”<sup>89</sup> Palshikar adds that “Gandhi’s relative neglect of developing satyagraha against caste probably derived from [his] position of not recognising the political nature of social divisions.”<sup>90</sup> “Reform [therefore] happened under severe limits,”<sup>91</sup> writes Tanika Sarkar. In a similar vein, Ajit Roy asserts that Gandhi was against any militant activism on the part of the Untouchables. He sought to avoid any confrontation of the ‘Untouchables’ with their oppressors on either economic or social issues. According to Gandhi, “... [to] create dissatisfaction among the ‘Harijans’ can bring no immediate relief to them and can only perpetuate a vicious division amongst Hindus.”<sup>92</sup> For their economic amelioration, Gandhi would depend on welfare measures undertaken by reformists; at the social level he would depend on the enlightened caste-Hindus for slowly persuading the conservative majority to eschew untouchability.

Tridip Suvrud adds that what Gandhi failed to understand about the inhumanity of caste is that there is a fundamental moral difference between “humiliation” and “shame.” One can experience a deep sense of shame at the humiliation of others, but this experience, however deep, is not the same as the experience of humiliation. Similarly, a shared sense of shame is morally not the same as an equally felt sense of humiliation. Gandhi, who understood self-volition as few others have, did not see that humiliation is not a matter of self-volition. It cannot be willed on to the self; it can only be inflicted. The moral community of co-sufferers

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<sup>89</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 268.

<sup>90</sup> S. Palshikar, ‘Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface:...When Shall The Twain Meet?’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 31 (Aug. 3, 1996), p. 2071.

<sup>91</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, p. 183.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Roy, A. Roy, ‘Caste And Class: An Interlinked View’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 14, No. 7/8, Annual Number: Class and Caste in India (Feb., 1979), p. 303.

who shared the historical and particular experience of humiliation remained outside Gandhi's grasp.<sup>93</sup>

Ambedkar, and later critics alike, thus see the Indian National Congress as essentially a caste-Hindu party. They echo the British Viceroy Dufferin's characterisation in the late nineteenth century dismissing the Indian National Congress, which had become the vehicle of the rising anti-imperialist nationalism in India, as representing a "microscopic minority" rather than the Indian "people" as a whole. They speak on similar grounds, as did Archibald Wavell, who at times alleged that Gandhi's dominant aim was Congress or caste-Hindu supremacy in the name of independence.<sup>94</sup> This, when the Indian National Congress in the colonial period was more a "platform" of the Indian national movement rather than a "party," on which an increasingly wider section of the Indian people from different classes, castes and religious communities began to be represented. The tallest Socialists and Communists, the most charismatic workers' and peasants' leaders, emerged from the ranks of the Congress and reached its highest decision-making bodies. Surely, they were not there to protect the caste-Hindus.

Mohandas Gandhi offered no reply himself to Ambedkar's 1945 charges, but he encouraged *Ambedkar Refuted*,<sup>95</sup> a short tract written by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, that contains a reply to some of Ambedkar's criticisms. Rajagopalachari criticises Ambedkar for imitating Muhammad Ali Jinnah, for his bogus assertion that the Indian National Congress "has no legitimate right to speak on behalf of the Scheduled Castes of India," as "these people are not behind the Congress claim for Indian freedom." Rajagopalachari asserts that since "the Congress [aimed] at the establishment of a democratic form of Government as the organ of Indian freedom, it [was] therefore an irrelevant issue whether the Congress [did] or [did] not represent any particular minority community in India."<sup>96</sup> Therefore, any argument tendered by leaders of minority communities or groups against the fundamental of

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<sup>93</sup> T. Suhrud, 'The Problem', *Seminar*, Volume 662, Number 662, October 2014, pp. 12-13.

<sup>94</sup> A characterisation that was fleshed out later by the so-called 'Cambridge School' of historiography, led by Anil Seal, saw the Congress as essentially a party of upper-caste-Hindus fighting for their narrow prescriptive interests.

<sup>95</sup> C. Rajagopalachari, *Ambedkar Refuted*, Bombay, Hindu Kitabs, 1946.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

democracy, *viz.*, majority-rule and claims “for any kind of positive sovereignty or for a negative right of control in the shape of a veto,” asserts Rajagopalachari, “is inconsistent with democracy,”<sup>97</sup> and “amounts to opposition to Indian freedom, and abetment of the British imperialist claim of the maintenance of the *status quo*.”<sup>98</sup> The acceptance of majority-rule, clarifies Rajagopalachari, however “does not mean a denial of the right of discussion or opposition, which every individual or group should have the fullest opportunity to exercise. It is this limited political right and the full enjoyment of civil rights, which such a minority must depend.”<sup>99</sup> As to the legal protection of every individual whether of the minority or the majority in the fullest enjoyment of all civic rights, the second essential condition in a democracy, and “without [which] democracy would be a sham and a tyranny,” the Congress at its 1931 Karachi session ensured “equal rights and obligations of all citizens, without any bar on account of sex; ... no disability to attach to any citizen by reason of his or her religion, caste or creed or sex in regard to public employment, office of power or honour and in the exercise of any trade or calling; ... equal rights to all citizens in regard to public roads, wells, schools and other places of public resort; [and] adult suffrage.”<sup>100</sup>

As for the doubts about the domination of the individuals or groups within the *Swaraj*, Gandhi clarified on different occasions that “[the] *Swaraj* of my dreams recognises no race or religious distinctions. Nor is it to be the monopoly of lettered persons, not yet of monied men, *Swaraj* is to be for all, including the former, but emphatically including the maimed, the blind, the starving toiling millions. A stout-hearted, honest, sane, illiterate man may well be the first servant of the nation. [Moreover,] it has been said that Indian *Swaraj* will be the rule of the majority community, that is, the Hindus. *There could not be a greater mistake than that*. If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it *Swaraj* and would fight it with all the

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 45, p. 370.

strength at my command, for to me ‘Hind Swaraj’ is the rule of *all* the people, is the rule of justice.”<sup>101</sup>

The declared policy of the Congress was to assist and work for the removal of all social and religious disabilities imposed by custom upon the Untouchables. The Congress in 1917 adopted a definite resolution urging upon the people of India “the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Scheduled Castes.”<sup>102</sup> Also, Gandhi wrote in 1920: “Untouchability cannot be given a secondary place on the programme. Without the removal of that taint, *Swaraj* is a meaningless term.”<sup>103</sup> On 2nd August 1931, shortly before he was to go to London for the Round Table Conference, Gandhi made a significant statement in Ahmedabad. “If we came into power with the stain of untouchability unaffected, I am positive that the ‘Untouchables’ would be worse off under that ‘*Swaraj*’ than they are now, for the simple reason that our weaknesses and our failings would then be buttressed by the accession of power.”<sup>104</sup> Gandhi was admitting here that *Swaraj* would give India’s upper castes political power in addition to the social and economic power they already enjoyed, and thus make the Dalits “worse off.” Since the *Swaraj* goal could not be abandoned, the solution, as Gandhi saw it, was to attack untouchability alongside the struggle for *Swaraj*.

Commenting on the slow pace of the progress achieved in the conditions of the Scheduled Castes, Rajagopalachari emphasises that it was unfair to ignore, as Ambedkar did, the fact that “the reformers [were] not armed as yet, with the powers of Government.” As Gandhi put it, “if as a member of a slave-nation I could deliver the suppressed classes from their slavery without freeing myself from my own, I would do so today. But it is an impossible task. A slave has not the freedom even to do the right thing. ... Hence though the *Panchama* problem is as dear to me as life itself, I rest satisfied with an exclusive attention to national non-cooperation. I feel sure that the greater includes the less.”<sup>105</sup> This was Gandhi’s explanation for his non-

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<sup>101</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Selected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, (ed. S. Narayan), Vol. VI, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1968, pp. 440-46, (hereafter, *Selected Works Of Gandhi*).

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Rajagopalachari, *Refuted*, p. 15.

<sup>103</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 36.

<sup>104</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1932, p. 303.

<sup>105</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 38.



cooperation movement for *Swaraj* when untouchability still waited to be removed. However, “the progress of conditions respecting the Scheduled Castes in India did not compare ill with what has been achieved in America for Negroes, or in the South African Republic for the natives of Africa, or for the Jews in civilised Europe,” asserts Rajagopalachari, and adding: “All that flows from poverty in [a] capitalist society cannot be imputed to the wickedness or folly of the Congress in India.”<sup>106</sup> Rajagopalachari states that Ambedkar struggled hard to prove that the Congress espousal of the cause of the Scheduled Castes was nothing but a Machiavellian plot, “to make the case for democracy unassailable.”<sup>107</sup> Rajagopalachari says that “[there] was nothing dishonourable in adopting such a just attitude in regard to minorities in order to *qualify* for democracy.”<sup>108</sup> Moreover, he asserts that an examination of the “evolution of political work in India from mere constitutional agitation to constructive work covering social and industrial problems”<sup>109</sup> would show the enlargement of Congress policy, and not a Machiavellian plot.

It was unreasonable of Ambedkar, says Rajagopalachari, “to discredit the motive and honesty of the Congress,” as its appeal for the removal of untouchability fell for long on deaf ears. Whereas in regard to other matters, which did not concern the Scheduled Castes, and in which the good of the higher castes was directly involved, such as the raising of the age of marriage or the promotion of inter-communal marriage and the like, “fared *no* better.”<sup>110</sup> But Gandhi succeeded where others had failed. He was able, writes Rajagopalachari, to integrate “social and religious reform with political activity in the Congress.”<sup>111</sup> Moreover, social disabilities imposed by custom cannot be removed by any conceivable legal coercion. The all-powerful British Government could “make no headway with it.”<sup>112</sup> Instead, Rajagopalachari emphasises that “economic conditions must be improved,” for “the

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<sup>106</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Refuted*, p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

state working under the capitalist system ... [cannot] ... make people rich by Acts of Parliament.”<sup>113</sup>

The social disabilities imposed by custom are such as cannot be removed by any conceivable legal coercion. The all-powerful British Government could make no headway with it. “Ambedkar fails to realise,” argues Rajagopalachari, “that in a matter where the social conscience alone could rectify the state of affairs, there is a limit to legal and constitutional sanctions.”<sup>114</sup> To justify his point, he cites Ambedkar who himself admits that “untouchability” is a mental attitude. “You cannot untwist,” he says, “a two thousand years twist of the human mind and turn it in the opposite direction.”<sup>115</sup> Instead of this realisation leading to patience, the conclusion drawn by Ambedkar is one of despair and opposition to political freedom of India.

In Ambedkar’s book, which professes to be a record of Congress activities in relation to the Untouchables, the vital period of Congress Ministries (1937-39) has been omitted. Till 1937, the Congress was not in power and its main activity was propaganda. It could not do much for or against the Untouchables in the way of legislative or administrative action. Yet Ambedkar judges the intentions of the Congress “by what was not accomplished by methods of persuasion, which alone were open to it.”<sup>116</sup> If the Congress and its source of inspiration, Gandhi, were hostile to the Untouchables, it should have been possible for Ambedkar to pile-up a charge-sheet of ministerial actions and omissions relating to them and it would have been a real indictment. Ambedkar is not fair and correct in his facts, when he attacks the Congress Ministries (1937-39), says Rajagopalachari. When Congress Ministries took up the responsibility of provincial administration, the problems they had to tackle were “many and heavy.” Special attention was paid to the problems arising out of the social disabilities and the poverty of the Untouchables. For example, Rajagopalachari says that in Madras “where the social disabilities [were] heaviest,”<sup>117</sup> three measures were passed by the Madras Legislature for the amelioration of the social status of the Untouchables when the Congress was in office. The Removal of Civil Disabilities Act

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>115</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 195.

<sup>116</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Refuted*, p. 18.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

(1938) provided that no ‘Harijan’ shall be disabled, merely, by reason of caste from enjoying any social or public amenity open to caste-Hindus. It also laid down that no court of law shall recognise any such disability even if imposed by custom.<sup>118</sup>

The Malabar Temple-Entry Act (1938) provided for the throwing open of major temples to the excluded classes if the step is favoured by majority-opinion among the voters of the area. Moreover, the Congress Government at the “*risk* of offending [its] *amour-propre*”<sup>119</sup> decided to enact a more effective measure, which enabled the throwing open of temples without the trouble of a plebiscite. The Temple Entry Authorisation and Indemnity Act (Madras Act No. XXII of 1939) authorised the trustees or other authorities, in charge of, any temple in any district in the province, to throw it open for worship to the so-called Untouchables and to all other classes hitherto excluded, if in their opinion the worshippers were not opposed to such innovation. It indemnified such trustees or other authorities from civil or criminal liability. “This law,” according to Rajagopalachari, “was a revolutionary blow.”<sup>120</sup> The great temples of Madura, Tanjore and Palani in the most orthodox southern districts were thrown open under the new law and the Untouchables entered and shared in divine service performed therein.<sup>121</sup> The Congress withdrew from Government in 1939 and the throwing open of other big temples was stopped. Sir Reginald Coupland, who has attempted to present the Indian National Congress and the Congress Ministries (1937-39) in the worst possible light in his *Indian Politics*, however, writes, “in general ... it can be said that the Congress Governments showed a great deal more courage than their predecessors in their handling of the thorny question of the ‘Harijans’.”<sup>122</sup>

Gandhi himself conceived the working pattern of the Harijan Sevak Sangh and evolved a functional strategy that ensured unity of command as well as effective integration of the central body with the state branches. Of the fifteen organising members of the Central Board of the Sangh, four were ‘Harijans’ – B. R. Ambedkar,

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30, (emphasis mine).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>122</sup> R. Coupland, *Indian Politics: 1936-1942*, Part II, London, Oxford University Press, 1944.

R. Srinivasan, M. C. Rajah and Baloo P. Palwankar.<sup>123</sup> The constitution of the Sangh also laid down that “*every Board or Committee shall have as many ‘Harijan’ members as it is possible to secure consistently with its maximum....*”<sup>124</sup> With this the Sangh, evolved a process of associating the ‘Harijans’ with the movement. Whilst the ‘Harijans’ were in no way called upon to share in the act of penitence, they were to form *independent Advisory Committees*, and to offer helpful advice, guidance, inspection and review of the work. Gandhi asserted that this was not only the privilege but also the duty of the ‘Harijans’.<sup>125</sup> It may be argued that Gandhi’s attempt to have Advisory Boards consisting of ‘Harijans’ was a way of creating more supporters and, at the same time subdue opposition from the ‘Harijans’.<sup>126</sup> The Sangh’s Board was of the caste-Hindu debtors and the ‘Harjans’, as creditors. The ‘Harjans’ owed nothing to the caste-Hindu debtors, and therefore, so far as the Boards were concerned, the initiative had to come from the caste-Hindu debtors.<sup>127</sup> Gandhi warned that there should be “*no repetition of the old method when the reformer claimed to know more of the requirements of his victims than the victims themselves,*” and, therefore, he wanted that the workers should “*ascertain from the representatives of the ‘Harijans’ what their first need is and how they would like it to be satisfied.*”<sup>128</sup> It was necessary to know the ‘Harijan’ mind, Gandhi emphasised, in any programme of work that may be taken up.<sup>129</sup> To broaden the base of the Anti-Untouchability Movement, he suggested suggested the formation of compact, small representative committees that would frame rules for the conduct of their proceedings and formulate

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<sup>123</sup> Rajagopalachari, *Refuted*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21, (emphasis mine).

<sup>125</sup> ‘Discussion With Representatives Of The Depressed Classed’, On Or Before 21st July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, pp. 214-15; *Harijan*, 10th August 1934.

<sup>126</sup> One common denominator was that the ‘Harijans’ did not understand why they could not help bring about reform themselves. In their view, having the caste-Hindus fighting for their right to temple-entry made them feel helpless and – once again – in an inferior position to the caste-Hindus.

<sup>127</sup> ‘Reply To Harijan Deputation’, 24th December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 394; *Harijan*, 5th January 1934.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Statement On Untouchability-II’, 5th November 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 51, pp. 347-48, (emphasis mine); ‘Letter to R. B. Talegaonkar’, 19th December 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 52, p. 234. See, also, ‘Letter To Anti-Untouchability League, Udipi’, 11th November 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 51, p. 398; ‘Letter To L. M. Satoor’, 4th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 468.

<sup>129</sup> *Harijan*, 4th March 1933, ‘As They See Us’, 4th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 458.

their expectations of the *savarna* Hindus. These Advisory Committees, wherever they were formed, were meant to advise the Central Board of their existence and show their preparedness to help the latter. Gandhi believed that “*the savarna Hindus will never be able to discharge their debt except with the co-operation of the ‘Harijans’.*”<sup>130</sup>

The Boards had three functions, to raise the economic, social, and religious status of the ‘Harijans’, or in other words, to remove the difficulties that the *savarna* Hindus for centuries put in the way of the ‘Harijans’ raising their heads in life. Thus, the Boards had to provide wells, scholarships, boarding houses, schools and social amenities, wherever the need arose. In all these, the general body of ‘Harijans’ was to take the help wherever it was offered. The Advisory Committees, Gandhi said, were to help the cause by making useful suggestions to the Boards and also rendering such help as they themselves could to those whom they represented.<sup>131</sup> “*Thus only will they,*” emphasised Gandhi, “*acquire the power of asserting themselves.*”<sup>132</sup> The Advisory Committees were to take up internal reforms and cause an *awakening* among the ‘Harijan’ masses, so that “they too begin to realise that they were men and women entitled to the same rights as were enjoyed by other members of the society to which they belonged.” The constitution of the Sangh laid down that no person shall be a member of any Board, unless he or she performed some definite service, for example, having a ‘Harijan’ in his or her house as a member of the family, at least as a domestic servant,<sup>133</sup> or was teaching a ‘Harijan’ or ‘Harijans’, or was paying a regular visit to the ‘Harijan’ quarters and cleaning them, or if he or she was a doctor, treating the ‘Harijan’ patients free of charge.<sup>134</sup> Gandhi’s campaign to eradicate untouchability not only *did not prevent* the ‘Harijans’ from developing their own

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<sup>130</sup> ‘How They Should Act’, 20th April 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, p. 417, (emphasis mine); *Harijan*, 20th April 1934, (emphasis mine).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*; *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine); *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>133</sup> Gandhi assured G. M. Thaware, Assistant General Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, Nagpur that “[an] attempt is already being made to induce the better classes to engage the ‘Harijans’ as domestic servants and I think it is coming.” ‘Letter to G. M. Thaware’, 12th February 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 279.

<sup>134</sup> Verma, *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, p. 65.

organisation, but also *did not deny* them an opportunity to work, and constantly interact with the caste-Hindus.

Contrary to arguments of the critics of Gandhi that his idealisation of *varnashram dharma* led to non-radical programmes being adopted by the Harijan Sevak Sangh, to Gandhi “the removal of untouchability [was] more precious than the retention of *varnashram dharma*.”<sup>135</sup> Gandhi declared that he did not care “if *varna* went to the dogs in the removal of untouchability.”<sup>136</sup> He also asserted that he had “gone no-where to defend *varnadharmā*.” He was the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of *khadi*, establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity, and the removal of untouchability, “the three pillars of *Swaraj*. But I have *never* placed establishment of *varnashram dharma* as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing a wrong emphasis on *varnashram dharma*.”<sup>137</sup> The Sangh also did not spring into action with campaigns “focusing on patronising upper-caste-Hindus working in *Dalit* slums.”<sup>138</sup> In this work of untouchability removal, Gandhi was strictly opposed to patronising the ‘Harijans’ in any sense.<sup>139</sup> The work was to be undertaken in the spirit of expiation. It meant nothing less than redeeming a debt that was centuries overdue. Hindus had behaved towards these unfortunate people nothing better than a man turned monster, and therefore, he said, the programme for the abolition of untouchability was just an expiation for the monstrous wrong.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, his whole approach to the problem was not of a reformer but that of a humble penitent who identified himself with the oppressed.<sup>141</sup> At one level even Ambedkar concurred with Gandhi. Ambedkar had reiterated in the closing lines of the letter that he wrote to

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<sup>135</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 229.

<sup>136</sup> *Harijan*, 28th September 1939.

<sup>137</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 523, (emphasis mine).

<sup>138</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 50.

<sup>139</sup> In his speech at the opening of dispensary, Pakkanarpuram (Kerala), Gandhi said that whilst giving medical relief, providing for education and arranging for free water supply were necessary in the interests of ‘Harijans’, there was something still more necessary to be done by the *savarna* Hindus, that is, they “have to cease to be patrons.” ‘Speech At Opening Of Dispensary, Pakkanarpuram’, 13th January 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 480; *The Hindu*, 16th January 1934.

<sup>140</sup> *Young India*, 6th August 1931.

<sup>141</sup> *Young India*, 1st May 1924.

Amritlal Vithaldas Thakkar (popularly known as Thakkar Bapa) of “*the need for love to bring together*, however doubtfully and provisionally, *the national community*.”<sup>142</sup> Gandhi would also insist that “the *cleanliness* of the *Bhangis* has very little part in the removal of untouchability.”<sup>143</sup> Even other attributes were not contingent to the removal of untouchability. Gandhi asserted that those ‘Harijans’ who did not give up carrion eating “should *not* be summarily boycotted,”<sup>144</sup> as it was not an easy matter to give up a long-standing habit.<sup>145</sup> Moreover, abstention was not an indispensable condition of temple-entry for the Hindus. Though personally Gandhi was in favour of making abstention from flesh and drink to be a condition but “it could not be imposed upon the ‘Harijans’ alone, if it was not imposed upon *all* the Hindus.”<sup>146</sup> Gandhian constructive programme was calculated to make both the ‘Harijans’ and the caste-Hindus better and virtuous individuals.

There is a point in the criticism that the term ‘Harijan’ “infantilised”<sup>147</sup> the Untouchables, and that “stony” caste-Hindu “hearts cannot be changed by words.”<sup>148</sup> However, Indira Rothermund explains that “[Gandhi’s] *language* [leapt] across two thresholds, that of the experience of the Untouchables *vis-à-vis* the caste-Hindus, and the level of the immanence and transcendence of the Supreme Being as expressed in the equation of *Hari* (God) and *Jan* (man), which poses the inherent equality of all.”<sup>149</sup> Gandhi expected all to whom he addressed, specifically the Hindu society, to expand their conscious horizon by incorporating the content of his term ‘Harijan’, and by comprehending the inherent equality, which the term unfolded.

Untouchability is an evil that has a basis not only in the social but also in the religious practices. Contrary to Jaffrelot’s contention that “for [Gandhi] equality

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<sup>142</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 139-40, (emphasis mine); R. Srivatsan, ‘From Ambedkar To Thakkar And Beyond: Towards A Genealogy Of Our Activisms’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 39 (Sep. 27 - Oct. 3, 2008), p. 100, (emphasis mine).

<sup>143</sup> ‘Letter To Hiralal A. Shah’, 23rd November 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 52, pp. 47-48, (emphasis mine).

<sup>144</sup> ‘Letter To Sitaram K. Nalavde’, 12th January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 37, (emphasis mine).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> ‘Letter To Viriyala Venkata Rao’, 25th January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 53, p. 142.

<sup>147</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 129.

<sup>148</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 49.

<sup>149</sup> I. Rothermund, ‘Mahatma Gandhi And Harijans’, in V. T. Patil, (ed.), *New Dimensions And Perspectives In Gandhism*, New Delhi, Inter-India Publications, 1989, p. 428.

before God meant more than equality between men,”<sup>150</sup> Rothermund says that Gandhi, by using the term ‘Harijan’, “[emphasised] equality of *all* Indians both before the law and before God.” The idea of equality as a purely secular concept was incomplete for Gandhi as “it [did] not question or enter into a dialogue with the other, more durable mode of thinking and behaviour, namely religious.” Untouchability, an extreme and inhuman form of inequality, derives its sanction from inhuman religious beliefs and practices. It requires more than a secular concept of equality to challenge it. The use of the term ‘Harijan’, writes Rothermund, “thus [implied] the acceptance of not only the assertive secular power to ‘Harijan’ but, more importantly their claim to human dignity,” for which “a purely positivist and secular concept like ‘Dalit’ is plainly inadequate.”<sup>151</sup>

Ajay Skaria has recently theorised that *seva* of the ‘Harijans’ by the caste-Hindus was an aspect of broader Gandhian philosophy. It was Gandhi’s response to the “incoherence and injustice” mooted out to the subaltern Untouchable. Skaria states that the term ‘Harijan’ has been much misunderstood. Scholars have sometimes opposed ‘Harijan’ in favour of Dalit. ‘Harijan’, scholars have suggested to be an imposition of bland spiritualism. Skaria, however, argues that ‘Harijan’ as a category did not displace Dalit but answered a very precise question: How the caste-Hindus addressed untouchability. To recognise the Untouchables as ‘Harijans’, argues Skaria, was to respond to Gandhi’s call against the impossibility of friendship with the Untouchables. As Gandhi said, “if we have love for them, we will *worship* them as we worship our mother and father.”<sup>152</sup> In this manner, the Untouchables could be offered *seva*.<sup>153</sup> As Gandhi put it, “the service [*seva*] of the ‘Harijans’ is after all the service of God.”<sup>154</sup> Moreover, according to Gandhi, service (*seva*) of the ‘Harijans’ itself was *dharma*.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*, p. 17.

<sup>151</sup> Rothermund, ‘Gandhi And Harijan’, p. 430.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Notes’, 12th May 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 170.

<sup>153</sup> A. Skaria, ‘Gandhi’s Politics: Liberalism And The Question Of The Ashram’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 101, Number 4, Fall 2002, p. 980.

<sup>154</sup> ‘Speech At Akola’, 18th November 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 255.

<sup>155</sup> ‘Letter To Ashram Boys And Girls’, 1st January 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 52, p. 335.



Ajay Skaria also argues that affirmation of the term Dalit, from the caste-Hindus, was inadequate within the ethics of Hinduism fashioned anew by Gandhi because it exonerated the caste-Hindus too easily. The term failed to undo the practices of systematic domination and glossed over the profound, even absolute, gulf that separated the caste-Hindus from the Untouchables. Skaria writes that for Gandhi such a gap could not simply disclaim the history of domination. Whereas ‘Harijan’ not only acknowledged the existing gulf between the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables, *but* tried to make a political commitment to initiate practices *that could sustain kinship, and may even produce friendship, across this gulf*. As Gandhi said, the only way in which the caste-Hindus could expiate the sin of untouchability was to befriend the ‘Harijans’ by going to their quarters, by hugging their children, by interesting themselves in their welfare, by finding out whether they get enough to eat, whether they get pure water to drink, whether they have the fresh light and air that caste-Hindus enjoyed as of right.<sup>156</sup> Gandhi also spelt out that one of the characters of a sincere devotee of God was an attitude of *affability* and companionship for the persecuted and the weak. This was best expressed “by *befriending* the ‘Harijan’ ... by getting off his back, so that he may no longer remain the beast of burden and the downtrodden creature that we have kept him for ages, and that he may breathe and move free.”<sup>157</sup> This called for devotion and suffering by the caste-Hindus: An indomitable cause, for which Gandhi repeatedly remarked that he wished to die for the ‘Harijan’ cause.<sup>158</sup>

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Although Gandhi had become convinced of the illegitimacy of the caste system, he was painfully aware of the fact that the caste system had its sanction in the *Vedas* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. He therefore had to tread cautiously. He first took the position that “caste” in its original form as *varna* was egalitarian and that its corruption into *jati* (the assignation of caste by birth) was “a hideous travesty of the

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<sup>156</sup> *Harijan*, 31st August 1934; ‘Speech At Women’s Meeting, Benares’, 2nd August 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 278.

<sup>157</sup> ‘Speech At Prayer Meeting, Lahore’, 17th July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 201, (emphasis mine); *The Tribune*, 19th July 1934, (emphasis mine).

<sup>158</sup> Skaria, ‘Liberalism And The Question Of The Ashram’, pp. 980-81.

original.”<sup>159</sup> Instead of the original four divisions, there was now a multitude of castes – clear evidence “that the law of *varna* [had] become a dead letter.”<sup>160</sup> By 1935, he took a firm stand against the caste system with the publication of his essay: “*Caste Has To Go*.”<sup>161</sup> However, the scriptural justification of the caste system raised its own difficulties, according to Parel, which forced Gandhi to examine the “rules” of interpretation of the scriptures. The issue became critical as Ambedkar threatened to abandon Hinduism altogether, arguing that nothing less than the rejection of the scriptures themselves was needed.

Anthony J. Parel states that “[no] political culture can long survive without its canon. And no political canon can long continue without timely change. There is a subtle but real connection between canon, stability, and change. A political canon reflects stability, but to be relevant, it should also be open to change.”<sup>162</sup> Parel argues that though Gandhi had written: “[My] *Swaraj* is to keep intact the genius of our civilisation,” Gandhi also “[wanted] to write many new things, but they must be all written on the Indian slate.” He was also willing to “gladly borrow from the West ....” At the same time, asserts Parel, Gandhi did not want to drown himself “in the waters of our ancestors’ well.”<sup>163</sup> Preserving everything from the past would indeed be suicidal. Gandhi’s task, Parel writes, was to increase the patrimony of the past and make it productive. Gandhi said: “I believe that it is our duty to augment the legacy of our ancestors and to change it into current coin and make it acceptable to the present age.”<sup>164</sup>

Gandhi, who proclaimed himself a *Sanatani* Hindu, said, “no one can convince me, with the help of quotations from *Shastras*.”<sup>165</sup> He also recounted, “early

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<sup>159</sup> Speech at Trivandrum, published under the title ‘Message to Travancore’. According to Mahadev Desai’s ‘Weekly Letter’, Gandhi was in Trivandrum on 9th and 10th October 1927, and he made the speech after he had met the Maharaja and the Maharani of Travancore, *CWMG*, Vol. 40, p. 230.

<sup>160</sup> ‘Introduction To Varnavyavastha’, *Harijanbandhu*, 23rd September 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 59, pp. 64-66.

<sup>161</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 62, pp. 121-22.

<sup>162</sup> A. J. Parel, ‘Gandhi And The Emergence Of The Modern Indian Political Canon’, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Special Issue on Comparative Political Theory, (Winter, 2008), p. 47.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>165</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 27, p. 21.

in my childhood I had felt the need of a scripture that would serve me as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. The *Vedas* could not supply that need.”<sup>166</sup> Though it is a fact that Gandhi on several occasions said that he believed in the *Shastras*, it is also true that he did not accept them as the ultimate authority or the word of God. When he was asked “[where] do you find the seat of authority?,” Gandhi, pointing to his breast said: “It lies here.” He also explained: “I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the *Gita*. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.”<sup>167</sup> Although Gandhi spoke very highly of different religious scriptures and had great faith in the Hindu *Shastras*, he never accepted them as the ultimate authority on life and never let them override his rationality and morality. On the other hand, “when Gandhi turned to Hindu (*Vaishnava*) texts,” Ananya Vajpeyi writes, “what he sought from them was a moral – possibly even a didactic – vision that could help an individual to cultivate self-mastery and acquire self-knowledge.”<sup>168</sup>

Valerian Rodrigues argues that tradition as *parampara* and *achar*, that is, beliefs, practices and institutions handed down over generations as salutary and enjoying widespread endorsement, had an important place in informing and directing social practices in India. However for Gandhi, writes Parekh, “the basic values and insights of a tradition were ‘valid’ and binding, not because of their age or certification by an individual, but because they had survived the rigorous test of lived experience and the scrutiny of their critics.”<sup>169</sup> Gandhi, thus made the distinction between the “basic values and insights,” the central organising principles of a tradition, which have an enduring value, and “beliefs and practices,” which were

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<sup>166</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 27, p. 271.

<sup>167</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 64, p. 75.

<sup>168</sup> A. Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundation Of Modern India*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. xix.

<sup>169</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 1.

subject to constant revision, and one owed loyalty to the former rather than the latter.<sup>170</sup>

Gandhi in this context asserted that religious texts “were necessarily articulated at two levels.” First, the texts propounded eternally valid values and principles, intended to guide all men everywhere. Secondly, Gandhi argued that since they were “written in a unique society at a specific time, and recommended practices and institutions most likely to realise those values in the specific circumstances of that society and age,”<sup>171</sup> the practices they recommend, had only a limited validity, while the same cannot be said about the values, which are eternally valid. According to Gandhi the “*Shastras* are ever growing .... Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods, and therefore they seem to conflict with one another. These books do not enunciate anew the eternal truths but show how those were practiced at the time to which the books belong. A practice which was good enough in a particular period would, if blindly repeated in another, lead people into the ‘slough of despond’.”<sup>172</sup>

Gandhi thus sought to find a way of both getting rid of the caste system and safeguarding the integrity of the scriptures. A correct interpretation of the scriptures, he argued, would show that the caste system had only a historical, not permanent, validity. Gandhi said that “it is no good quoting from *Manusmriti* and other scriptures in defense of this orthodoxy. A number of verses in these scriptures are apocryphal, a number of them quite meaningless ...,” thereby asserting, writes Rajmohan Gandhi, “the duty to weigh ancient verses.”<sup>173</sup> Parel argues that this position followed from the criteria of the interpretation of the scriptures that Gandhi employed. The criteria he chose were “conscience, reason, learning, holiness of life, and the inner experience of the truths to be interpreted.”<sup>174</sup> Repeating it soon afterwards, Gandhi wrote that verses

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<sup>170</sup> V. Rodrigues, ‘Reading Texts And Traditions: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 02, (January 08, 2011), p. 60.

<sup>171</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 240; Rodrigues, ‘The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate’, p. 64.

<sup>172</sup> Parekh, *ibid.*, p. 241; Rodrigues, *ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 237.

<sup>174</sup> Parel, ‘Modern Indian Political Canon’, p. 50.

from scriptures “cannot be above reason and morality.”<sup>175</sup> He said that “the scriptures must be interpreted according to the needs of society as it evolved. What was contrary to ‘universal truth’ could not be accepted, even if the *Shastras* had accepted them in the past. What in the *Shastras* were in conflict with reason cannot be accepted.”<sup>176</sup>

However, critics of Gandhi castigate him as a staunch supporter of *Manusmriti* and a *Manuvadi*. In his autobiography, in a chapter titled “Glimpses of Religion,” Gandhi has dealt with the awakening of his religious sense during his childhood. Gandhi had written, “I happened about this time, to come across the *Manusmriti*, which was amongst my father’s collection. *The story of the creation and similar things in it did not impress me very much, but on the contrary made me incline somewhat towards atheism.* There was a cousin of mine ... to whom I turned with my doubts. But he could not resolve them. He sent me away with his answer: ‘When you grow up, you will be able to solve these doubts yourself. These questions ought not be raised at your age’. I was silenced, but was not comforted. Chapters about diet and the like in the *Manusmriti* seemed to me to run contrary to daily practice. To my doubts as to this also, I got the same answer: ‘With intellect more developed and with more reading, I shall understand it better’, I said to myself. *Manusmriti* however did not at any rate teach me *ahimsa*.”<sup>177</sup>

Therefore, averred Gandhi, “I must expunge those texts as apocryphal, as we do in the case of many verses of doubtful authenticity which have crept into a much more recent work like, for instance, Tulsidas’s *Ramayana*.”<sup>178</sup> He went to the extent of proposing that some authoritative body should expurgate the inhumane references from the Hindu scriptures.<sup>179</sup> According to Gandhi, anything that was not acceptable to reason, anything that went contrary to reason, could not be religion. The only safe rule for studying the *Shastras*, he said, was to “reject whatever is contrary to truth and

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<sup>175</sup> Gandhi, *The Good Boatman*, p. 237.

<sup>176</sup> A. J. Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy And The Quest For Harmony*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 90.

<sup>177</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 29, (emphasis mine).

<sup>178</sup> ‘Discussion With Sanatanists’, 24th July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, p. 240; *Harijan*, 24th August 1934.

<sup>179</sup> *Harijan*, 29th September 1934 & 28th November 1936.

*ahimsa*.”<sup>180</sup> Gandhi even went on to assert that “not even the so-called divine revelation can avail against a practice or belief which runs contrary to fundamentals accepted as such by mankind, and I have seen as yet no argument whatsoever from this universal standpoint in defence of the practice of untouchability.”<sup>181</sup> Even if the whole world of *Shastris* were to oppose him, Gandhi said, he would proclaim from housetops that they were wrong in considering untouchability to be a part of the Hindu religion.<sup>182</sup>

Parel argues that according to Gandhi, one “eternal verity” that the Hindu scriptures taught was that humans were capable of self-determination, self-development, and spiritual liberation. Gandhi said that “[the] scriptures[,] properly so called[,] can only be concerned with eternal verities and must appeal to any conscience, [that is], any heart whose eyes of understanding are [open]. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or is capable of being spiritually experienced .... Learning there must be, but religion does not live by it. It lives in the experiences of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings. When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come.” Gandhi’s point was that the Hindu scriptures, rightly interpreted, could favour the evolution of an egalitarian society. Seen in this light, the caste system as it had evolved in India had only historical, not permanent, validity. The scriptures when reinterpreted, would call for the end of caste system. As historical awareness changes, so would the attitude toward caste. Parel thus suggests that by the mid-1930s, a combination of historical knowledge, spiritual experience, and sound reasoning “led Gandhi to delete the caste system from the old Indian political canon.”<sup>183</sup>

A corollary to the above argument is Bhikhu Parekh’s reading of Gandhi’s “spirit of Hinduism.” For Gandhi, the “spirit of Hinduism” consisted in practicing that “there is no religion higher than Truth,” “non-violence is the highest religion ....,” and “*Brahman* [God] alone is real, the world is trivial or inconsequential.” To these

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<sup>180</sup> *Harijan*, 6th April 1934; ‘An Adi-Dravida’s Difficulties’, 6th April 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, pp. 354-55.

<sup>181</sup> ‘Letter To C. Narayana Menon’, 18th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, pp. 119-20.

<sup>182</sup> *Young India*, 26th February 1925.

<sup>183</sup> Parel, ‘Modern Indian Political Canon’, p. 50.

Gandhi sometimes added “the unity of man, of life and of all creation, *karunā* and *dayā*.” Parekh asserts that these values had not only been stressed by a long line of sages but also cherished by the Hindu masses. These values, which constituted the “spirit of Hinduism,” provided “the hermeneutical canons of the principles of Hindu scriptures.” Hence, the Hindu religion, which to Gandhi “preached unity of life, non-injury and universal compassion could hardly be expected to sanction [untouchability].” Therefore according to Gandhi, writes Parekh, “untouchability was and had to be an excrescence, a corruption, a perversion of the true spirit of Hinduism.”<sup>184</sup>

This has led historian Irfan Habib to describe Gandhi as a “classical modern figure,” who “changed the course of Hinduism or at least gave a new face to Hinduism.” Habib argues that Gandhi read a message of duty, he read a message of dignity of labour, and he read a message of peace into the *Gita* that, which it seems to one is not there. Then there was Gandhi’s emphasis on monotheism when he was all the time denying this emphasis. Gandhi would say that he was a *Sanatani Hindu*, and on this basis he would support the movement of the Untouchables to enter temples, and yet, “in his personal life he never gave concession to anything short of monotheism.” Gandhi also “ascribed to Hinduism a degree of tolerance ... [making] it a more tolerant religion.” They were “not ... an assertion of the traditional against modern values,” asserts Habib, but “[was] the assertion of modern values in traditional garb.” By attributing all his statements to roots in the Indian civilisation, and particularly in Hinduism, “[Gandhi] created a picture of Hinduism which made it possible for its followers to accept modern values.” Clearly, “Gandhi’s religiosity was based on an extension of humanitarian values, and their application to Hinduism ... [resulted] in a vast transformation of its beliefs,” emphasises Habib.<sup>185</sup>

Similarly, Anand Patwardhan sees Gandhi as a “liberation theologian,” who “[helped] people discard the worst features of their inherited religious culture and replace them with ethical interpretations.” Gandhi recognised that India was so steeped in religion that atheism or pure rationality would not reach the masses. Hence,

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<sup>184</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 242.

<sup>185</sup> I. Habib, ‘Gandhi And The National Movement’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 4/6 (Apr. - Jun., 1995), pp. 7-8.

to this religion, he applied post-Enlightenment ethical values that were essentially modern. When he began manual scavenging, he destroyed the very basis of the pollution/purity dichotomy that was the heart of the caste system. Theoretically, for a long time, he infamously clung to the concept of *varnashrama-dharma*, but in actual deed, Patwardhan argues, “he destroyed it the day he took up manual scavenging, a job reserved for the so-called “Untouchables”.” As time went on, Gandhi became ever more radical. Later in life, he refused to attend any marriage that was not an inter-caste marriage. He thus fashioned out of his inherited Hinduism something entirely new. Only the idiom remained, not the original *Sanatan Dharma*. “What is unmistakable,” asserts Patwardhan, “is that Gandhi’s ethical code bears little resemblance to the hierarchical, vengeful structure of traditional Hinduism.”<sup>186</sup>

Baren Ray, a well-known political activist,<sup>187</sup> adds that “together with all other nationalist leaders, Gandhi too had some need of glorification of past history as a necessary input in the independence struggle.” But, he emphasises that instead of falsely glorifying the past, Gandhi in fact infused the past with his very modern ideas of “truth, justice, fearlessness, fraternity, absence of hierarchy, and dignity of the individual, *et al.*” – values which he thought were essential for the revivification of India’s ancient but also decadent society. That is why, according to Ray, “Gandhi was the most unsparing in crying out against all that was reactionary, oppressive and exploitative in India’s traditional customs, characterising them as excretions of the historical process, and called for their absolute elimination.”<sup>188</sup>

## [5]

Further, while critics have argued that Gandhi by focusing on improving the personal character of the caste-Hindus, was “wasting his energy and hugging an illusion,”<sup>189</sup> the 1924-25 Vaikom Satyagraha proved otherwise.<sup>190</sup> While most

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<sup>186</sup> A. Patwardhan, ‘Ethics Is The Answer’, *The Indian Express*, 15th April 2017. Anand Patwardhan is an Indian documentary filmmaker known for his socio-political, human rights-oriented films

<sup>187</sup> Baren Ray was a political activist from his student days in the early 1940s. He has been to prison both before and shortly after independence for his political work. He was active in the Indian and international Peace and Solidarity movements for many years from the inception of these movements.

<sup>188</sup> B. Ray, (ed.), *Gandhi’s Campaign Against Untouchability, 1933-34: An Account Of The Raj’s Secret Official Report*, New Delhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>189</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 1, p. 89.



satyagrahas by Gandhi and his followers were mixed in character, and involved varying combination of both suffering love, and non-moral pressure, that in Vaikom was and is often seen differently. The Vaikom Satyagraha was mounted by the Untouchables to secure the right of access to the roads encircling the outer walls of a temple that had long been closed to them by the orthodox *Brahmins* on grounds of pollution. In small groups, representatives of the Untouchables, later joined by caste-Hindus, kept vigil, sang devotional songs, and braved the monsoon while they stood in waist-deep icy waters and faced cold blasts of wind. This satyagraha, which attracted national attention and brought Gandhi's involvement, lasted just over twenty months and resulted in a settlement that met most, though not all, of its demands. A long line of distinguished Gandhian scholars, including Richard Gregg, Krishnalal Shridharani, Joan Bondurant, and Gene Sharpe,<sup>191</sup> has accepted a narrative of conversion and quoted in support a remark allegedly made by the orthodox *Brahmins* that they "cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us."<sup>192</sup>

Gregg's 1934 description was the most influential of the accounts. Gregg argues that the endurance and consistent non-violence of the reformers was finally too much for the *Brahmans*. In the autumn of 1925, after a year and four months, their obstinacy broke down, and they said, "[we] cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us, and we are ready to receive the Untouchables."<sup>193</sup> The *Brahmans* opened the road to all comers and the low-caste people were allowed to walk at any time past the temple and past the *Brahman* quarters. Shridharani in 1939 came to the same conclusion that in Vaikom the suffering of the satyagrahis had its

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<sup>190</sup> In 1932, when the upper caste in South India did not agree with Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign, he along with C. Rajagopalachari suggested a plebiscite on the question of Guruvayur Temple Entry for the Untouchables in Calicut, which went in their favour. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. 2, p. 188.

<sup>191</sup> G. Sharpe, *Power And Struggle*, Vol. 1: *The Politics Of Non-Violent Action*, Boston, Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973, p. 83.

<sup>192</sup> Quoted in M. E. King, *Gandhian Nonviolent Struggle And Untouchability In South India: The 1924-25 Vaikom Satyagraha And Mechanisms Of Change*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. xii.

<sup>193</sup> R. B. Gregg, *The Power Of Non-Violence*, 3rd Edition, London, James Clarke and Company Ltd., 1960, (1st Edition, New York, Schocken Books, 1934), p. 20.

visible effect on the orthodox *Brahmins*. Finally the *Brahmins* gave in.<sup>194</sup> Thus the satyagraha won, for the Untouchables, their civic rights. Bondurant classified the response of the upper castes as capitulation. The “roads [were] opened to all comers,” she asserts. “The immediate objective of the satyagraha had been fully achieved .... Before terminating their action, satyagrahis insisted upon and secured full agreement with the opponent.”<sup>195</sup>

Mary E. King, an academician and a civil rights activist, challenges this interpretation. Drawing on an extensive range of primary and secondary sources and interviews, she argues that the reality was different. Although suffering of the satyagrahis influenced neutral public opinion, attracted the attention of the country at large, and provided an additional motive for action to well-disposed caste-Hindus, it had little impact on the orthodox *Brahmins*, who remained firm in their beliefs. It was not their “conversion” but other factors that played a part in securing the final settlement, such as the wider anti-untouchability movement,<sup>196</sup> spread of liberal and egalitarian ideas, the royal intervention, and the fear of the Untouchables converting to other religions.

King argues that it is erroneous to believe that the suffering of the satyagrahis swayed the sentiments of those who for generations had immunities and benefits bestowed on them as high-caste landlords. If anything, “Vykom proved that the satyagrahis’ appeals and suffering were insufficient to produce immediately responsive social change.”<sup>197</sup> When the satyagraha eventually began to see some “oblique effects,” they did “not come from the volunteers’ incurring extreme self-sacrifice.”<sup>198</sup> The attempt to “glorify suffering” failed, as T. K. Ravindran put it, and in trying to “institutionalise suffering,” the actors in Vaikom used “mendacious and

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<sup>194</sup> K. Shridharani, *War Without Violence: A Study Of Gandhi's Method And Its Accomplishments*, (Revised Edition), Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962, (1st Edition, New York, Harcourt Brace and Company, 1939), pp. 94-95.

<sup>195</sup> J. V. Bondurant, *Conquest Of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy Of Conflict*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1965, pp. 50-52.

<sup>196</sup> King, *Untouchability In South India*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

cheap propaganda,” causing the suffering of volunteers to lose its “ethical charm and glory.”<sup>199</sup>

King asserts that the Vaikom Satyagraha “had minimal success,” since only three of the temple roads around the place of worship were fully opened. Whatever concessions occurred were “not as a result of the persuasion, or conversion,” of the orthodox Hindus, but rather, “capitulation by the local Travancore Government.” She argues that the Maharani of Travancore had moderate education and by all accounts tried to be a responsive monarch. From her other policies, King emphasises that “it can be seen that [the Maharani] held broadminded values, which may have facilitated the process.” But, the most influential with the Government, according to King, was public opinion, including that expressed by the middle-class caste-Hindus, for whom this denial was a civil libertarian issue rather than a matter of religion.<sup>200</sup> Added to it was the fear of impending conversions to Christianity coming from Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam quarters and the *Ezhavas*. The Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was consolidating and becoming mainstream, affecting all levels of the society. Seen in this light, the Maharani’s legitimacy was threatened, asserts King, “and she had to throw open the Vykam Temple roads, not from a point of view of granting rights or entitlements, but to bring about a subsidence of the continuing disruption in Travancore.”<sup>201</sup>

Ravindran, moreover, criticises that the struggle resulted in “about eight furlongs more ... added to these free roads .... After twenty months of relentless fight, Congress withdrew from the scene with its finery torn, and its prestige tarnished, leaving the cause of the Depressed Classes at the same spot whence they picked it up in March 1924.”<sup>202</sup> For Ravindran, Gandhi’s satyagraha led to a “deplorable situation,” in which the satyagrahis had sustained their earnest best efforts, but the settlement “concluded over their heads nullified the effect of all their past actions.”<sup>203</sup> Yet, Ravindran’s is not the last word. The significance of the struggle’s outcome was not as a specific breakthrough or tangible attainment, but that a major penetration and

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<sup>199</sup> Ravindran, *Vaikkam Satyagraha*, p. 117.

<sup>200</sup> King, *Untouchability In South India*, p. 211.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>202</sup> Ravindran, *Vaikkam Satyagraha*, p. 205.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204 & 206-7.

upheaval in customary ideas about untouchability had occurred. “*In struggles against social obscurantism based on religious beliefs,*” K. N. Panikkar observes, “*the initial step is perhaps the most difficult one. The Vaikkam satyagraha represented the difficult first step.*”<sup>204</sup> According to Gandhi, quotes Mahadev Desai,<sup>205</sup> “the solution was ‘a bedrock of freedom’, referring to it as a contract of sorts between the people and the state in the direction of liberty in one respect at least.”<sup>206</sup>

## [6]

The allegation is also that Gandhi’s anti-untouchability work was only of instrumental value to him for mobilising the Untouchables into his mass based freedom movement. Gandhi is accused of having an ulterior motive in the Harijan Movement, namely strengthening civil disobedience, and thereby using reform workers for political and not religious or social means. V. V. Srinivasa Iyengar, an ex-judge, as early as 1933-34, claimed that though “Mr. Gandhi, the great protagonist of temple-entry, had proclaimed that the movement was not political but religious ...., [but in reality it] was not a religious movement but a great political movement. It was necessary for the politics of Mr. Gandhi to present to the Government a united front and to placate the ‘Harijans’ .... The present ‘temple-entry’ movement was but a political stunt of Mr. Gandhi and his followers to win over that new party to the Congress.”<sup>207</sup>

In this context, Trilok Nath has argued that Gandhi’s views on untouchability were moulded by his dual role as a politician and the saint in Indian public life.<sup>208</sup> Zelliott fully accepts this view. Although Gandhi as Mahatma, says Zelliott, had deep feelings for the Untouchables, and would say that “if I have to be reborn, I should be

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<sup>204</sup> K. N. Panikkar, ‘Vaikkam Satyagraha: The Struggle Against Untouchability’, in R. Dayal, (ed.), *We Fought Together For Freedom: Chapters From The Indian National Movement*, Delhi, Oxford University Press and Indian Council of Historical Research, 1995, p. 135, (emphasis mine).

<sup>205</sup> Mahadev Desai (1892-1942) was an Indian independence activist and writer best remembered as Mahatma Gandhi’s personal secretary. He has variously been described as ‘Gandhi’s Boswell, a Plato to Gandhi’s Socrates, as well as an Ananda to Gandhi’s Buddha’. *Outlook*, 15th August 2008; *The Hindu*, 23rd October 2005.

<sup>206</sup> M. H. Desai, *The Epic Of Travancore*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Karyalaya, 1937, pp. 21-22.

<sup>207</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 62, p. 296.

<sup>208</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 223.

born an Untouchable ...,”<sup>209</sup> but Gandhi as politician, could not let go of his objectives of independence and “Hindu-Muslim unity.” This was evident from Gandhi’s assertion that though “[untouchability] is a bigger problem than that of gaining Indian independence, but I can tackle it better if I gain the latter on the way. It is not impossible that India may free herself from English domination before India has become free of the curse of untouchability.”<sup>210</sup> Thus, as both Mahatma and politician, Gandhi’s first and foremost priority was “to weave the divergent interests in India into a unified opposition to the British ...”<sup>211</sup> “Feeling that untouchability was a great hindrance to independence,” says Nath, “[Gandhi] sought to integrate Untouchables’ interests with the national interests so that they could be mobilised in the struggle against British imperialism.”<sup>212</sup> This *limitation* is also brought out by Jaffrelot. He argues that since Gandhi wanted the popular energy to focus on political struggles, he could not afford to press for the anti-untouchability programme beyond a point.<sup>213</sup>

Gandhi’s political instincts, asserts Arundhati Roy, “served the Congress party extremely well,” for “[his] campaign of temple entry drew the Untouchable population in great numbers to the Congress.”<sup>214</sup> Politically minded Hindus knew that Gandhi could deliver goods and made full use of his prestige all the world over with his wonderful will power and accepted his Constructive Programme for Untouchables as part of politics, but “the heart of most of them was set on driving the British out.” Once this was done, says Wadia, “the Constructive Programme was left to take care of itself with legal sanctions behind them, but no will to enforce them.”<sup>215</sup>

Without denying his “unquestioned commitment to the cause of ‘eradication’ of untouchability or his moral integrity,” Upendra Baxi, following E. M. S. Namboodripad, seems to think that Gandhi’s “constructive work” for the ‘Harijans’ was more “an aspect of political tactics” to serve the class interests of the bourgeoisie than “an aspect of conscientious struggle to fundamentally change the social structure

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<sup>209</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 153.

<sup>210</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 44.

<sup>211</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 153.

<sup>212</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 223.

<sup>213</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 71.

<sup>214</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 134.

<sup>215</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 54.

of Hinduism.”<sup>216</sup> Namboodripad argues that Gandhi’s “interest in ‘Harijan’ cause and activities should be considered as nothing but an effort on his part to disengage the Congress from the situation in which it had been placed following its break with the Government. It was an effort to find out points of contact with the British, to pursue the negotiations on constitutional reforms, started and temporarily broken, at the Second Round Table Conference, and to recognise the Congress, with a view to enabling it, to meet this new constitution.”<sup>217</sup> In other words, the problem was one of disengaging the Congress from the mass Civil Disobedience Movement and cultivating legitimation for this decision.

Baxi asserts that in the 1933-34 period, “Gandhi used the tactics of fast, and consequent release from prison, for ‘intense tours ostensibly for ‘Harijan’ welfare work, but really for informal consultations on the future of civil disobedience.”<sup>218</sup> According to Baxi, the Untouchables, as a result of Gandhi’s political tactics, may be “the immediate and perhaps long-term losers.”<sup>219</sup> Judith Brown fully accepts this view. In her work on the Civil Disobedience Movement, she maintains that Gandhi’s entire effort towards the ‘Harijan’ Movement at this critical period was a “search of a role,” as by this time the movement had more or less faded. She writes, “[therefore] Gandhi began to search for a role which would fulfill his personal aspirations and enable him to influence his compatriots and the Government.”<sup>220</sup> She describes in detail how Gandhi made an effort to open negotiations with the Government officials. She argues that although the ‘Harijan’ campaign “provided for Gandhi an alternative to the tactic of civil disobedience, which had manifestly failed to forge ... [national] unity, he still found no way of engaging in political discussion with the Government, and whenever possible he hinted that he was open to suggestion of peace.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> U. Baxi, ‘Emancipation As Justice: Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Legacy And Vision’, in U. Baxi & B. Parekh, (eds.), *Crisis And Change In Contemporary India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1995, p. 137.

<sup>217</sup> E. M. S. Namboodripad, *The Mahatma And The ‘Isim’*, New Delhi, People’s Publishing House, 1968, p. 64.

<sup>218</sup> Baxi, ‘Emancipation As Justice’, p. 137.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>220</sup> J. M. Brown, *Gandhi And Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma In Indian Politics, 1928-34*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 351.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

Gandhi's politics, (in the 'Harijan' campaign) as a prisoner was, therefore, that of "trying to escape the frustration of a fruitless political confrontation."<sup>222</sup>

Gandhi's turn to the work of Untouchable uplift in 1932 was questioned by D. D. Kosambi as early as 1939. Kosambi pointed out that in the act of articulating an anti-colonial alliance between the elite nationalists and the subaltern masses, the elite leadership had to devise a method "for the dissipation of the excess of energy available." As an example, "when the 1930 satyagraha got out of hand and was about to be transformed into a fundamentally different movement by the no-rent and no-tax campaigns in 1932, [Gandhi] discovered the need for the uplift of the Untouchables, and the whole movement was neatly sidetracked."<sup>223</sup> Gandhi was in no position to launch a radical movement against untouchability given his need to reassert control over Indian nationalism in the early 1930s as well as to prevent the national movement turning against the wealthy and powerful. Given that political limitation, the Gandhians of the 1930s followed the conservative reformation of the 1920s which stressed the transformation of the attitude and behaviour of the caste-Hindus toward the *Bhangis*.

Sumit Sarkar argues that from a more long-term point of view, 'Harijan' welfare work by Gandhians indirectly helped to spread the message of nationalism down to the lowest and most oppressed sections of rural society, and 'Harijans' in most parts of the country did come to develop a traditional loyalty towards the Congress.<sup>224</sup> Like other Gandhian mass movements, states Sarkar, "extension was combined with control,"<sup>225</sup> for Gandhi "deliberately confined the 'Harijan' campaign to limited social reform"<sup>226</sup> (opening of wells, roads, and particularly temples, plus humanitarian work), "delinking it from any economic demands"<sup>227</sup> (though very many 'Harijans' were agricultural labourers), and refusing to attack caste as a whole. As with peasant movement, says Sarkar, "Gandhian 'Harijan' work seems to have been

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<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>223</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *Exasperating Essays: Exercises In The Dialectical Method*, New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1957, Ch. 'The Function Of Leaders In A Mass Movement, (1939)', pp. 7-8.

<sup>224</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 328-30.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

in part a bid to establish hegemony over potentially more radical pressures from below.”<sup>228</sup>

Contrary to the alleged criticism that Gandhi’s anti-untouchability work, was only of instrumental value to him, for mobilising the Untouchables into his mass-based Freedom Movement and that it was, meant to transfer power from the colonial rulers into the hands of the caste-Hindus, Thomas Pantham argues that in reality “Gandhi’s anti-untouchability work preceded, and the value that he attached to it was not less important *than any other work or programme* of the national movement for political independence.”<sup>229</sup> To Gandhi, argues Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “an agitation against untouchability was more important than even conducting the Civil Disobedience Movement.”<sup>230</sup> Gandhi warned: “We shall be unfit to gain *Swaraj* so long as we would keep in bondage[,] a fifth of the population of Hindustan.”<sup>231</sup> Edwin S. Montagu,<sup>232</sup> after his first interview with Gandhi in November 1917, recorded in his diary, “[he] is a social reformer; he has a real desire to find grievances (for example, untouchability) and to cure them, not for any reasons of self-advertisement, but to improve the conditions of his fellowmen.”<sup>233</sup> Moreover, the private correspondence of the British officials reveals how they were relieved to see Gandhi’s indulgence in the Harijan Movement. They were indeed happy that Gandhi’s involvement in the Harijan Movement had diverted him from the Civil Disobedience Movement, which he had *refused* to call off. In fact, the fear of possible revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement was lurking in the minds of the British officials. In a letter to the Viceroy, the Secretary of State for India wrote: “As you may imagine the King is very much interested in what has been happening with Gandhi. He like all of us, is very anxious lest anything we should do, should plunge India back into

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Pantham, ‘The Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, p. 183.

<sup>230</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics And The Raj*, p. 170.

<sup>231</sup> Quoted in T. Pantham, ‘Against Untouchability: The Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, in G. Guru, (ed.), *Humiliation: Claims And Context*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 183-84.

<sup>232</sup> Edwin Samuel Montagu (1879-1924) was a British Liberal politician who served as Secretary of State for India between 1917 and 1922.

<sup>233</sup> E. S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary*, (ed., V. S. Montagu), London, William Heinemann, 1930, p. 58, (emphasis mine).



confusion of [twelve] months ago.”<sup>234</sup> Brown has not paid attention to the fact that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State dreaded Gandhi’s repetition of his movement. She has further pointed out that Gandhi hankered for personal friendship with the Viceroy and the Secretary of State and was trying to open a dialogue with the Government officials. Gandhi always maintained that he was fighting against the system and not the individuals. His personal friendship did not come in conflict with his ideological differences. As a true satyagrahi he always explored the possibility of negotiations.

The Harijan Sevak Sangh was started when the Congress was not functioning and most Congress leaders and workers were in jail. The Sangh never had any sort of organisational connection with the Congress. Its President, G. D. Birla, had never been a member of the Congress. Its Secretary, A. V. Thakkar, was one of the oldest of the life members of the Servants of India Society founded by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. It is well known that the Servants of India Society had been a persistent critic of the Congress policy since 1920. The majority of the members of the Central Board of the Sangh had always been non-Congressmen. The Sangh had received no grants from the Congress and had never been obliged to submit to the direct control of the Indian National Congress. According to the rules of the Sangh, no whole time paid worker of the Sangh could take part in any political activity.<sup>235</sup> Ambedkar himself had said, “it is true that the original intention was to keep the Sangh scrupulously *aloof* from politics.”<sup>236</sup> “The League [Sangh] may be able to carry on its work on a non-party basis, it has decided not to associate itself with politics or religious propaganda of any kind. The heads of Provincial as well as Central Executive will, therefore, have to be very careful in the selection of their active workers. With this object in view it is necessary that all whole-time paid workers of the League should not take part in

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<sup>234</sup> Sir Samuel Hoare’s Letter to Willingdon, 14th September 1932, Private Letters From Sir Samuel Hoare to Lord Willingdon, *Mss. Eur. E.240/2*, 22nd April 1932 – 28th December 1932, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi. Hereafter, *Mss. Eur. E.240/2*.

<sup>235</sup> The constitution of the Harijan Sevak Sangh laid down that “[no] member or agent of the Central Board or Provincial Boards or committees shall while holding such position in any way engage in any campaign of civil disobedience.” ‘Draft Constitution Of The Harijan Sevak Sangh’, 9th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 20.

<sup>236</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 143, (emphasis mine).

politics or in any sectional or religious propaganda.”<sup>237</sup> But whilst every Congress member was expected to fight the evil, he or she was not expected officially to join the Sangh.<sup>238</sup> Moreover, Gandhi warned that “Congressmen should not handle this movement to strengthen the Civil Disobedience Movement or the Congress hold on the people.”<sup>239</sup> He feared that such an attitude would damage both the Congress and the ‘Harijan’ cause. Gandhi asserted that so far as he himself and the Harijan Sevak Sangh were concerned, the Anti-Untouchability Movement was not a political movement aimed at garnering Hindu voters.<sup>240</sup>

As far as the Congress was concerned, it claimed it as a right and a duty to draw the ‘Harijans’ into its fold in the same way as it sought the support of other communities. It would have forfeited its claim to be a national organisation if it did not do so. Gandhi also said that “as a nationalist I claim to represent all communities equally, the largest as well as the smallest.”<sup>241</sup> He asserted that in fact, no branch of national activity, which among others included the ‘Harijan’ service, should be left untouched by the Congress. It was a very wrong idea that there was no other Congress activity save that of civil resistance, he said, or that the latter blocked all other activities. This would be true, he added, perhaps when there was mass Civil Disobedience and the campaign had to be swift and sharp. “But till that time is reached, due importance must be given to every one of nation-building activities and none should be neglected,”<sup>242</sup> thus emphasised Gandhi. But the Harijan Sevak Sangh

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<sup>237</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>238</sup> ‘Speech At Public Meeting, Amraoti’, 16th November 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 240.

<sup>239</sup> ‘Letter To Jawaharlal Nehru’, 13th November 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 221. See also, ‘Civil Resistance And Harijan Service’, 24th November 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 272; *Harijan*, 24th November 1933.

<sup>240</sup> A. G. Jeevaratnam, *Political Implications Of Untouchability*, Hyderabad, Kondaveedu Press, 1971, pp.194-95.

<sup>241</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 14th December 1933; ‘Statement To The Press’, 13th December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 330.

<sup>242</sup> The other nation building activities that the Congressmen were required to engage in included communal unity, *khadi* production and distribution, total prohibition, boycott of foreign cloth and other goods that compete with indigenous manufactures or are otherwise detrimental to the interests of the nation, the manufacture of new goods, the improvement of the methods of indigenous manufacture, and in this connection development or resuscitation of village industries, improvement of agriculture and cattle-breeding, organisation of labour unions, not for political exploitation but for the betterment of the

never tried to dabble in politics, to set up candidates to the Legislatures, or in any way took part in political agitation of any sort. It strictly confined itself to constructive work for doing which Ambedkar found fault with it. He had advocated that the real activities of the Sangh should be propaganda and civil disobedience for obtaining “civic rights” and other privileges for the ‘Harijans’. Though this would have been a good thing but it would have been impossible to adopt a programme of this kind without the Sangh becoming a political organisation. Gandhi had said that the ‘Harijan’ work had nothing to do with politics. The Sangh approached it purely from the religious and social standpoint. The Sangh, was therefore, open to all. If Congressmen were to limit the ‘Harijan’ service to themselves, he said, Hinduism would not be able to purge itself of the taint of untouchability, because thousands who did not consider themselves Congressmen would remain outside the orbit of that service. Gandhi therefore wished all offices to be filled by non-Congressmen, if they would come. Gandhi said that the Congressmen should take pride in working under them. This work of mighty reform in Hinduism could not be a monopoly of any party or group.<sup>243</sup>

Gandhi believed that the caste-Hindus, who denied freedom to the Untouchables, were themselves morally deficient and were thereby devoid of any moral right to undertake or support any satyagraha movement for freedom from oppression and exploitation by the external colonisers: “If it is necessary for us to buy peace with the Mussalmans as a condition of *Swaraj*, it is equally necessary for us to give peace to [Untouchables] before we can ... talk of *Swaraj* .... Hence for me, the movement of *Swaraj*, is a movement of self-purification.”<sup>244</sup> Contrary to Baxi’s contention that Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ work was a camouflage for consulting on the

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condition of workers and improvement in the relations between capital and labour. ‘Statement On M. S. Aney’s Statement’, 26th July 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 299.

<sup>243</sup> Gandhi was reported to have pointed out to Congressmen to seek the co-operation of non-Congress workers, give them offices and serve under them. Let them have no distinction between Congress and non-Congressmen, he said, for the ‘Harijan’ work interested everybody alike. He felt that healthy co-operation between Congress and non-Congressmen in the ‘Harijan’ work would prove very beneficial to the ‘Harijans’. He appealed to them to seek the help of non-Congress workers as much as they possibly could. ‘Discussion With Congress, Harijan And Khadi Workers’, 26th July 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 58, pp. 250-51; *The Leader*, 30th July 1924; *The Hindustan Times*, 27th July 1934.

<sup>244</sup> Pantham, ‘The Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, p. 184.

future of civil disobedience, Pantham argues that Gandhi did not view his anti-untouchability programme as a subordinate component of the *Swaraj* movement. After his release from the Yeravada Jail in May 1933, Pantham asserts that “[Gandhi] temporarily suspended the Mass Civil Disobedience Movement in order to concentrate on anti-untouchability work.”<sup>245</sup> Therefore, Gandhi’s non-cooperation was an effort not merely for a change of policy of the English but also a plea to the Hindus. He declared anyone who believed that untouchability was a part of Hinduism had no right to become a non-cooperator.<sup>246</sup> Indeed, he expected the change first in the Hindus and then as a matter of course in the policies of the English.<sup>247</sup> He maintained that a nation that could throw away an age long curse in a year was bound to make an impact on the world. He believed if India could become transformed in this way then no power on earth could deny India the right to establish *Swaraj*. He prophesized that the moment India had repented for her treatment of the Untouchables, she would be hailed as a free and brave nation.<sup>248</sup>

Gandhi tackled the untouchability problem at two altogether different levels. At one level the emphasis was on the change of heart among the Hindu upper castes, calling upon them to become sensitive to the most extreme wretchedness of the victims of untouchability, to atone for the centuries-long misery that Hindu custom had imposed and heaped upon a great part of its adherents. Gandhi stated that “there is nothing so bad [as the practice of untouchability] in all the world, and yet,” Gandhi said, “I cannot leave religion and therefore Hinduism. My life would be a burden to me, if Hinduism failed me .... Take ... [it] away and nothing remains for me. But then I cannot tolerate it with untouchability – the high-and-low belief,”<sup>249</sup> for “I would far

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<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>246</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 23, p. 382.

<sup>247</sup> Dennis Dalton no nationalist before Gandhi had embraced the responsibility of the colonised so unequivocally: “To blame the English is useless,” Gandhi’s ‘Editor’ in the *Hind Swaraj* declared to the ‘Reader’, “they will either go or change their nature only when we reform ourselves ....” And that “*Swaraj* cannot be had so long as walls of prejudice, passion and superstition continue ....” D. Dalton, *Indian Idea Of Freedom: Political Thought Of Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, Mahatma Gandhi And Rabindranath Tagore*, Haryana, The Academic Press, 1982, p. 169.

<sup>248</sup> *Young India*, 29th September 1921.

<sup>249</sup> ‘Letter To Jawaharlal Nehru’, 2nd May 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 60, p. 60.

rather than Hinduism died than that untouchability lived.”<sup>250</sup> In effect, soon, the movement against the practice of ‘untouchability’ became one of the most important projects of Gandhi.

At the religious level Gandhi categorically denied that untouchability was ever sanctified by original Hinduism in the first place and equally strongly he denied that Hinduism accepted the Untouchable’s present status on the basis of his *karma*, that is, his sins in his previous births. Most of his discourses at this level, argues Baren Ray, could be described as purely religious or spiritual in content in which the above two points were essential.<sup>251</sup> Gandhi’s advice to the Untouchables was to take to cleanliness and hygiene, stop eating carrion and beef, give up drinking and lead a moral life, acquire education and self-improvement, etc. His movement was essentially a call for an act of spiritual atonement for the caste-Hindus and for a moral reintegration of Hindu society on the basis of love and fraternity. When he asked for contributions for his ‘Harijan’ Fund that, too, was on the basis of the atonement programme.

Yet, Gandhi had a completely different discourse for the other level, which was entirely non-religious, secular, and social and quite complete at that. To Gandhi, India was struggling for ‘purna Swaraj’ on the basis of democratic citizenship. This must ensure justice, dignity, equality, and fraternity for *all*. Gandhi demanded that just as the Congress was the common platform for the struggle for attaining ‘purna Swaraj’, similarly all elective representative bodies in which Congress members and their allies commanded a majority, were duty-bound, to ensure that they followed a common minimum policy to implement anti-untouchability objectives. He insisted that all Municipalities and District or Local Boards under the Congress leadership *must* stop all discriminations against the Untouchable employees, such as sweepers, scavengers, doms, leather workers and such others. They should give them minimum living wages, provide them with clean and dignified uniforms and hygienic living condition-cum-quarters, cheap liquor shops in their vicinity must be closed down, night schools and health centres should be opened, etc.

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<sup>250</sup> ‘Speech At Minorities Committee Meeting’, 13th November 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 159.

<sup>251</sup> Ray, *Gandhi’s Campaign Against Untouchability*, p. 14.

In this context, Gandhi wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru clarifying that Civil Disobedience and the 'Harijan' Movement must be kept apart. The 'Harijan' Movement must not be used to strengthen the Civil Disobedience Movement, for that would damage both the Congress and the 'Harijan' cause.<sup>252</sup> Further, in an article published in *Harijan* on 24th November 1932, Gandhi reiterated that Congressmen must not use the 'Harijan' Movement for furthering civil resistance. *The two should not be mixed*. The 'Harijan' Movement must be taken up for its own sake. Gandhi wrote, "a movement so grand and so pure, so religious and so humanitarian, must not be exploited by anybody for his own end. Certainly not for its political consequences."<sup>253</sup>

Gandhi asserted that so far as he and the Harijan Sevak Sangh were concerned, the anti-untouchability movement was not a political movement. As Gandhi put it: "I would request those who do not appreciate the purely religious character of the movement, to retire from it." Gandhi explained plainly that he was concerned in the movement with the purification and fortification of Hinduism. He wanted others to trust him that his movement was religious, though in its working, political significance arose and political consequences ensued, in which he had no interest. And, he asserted that he was aware of the political implications. The removal of untouchability formed one of the three pillars of *Swaraj*. His *Swaraj* was one of egalitarianism with freedom for the meanest. Gandhi's conception of egalitarianism fed on Vedic ideals and nurtured on unto this last, evolved itself as *sarvodaya*, the welfare of all. It was in the attainment of this political ideal that a political implication arose in the removal of untouchability. Though in the accomplishment of this ideal, love, selflessness and self-sacrifice formed indelible factors, yet, in his conception it was spiritual. His *sarvodaya* was soaring on a high plane of classlessness, and castelessness. That was, indeed, a political order emanating from the political implication, apart from significance and consequence. Thus "to attribute political motives to Gandhi's commitment to the eradication of untouchability, [is] a travesty of truth."<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 221.

<sup>253</sup> *Harijan*, 24th November 1932.

<sup>254</sup> Rothermund, 'Gandhi And Harijans', p. 434.

## [7]

From 1935 onwards Gandhi became more open in his criticism of the caste system itself. Nehru reported that Gandhi “did not believe in the caste system except in some idealised form of occupation .... I am undermining it completely, he said, by my tackling untouchability .... If untouchability goes ... the caste system goes. So I am concentrating on that.”<sup>255</sup> Coward argues that in the 1940s Gandhi’s emphasis seemed to change “... as a result of his continually having to contend with Ambedkar’s critique.”<sup>256</sup> David Hardiman and Nagaraj fully accept this view. By learning of the discrimination personally faced by Ambedkar even at the height of his prominence, Gandhi became more sensitive to the “structural roots” of caste discrimination. Nagaraj argues that “because of this confrontation [with Ambedkar] ..., [Gandhi] had taken over economics from Babasaheb ..., [and] adopted the primacy of economic uplift ....”<sup>257</sup> Therefore, from mid-1930s, rather than continuing to exalt a purified caste order purged of untouchability, Gandhi began to call for the full repudiation of caste.<sup>258</sup> Coward asserts that “[it] was becoming clear to him that the attitudes of caste-Hindus were not changing.”<sup>259</sup> In a 1945 conversation Gandhi debates the possibility of going on another fast but doubts it would change Hindus – a marked reversal of his earlier thinking at the time of his Poona fasts.<sup>260</sup>

“Even the Harijan Sevak Sangh, Gandhi said,” writes Coward, “needed to rethink its goal from the uplift and education of Untouchables to the re-education of the caste-Hindus.”<sup>261</sup> Gandhi suggested that it was easier to educate the Untouchables than the caste-Hindus: “You can educate ‘Harijans’ by giving them scholarships,

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<sup>255</sup> Gandhi, *Revenge And Reconciliation*, p. 253.

<sup>256</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 62.

<sup>257</sup> Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet*, p. 56. At the same time, through Gandhi’s rhetoric of self-purification of the caste-Hindus, Ambedkar came to recognise that Dalit emancipation required an element of moral regeneration alongside economic opportunity.

<sup>258</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society, And Politics*, p. 251, fn. 40. Bayly observes that “[in] the 1940s Gandhi called for full repudiation of caste rather than his earlier goal of a purified caste order purged of untouchability.”

<sup>259</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 62.

<sup>260</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 81, p. 119.

<sup>261</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 62.

hostels, etc., but no such way is possible among the caste-Hindus.”<sup>262</sup> Coward argues that while Gandhi’s attempt to prick the conscience of the caste-Hindus through the anti-untouchability campaign did change the lives of some Hindus, and may have sensitised the nation to the evil of untouchability, the vast majority did not significantly alter their behaviour. David Hardiman’s analysis fully accepts this view. He argues that by the 1940s, “seeing the slow progress of his ‘Harijan’ work, Gandhi became more open to the idea of a direct state-led assault on the practice of untouchability.” He argues that Gandhi, therefore, supported the banning of the practice of untouchability by law, and gave his full support to a policy of reservations of seats for ‘Harijans’ in elections.<sup>263</sup>

Gandhi, in 1945, seemed to adopt Ambedkar’s approach when “he asked educated ‘Harijans’ to participate in politics and be more than a match for their political competitors.”<sup>264</sup> While ‘Harijans’ “can take assistance from the caste-Hindus (the previously stated goal of the Harijan Sevak Sangh), the more ‘Harijans’ lean on such assistance, the less likely are they to uplift themselves and the rest of society.”<sup>265</sup> This is far from Gandhi’s counsel of the 1920s and 1930s, argues Coward, “when he urged Untouchables to remain passive but become clean in personal habit, while he convinced the caste-Hindus to change their sinful ways.”<sup>266</sup> Coward further emphasises that in the end Gandhi seems to adopt the strategy (with regard to untouchability) that Ambedkar had advocated all along. Perhaps that is why, as independence approached, Gandhi advised Nehru and Patel to include Ambedkar in India’s first cabinet.<sup>267</sup> Hardiman argues that many Congress members resented this move, but it followed from Gandhi’s belief that one should always reach out to and try to incorporate an opponent.<sup>268</sup> The Congress had won the bulk of ‘Harijan’ seats in the 1946 elections, and routed the Scheduled Castes Federation, thereby ending the fear of ‘Harijan’ separatism. It had no reason to invite Ambedkar to join the Cabinet when he was not even a member of the Congress party.

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<sup>262</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 81, p. 119.

<sup>263</sup> D. Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time And Ours*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 134.

<sup>264</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 62.

<sup>265</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 81, p. 120.

<sup>266</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 62.

<sup>267</sup> Gandhi, *Revenge And Reconciliation*, p. 256.

<sup>268</sup> Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time*, p. 134.



This was possible because Gandhi had succeeded in creating the necessary moral consensus for abolishing untouchability and that the Government of independent India should be able to enact appropriate legislation without fear of popular resistance.<sup>269</sup> He wanted the Government to ban untouchability and punish those found guilty of practicing it. He also wanted it to introduce a massive social, educational and economic programme of ‘Harijan’ uplift, including giving them land for resettlement and necessary financial grants. He proposed that all elected bodies should reserve seats for them in proportion to their number in the population as a whole, but was against reservations in employment and in school and university admissions where merit alone was to count. He asked political parties to actively encourage ‘Harijan’ participation, and hoped that the Congress would give a lead by rotating its higher offices among the minority communities, and by assigning them proportional representation on its district and working committees. He was keen that the Constitution of independent India should lay down the basic framework of such a programme. He took considerable interest in the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly and kept in close touch with its leaders.

### [8]

A corollary to the above assertion is that, a hundred years ago, Abraham Lincoln had to face the same dilemma as Gandhi had to face in India. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, argues Rajmohan, some persons of conscience in what until then was Britain’s American colony had also been forced to prioritise. Should they focus their energies on opposing slavery or on ending British rule? To an American who pleaded that he should give up the idea of abolishing slavery in order to save the Union, Lincoln boldly replied: “If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount project is to save the Union, and not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it. If I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would do it.”<sup>270</sup> Nothing

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<sup>269</sup> Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition And Reform*, p. 269.

<sup>270</sup> Quoted in Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, pp. 50-51

could be clearer than this avowal that if he had to choose between the preservation of the Union and the abolition of slavery, Lincoln would prefer the preservation of the Union. Thus in the end, argues Rajmohan, independence attracted more American energy than opposing slavery. It was only in 1865, shortly before the South surrendered in the Civil War, that slavery was declared illegal by Lincoln.

Gandhi found the same predicament confronting him. “Gandhi refused to concede that independence was more important to him than the removal of untouchability,” asserts Rajmohan. But he was not in a position to make the abolition of untouchability the end-all and be-all of his life. The liberation of his country from the yoke of the British came to be his first concern, as the preservation of the Union had come to be Abraham Lincoln’s. In this colossal struggle with the British, Gandhi had to have the whole of India behind him. He hoped to win over the Muslim support by his support of the Khilafat Movement of the Ali Brothers. He spoke out for the abolition of untouchability, but in those circumstances to demand for the “abolition of untouchability” says Rajmohan, “could have destroyed the Untouchables if everything about every Hindu had been assailed, and all caste-Hindus provoked and polarised.”<sup>271</sup>

Rajmohan argues that Gandhi’s imperial foes – Winston Churchill, Lord Linlithgow and Archibald Wavell – were never in two minds as to Gandhi’s purpose, all of them agreeing that ending British rule was his dominant passion. In 1947, Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief during the Quit India Movement and Viceroy from 1943 to 1947, called Gandhi “an implacable foe of Empire” and the “most formidable” of the opponents “who have detached portions of the British Empire in recent years.” The opposition of the Muslims and the Untouchables was the trump card the British had, to oppose the demands of the National Congress. Time and again they had therefore to choose between struggling against an Indian oppression and struggling against European subjugation. Or, they alternated and oscillated between the two.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Rajmohan, *The Good Boatman*, p. 242.

<sup>272</sup> R. Gandhi, ‘Independence And Social Justice: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, No. 15, (April 11, 2015), p. 40.

Recalling that Gandhi had “again and again” said that with untouchability Indians were “not fit” for *Swaraj*, C. F. Andrews<sup>273</sup> asked Gandhi to focus solely on untouchability and not try “to serve two masters.”<sup>274</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Gandhi, one can look at the reasons he gave for declining the earnest advice. “My dear Charlie: My life is one indivisible whole. It is not built after the compartmental system. Satyagraha, civil resistance, untouchability, [and] Hindu-Muslim unity ... are indivisible parts of a whole. You will find at one time in my life an emphasis on one thing, at another time on [an] other. But that is just like a pianist now emphasising one note and now [another]. But they are all related to one another. It is utterly impossible for me to say: ‘I have now nothing to do with civil disobedience or *Swaraj*!’ *Not only so .... Full and final removal of untouchability ... is utterly impossible without Swaraj* ...”<sup>275</sup>

In this context, Wadia argues that Dr Ambedkar is fond of posing the question “why Gandhi never undertook a fast unto death on behalf of the Untouchables?” Wadia emphasises that Gandhi was shrewd enough to know his limitations and that such a fast would not have succeeded in dethroning the centuries-old prejudices of orthodox Hindus. The fast that he did undertake after the declaration of the British Government in favour of granting separate representation to the Untouchables, contends Wadia, “was really a fast in support of the unity of the Hindus rather than in the interests of the Untouchables as such.” Wadia rightly contends that “as a matter of practical politics nobody can blame Gandhi for not having done more for the Untouchables than he did up to the time independence was achieved.” The acid test for Gandhi would have come after independence as it did in the case of Abraham Lincoln after his successful emergence out of the Civil War. Once the Union was saved, he was honest enough to keep his word and the emancipation of the Negro slaves followed. An assassin’s bullet took Gandhi’s life within six months after independence. Whether he would have felt like undertaking a fast unto death for the

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<sup>273</sup> Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), a Christian missionary, educator and social reformer in India, was a close friend of Gandhi and identified with the cause of India’s independence.

<sup>274</sup> D. M. Gracie, *Gandhi And Charlie*, Cambridge, Mass, Cowley, 1989, p. 59, quoted in Gandhi, ‘Independence And Social Justice’, p. 41.

<sup>275</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 55, pp. 169-96.

abolition of untouchability, and not merely by legislation, which has proved so infructuous, says Wadia, “it is anybody’s guess.”<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Wadia, ‘Untouchability’, p. 52.

## Divide Et Impera British Policy Towards ‘Untouchables’

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*“I [Churchill] think the main difference between us [Churchill and Linlithgow] is that you [Linlithgow] consider a united All-India as end desirable in itself; whereas I regard it as an abstraction which in so far as it becomes real will be fundamentally injurious to British interests. ... I’m not at all attracted by the prospect of one united India which will show us the door. We might not be able to prevent it, but that we should devote our best efforts to producing it, is to my mind distressing and repugnant in the last degree .... I want to see the British Empire preserved for a few more generations in all its strengths and splendour. Only the most prodigious exertions of British genius will achieve this aim.”<sup>1</sup> – Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister*

### [1]

**I**t was quite fashionable among colonial administrators to omit rather than highlight that “British rule and British policy hold a special responsibility for the growth of communalism in modern India.”<sup>2</sup> They were joined by some scholars to exonerate the British of their responsibility in contributing to communalism.<sup>3</sup> This is, however, not to suggest as other scholars like Gopal Krishna does, that “communalism was *essentially a product of British policy ...*,”<sup>4</sup> or as Francis Robinson writes: “The British *deliberately* created division in Indian society for their own imperial purpose ....”<sup>5</sup> The British policy of ‘divide and rule’ could succeed only because something in the internal social, economic, cultural and political

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<sup>1</sup> Papers of 2nd Marquess of Linlithgow As Viceroy of India 1936-43, (hereafter, *Linlithgow Papers*), Roll No. 150, Winston Churchill to Linlithgow, 3rd November 1937, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), New Delhi, India.

<sup>2</sup> B. Chandra, *Communalism In Modern India*, New Delhi, Har-Anand Publication, 2008, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> For example, G. Krishna, ‘Religion In Politics’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Delhi, Vol. VIII, No. 4, December 1971, pp. 362-94; F. Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics Of The United Provinces’ Muslims, 1860-1923*, Delhi, Vikas Publications, 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Krishna, ‘Religion’, pp. 363-64, (emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, p. 2, (emphasis mine).

conditions of Indian society favoured its success.<sup>6</sup> While the British did not create differences, argues Beni Prasad, “... the British Government did strike on policies and actions to *sustain* and *accentuate* ... differences between ... communities.”<sup>7</sup> Bipan Chandra also points out that “communalism could grow not only because it served the political needs of colonialism but also because it met the social needs of *some* sections of Indian society.”<sup>8</sup> After all, “the social classes and groups involved, ... *lacked* the political power to push their interests ... and could hardly have gone far, or even dared to try to do so, in the absence of support from the colonial state.”<sup>9</sup>

As the struggle between Nationalism and Imperialism gathered momentum in India in the first half of the twentieth century, the cleavages that characterised the sub-continent – cleavages of religion, community and class, particularly between the Hindus and the Muslims – became a matter of serious expediency to the participants involved in the confrontation. The British statesmen who framed imperial policy, and the British civil servants, who presided over its implementation, spent considerable time in locating such cleavages and in drawing them into constitutional procedures, which they devised in response to the growing sentiment of nationalism. However, for the nationalist leaders, prominent among them being Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi), these cleavages posed an insurmountable challenge before the transformation of India into a modern nation-state.

The Hindu-Muslim divide was not the only one with which Gandhi had to reckon as the leader of the National Movement, however. There were other divisions within the Hindu community itself, which threatened to erupt into open at certain critical junctures, and could prove disastrous for the cultural and political unity of the sub-continent. One such crucial division related to the caste-Hindus and the

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<sup>6</sup> The most important contemporary Indian analyst of the communal problem, K. B. Krishna analyzed at length the social roots of communalism and then wrote that “[these] struggles (within Indian social classes and groups), arising from the social economy of the country, are *accelerated* in an epoch of the development of Indian capitalism under feudal conditions, by British imperialism, by its policy of *counterpoise* ...” K. B. Krishna, *The Problem Of Minorities Or Communal Representation In India*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1939, pp. 296 & 346, (emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> B. Prasad, *The Hindu-Muslim Questions*, Allahabad, Kitabistan, 1941, p. 163, (emphasis mine).

<sup>8</sup> Chandra, *Communalism*, p. 269.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274, (emphasis mine).

Untouchables. Relations between these two components of the Hindu community came to a head during the constitutional deliberations of 1930-31, prefaced and introduced by the British. This got accentuated when the British announced the Communal Award in 1932. It took a “fast unto death” by Gandhi to stop a breach pregnant with the most disastrous possibilities for India. This and the subsequent chapter will chronologically analyse British policy towards the Depressed Classes from the time of the first Decennial Census in 1871-72 till the conclusion of the Poona Pact in 1932. This chapter argues that the British interest in the Depressed Classes became livelier as the nationalist pressure grew with the advent of Gandhi. The Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement (1919-21) reminded them of the 1857 uprising which conclusively proved that the Hindus and Muslims were not irreconcilably inimical. In pursuance of the common pursuit they could again come together and fight under a common banner. Though the British continued to equate freedom struggle with Hindu nationalism, they had a lurking fear that it was unsafe to rely on Hindu-Muslim dissensions for keeping the growing nationalist sentiment under control. This realisation was to have a lasting effect on the evolution of their policy towards the Depressed Classes.

## [2]

The British followed the strategic policy of dividing Indians on communal lines, and giving support to communalists, from the end of the nineteenth century. ‘Divide and rule’ proved to be an important instrument of colonial policy in an effort to thwart the rising tide of the Indian National Movement ever since the founding of the Indian National Congress<sup>10</sup> in 1885. A key device for this strategy that was most capable of breaking the people were ‘separate electorates’ – a benefit which a group could avail *only by asserting its separateness*. It was in full knowledge of how separate electorates would wrench the Muslims away from the rest of the Indians that Lord Minto (1905-1910) had made a delegation of Muslims submit a demand for separate electorates and then agreed graciously to concede the demand.<sup>11</sup> The same

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<sup>10</sup> The Indian National Congress, a political ‘party’ founded in 1885, is also referred to as the ‘Congress’ in the text.

<sup>11</sup> Lord Minto was the Viceroy of India from 1905 to 1910. In 1909 the Morley-Minto Reforms took the momentous step of conceding ‘separate electorate’ to Muslims in electoral politics at all levels of

set of operations was set afoot for the Untouchables. In fact, the Untouchables had been targeted by the British administrators for even longer time than the Muslims. Eleanor Zelliot argues that “[the] granting of separate electorates for Muslims, in which they alone would vote, brought the *idea* of communal electorates for *minorities to the forefront* .... [It] also made *numbers* important.”<sup>12</sup>

The British remained pre-occupied with a political dimension – whether the vast number of Untouchables were truly Hindus and to be counted as such or not.<sup>13</sup> From the time of the first Decennial Census in 1871-72, they remained ‘obsessed’ with the question whether the Untouchables could be properly be classified as Hindus.<sup>14</sup> During the 1881, 1891 and 1901 Census enumerations, no specific guidelines were issued, but Census Superintendents like Denzil Ibbetson made efforts to collect data on selected castes and tribes. In 1901, H. H. Risley, the Census Commissioner of India, introduced the principle of social precedence for the classification of castes.<sup>15</sup> Around 1901, the British also floated the term ‘Depressed Classes’ in an attempt to artificially transform the Untouchables into an all-India community.<sup>16</sup> The reference to, or inference of, the Untouchables became more clear at the time of the 1911 Census when E. A. Gait, the Commissioner of Census, pointed out that “the Census returns of Hindus are misleading as they include millions of (Untouchable) people who are *not* really Hindus at all, who are denied the ministrations of the Brahmans and are forbidden to enter Hindu temples, and who, in many cases, are regarded as so unclean that their touch, or even their proximity,

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representation, which had opened new arenas of competition and community division, yet negated popular representation India.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in M. Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law And The Backward Classes In India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 26, (emphasis mine).

<sup>13</sup> See, S. K. Gupta, *The Scheduled Castes In Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence As A Political Power*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, Ch. 2.

<sup>14</sup> O. Mendelsohn & M. Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 27-29.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Burns, during the Census operations for 1901, classified castes on the basis of social precedence. Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> D. Swarup & M. Jain, (eds.), *The Rajah-Moonje Pact: Documents On A Forgotten Chapter Of Indian History*, Delhi, Originals, 2007, p. 9.



causes pollution.”<sup>17</sup> Consider the Bhangis or the Chuhras, Gait wrote, their religion “is a curious mixture of various faiths.”<sup>18</sup> These people are *not* Hindus, reported Gait, and therefore the British need not assume that they will be led by the Hindus in the Congress. Gait, therefore, suggested that the Untouchables who could *not* really be considered Hindus be listed separately in a special table.<sup>19</sup> Whether the vast numbers of the Untouchables were truly Hindus, or were to be counted as such or not, became an important question for the first time.<sup>20</sup> It was in this context that the Indian National Congress was dubbed as a Hindu body by the British Government.

It was in 1905, when the British Government was engaged in considering the introduction of constitutional reforms to check the rising national aspirations, like the Morley-Minto Reforms, that the Muslim leaders also began to think of the methods to protect their interests against the Hindu majority. In their view since the Untouchables were regarded by the caste-Hindus as beyond the pale of Hinduism, their number should not be included in any computation of Hindu population for the purposes of constitutional and political arrangements. A delegation of Muslim leaders under the leadership of the Aga Khan (then President of the All-India Muslim League) met the Viceroy, Lord Minto at Simla, following which the British began to calculate that “the Mahomedans of India number, according to the Census taken in 1901, over sixty-two millions or between one-fifth to one-fourth of the total population of His Majesty’s Indian dominions, and if a reduction is made for ... those (Untouchable) classes who are ordinarily classified as Hindus but properly speaking are *not* Hindus *at all*, the proportion of Mahomedans to the Hindu majority becomes much larger.”<sup>21</sup> Ambedkar

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<sup>17</sup> Government of India, Home Department (Census), *Deposit, November 1910, No. 1*, NAI, New Delhi, India, (emphasis mine).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> P. R. S. Aiyer, ‘The Depressed Classes’, *The Indian Review*, Vol. II, December 1910, pp. 946-47. The Government made political manipulations in the Census returns comparatively easier in 1911 when it left the people ‘free to say what their religion was’. Government of India, *Census Of India: 1911, Part I – Report*, Calcutta, Superintendent Government Printing, 1912, p. 125.

<sup>20</sup> Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *The Times Of India*, 6th October 1906, (emphasis mine). It was reported in the *Indian Review* that Muslims were adamant that this strength of “outcastes [who] are beyond of Hinduism” should not “swell the numerical force of the Hindus.” *Indian Review*, September 1910, quoted in A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits And The Politics Of Modern India*, Ranikhet, Permanent Clack, 2010, p. 131.

himself commented on Muslim attempts to use the Untouchables as a tool to reduce the numerical strength of the Hindus. “The Muslims,” he said, “have always been looking at the Depressed Classes with a sense of longing and much of the jealousy between Hindus and Muslims arises out of the fear of the latter that the former might become stronger by assimilating the Depressed Classes. In 1909 the Muslims ...” suggested with intrepidity that “the Depressed Classes should *not* be enrolled as Hindus.”<sup>22</sup>

Though the Untouchables did not gain any substantial place in the Government of India (GOI) Act 1909, but, “it was being acknowledged that they were a category *apart* suffering from social exclusion.”<sup>23</sup> The British taking the cue from the Muslims even suggested creation of constituencies on the basis of “*caste and religious* differences.”<sup>24</sup> The caste-Hindus were alarmed. The colonial turn to social questions appeared as a convenient way to *avoid* sharing the political power. How could the British share or abdicate power, it was being argued, if the social grounds for power sharing were not clear in the first place: who could the British take as the representatives of the Indian nation? Given the social inequities in Indian society, the British argued, could they rely upon the liberal values of those who were taken as representatives?<sup>25</sup> The Depressed Classes agreed and lent active support to the view. For example, the leaders of the various Depressed Classes’ Associations insisted that their people were not party to the national movement for freedom. They argued that what was going on in India was not a national movement *at all*, and that the Congress represented *only* the caste-Hindus among the people of India, thereby giving

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<sup>22</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan Or The Partition Of India*, Bombay, Thacker & Co., 1946, p. 235, (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> S. Thorat & N. Kumar, (eds.), *B. R. Ambedkar: Perspectives On Social Exclusion And Inclusive Policies*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 14, (emphasis mine).

<sup>24</sup> *The Indian Social Reformer*, 3rd January 1909, cited in T. Nath, *Politics Of The Depressed Classes*, Delhi, Deputy Publications, 1987, p. 44, (emphasis mine).

<sup>25</sup> Communalism was presented by the Colonial Government as the problem of the defence of minorities. The defence of minorities became a major part of the theory of imperialist legitimation, as its other components – welfare of the colonised, civilising mission, white man’s burden, etc. – got increasingly discredited. The imperialist statesmen, officials and ideologues at that stage said that Britain had to continue to rule India because it alone could protect the minorities from domination, exploitation and suppression by the majority.

substance to British claims. It was this that made them an instrument of imperialism and reaction, even when they might have been nationalists.

While the British Government was still collecting information to formulate a policy aimed at separating the Untouchables from the Hindu community, World War I broke out in 1914. The Government now began to woo the Indian public opinion to obtain assistance for recruitment to the army and to ensure the regular supply of war-material from India. The war years were also marked by an important declaration in the Home of Commons by E. S. Montagu, Secretary of State for India, on 20th August 1917, which seemed to foreshadow some definite transfer of responsible Government to the Indians. The object of the British policy was defined to be “not only the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration, but also the granting of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire.”<sup>26</sup> The declaration sufficiently indicated the nature of forthcoming constitutional reforms. However, the Montagu declaration also gave a *fillip* to the politics of *numbers*. Lala Lajpat Rai observed that after the announcement “a great political capital” was made of the Depressed Classes and their number arbitrarily increased.<sup>27</sup> “In 1917,” he stated, “the total population classed according to the list in the ‘Quinquennial Education Report’ as *depressed* amounted to around [thirty-one] million persons .... Since then the number has swollen, and in the report of 1921 itself the total figures mount up to nearly 52.7 millions .... But the Census Commissioner guesses that the number may be between [fifty-five] and [sixty] millions.”<sup>28</sup> The country by that time had witnessed important political developments, for example, the Lucknow Pact (1916) and the launching of the Home Rule Movement. The Lucknow Pact had re-united the two wings of the Congress and had harmonised communal interests between the Hindus and the Muslims in preparation for a scheme of Self-Government. The Home Rule Movement was demanding Self-Government for *all* Indians by obtaining the status of Dominion for India within the British Empire.

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<sup>26</sup> Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 1917, reproduced in E. F. Irschick, *Politics And Social Conflict In South India: The Non-Brahman Movement And Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929*, Bombay, University of California Press, 1969, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> L. Lajpat Rai, *Unhappy India*, Calcutta, Banna Publishing Company, 1928, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

## [3]

The Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford (1916-21) and the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Samuel Montagu (1917-22) received many deputations when they toured the country in connection with the constitutional reforms. Many communities anticipating major changes in the constitutional structure of the country, began preparing schemes to 'safeguard' their interests. These included, other than the Muslim separatists, many groups of people from among the Depressed Classes, who were at the time strongly disfavoured 'Home Rule', believing it to mean more or less 'Hindu Rule'. Many leaders, representing the Depressed Classes, felt that the Hindu Government officers would not shrink from unscrupulously using their authority to persecute the Depressed Classes if they *dared* to claim equal rights with other people who possessed the advantage of higher birth. Instead of 'Home-Rulers', they preferred to be ruled by a bureaucracy which would not persecute them for having been born Untouchables.<sup>29</sup>

The Depressed Classes held a number of meetings in the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies to publicise their views and pass resolutions. They also met the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India. One such meeting was that of the Namasudra representatives of all the districts of Bengal under the Presidency of Purna Chandra Mullick of Faridpur held at Dalhousie Institute, Calcutta. This all Namasudra conference protested against "the gross misrepresentation of facts" that were being made by the caste-Hindu leaders, in a "self-conceived" character posing as representatives, with regard to the real wishes of the people about 'Home Rule'. They also pointed out that any sudden and big advance towards the "progressive realisation of responsible Government," as contemplated by some of the post-war schemes, would not only be derogatory to the interests of the Depressed Classes but make their future progress utterly impossible since any great transference of powers at the moment would mean undue strengthening of the hands of the caste-Hindus. Their interests were *contradictory* to the interests of the Depressed Classes in view of the then composition of Hindu community.<sup>30</sup> In Bombay, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, a

<sup>29</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 50. In such a belief, Hinduism had not till then evolved to such an extent as to allow equal social and religious rights to the Depressed Classes.

<sup>30</sup> *The Statesman*, 4th November 1917, cited in Nath, *Depressed Classes*, pp. 52-53. This All-Namasudra Conference was held on 28th October 1917.

leader of the Non-Brahmin Movement, wrote a letter to Lord Willingdon, Governor of Bengal, strongly recommending “communal representation down to the Untouchables, and especially for them.”<sup>31</sup> Another Non-Brahman took two politically active Untouchables, G. A. Gavai and Kisan Fago Bansode (Mahars), to visit the Secretary of State for India, and although one did not speak English, Montagu “was *struck* by their extraordinary intelligence.”<sup>32</sup> Some other Non-Brahmin leaders of Western India like Kothari, Lathe, Bole and Bhaskarrao Jadhav, in their memorials to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State, also demanded ‘communal representation’ for the Depressed Classes.<sup>33</sup> In yet another conference, in Bombay, under the leadership of Subhedar Ganpatrao Govind Rokde, a demand was made not only for representation but also for separate electorates for the Untouchables.<sup>34</sup> It may thus be noted that the British had succeeded in germinating the notion among the Untouchables that they were *not* Hindus. This indicated the British objective of politicising the problem of untouchability and according a *separate* political identity to the Untouchables.

Later, when the Southborough Committee<sup>35</sup> came to India to concretise the Montagu-Chelmsford Report, that is, to devise franchise, to frame constituencies and to recommend adjustments required in the form of proposed popular Government, it again met organised groups, representing the Depressed Classes. It was in 1919 that Ambedkar, for the first time, intervened in the formulation of British policies with regard to the Untouchables by presenting a written statement to the Committee. Ambedkar had a daunting task to represent the claims of the Untouchables as a separate entity, detached from the Hindu community to make them qualify for separate electorates. The first challenge before him was, therefore, *how* to establish the identity of the Untouchables as ‘distinct’ in a society which was rooted in the

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<sup>31</sup> D. Keer, *Shahu Chhatrapati: A Royal Revolutionary*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1976, p. 298.

<sup>32</sup> E. S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary*, (ed., V. S. Montagu), London, William Heinemann, 1930, p. 306.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>34</sup> C. A. Kairmode, *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, Vol. I (in Marathi), Bombay, Y. B. Ambedkar, 1952, pp. 266-67, cited in E. Zelliott, ‘Congress And The Untouchables, 1917-1950’, in R. Sisson & S. Wolpert, (eds.), *Congress And Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> The Southborough Committee (1919) was appointed to look into the claims of various communities, to set franchise rights for their representation in the Legislature.

popular belief that the Untouchables and the Hindus were same, having *no* separate interests. But Ambedkar was working in the background of a few developments whereby the British had been *feeding* on the divisive forces within India. For example, when Ambedkar got ready to represent the Untouchables as separate from the Hindus, the British had recognised the claims of the Muslims as a minority by granting them separate electorates in 1909; they had toyed with the idea to accept the demands of the Sikhs, the Anglo-Indians and the Untouchables for separate representation in the Legislature in the name of granting some political rights for the establishment of Self-Government under the British rule. Colonialism was thinking by the policy of ‘divide and rule’. So when Ambedkar deposed before the Committee, his arguments came to rest on two premises: (1) he believed that “as religion divides the Hindus, Muslims, Parses, Christians, etc., to become a community, *similarly* caste divides Hindus into low and higher castes,” and (2) he asserted that “there was a lack of commonality of aims, beliefs, customs, etc., ... among the Untouchables and the caste-Hindus.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the Untouchables were a distinct community and should be treated as such in the perception of Ambedkar.

Such perceptions to establish an identity for the Untouchables, separate and distinct from the Hindus, was revealing. It was meant to *qualify* the Untouchables for separate electorates. The perception was, however, paradoxical. Ambedkar had refused to consider the Untouchables as being within Hinduism, yet he qualified his testimony to the Southborough Committee by using the term ‘Hindus’ for both the communities. According to him, “[the] real social divisions of India” were, among others, “(1) Touchable *Hindus*, (2) Untouchable *Hindus*, ....”<sup>37</sup> Again in a letter to *The Times of India*, Ambedkar adopted a contraposition to his own testimony. Commenting on the demand for ‘Home Rule’, Ambedkar questioned “[if] the backward and down-trodden (Untouchable) classes are to be denied equal status by their *co-religionists* (Hindus), ... what *right* has this politically advanced (Hindu)

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<sup>36</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings And Speeches*, (ed., V. Moon), Vol. 1, Bombay, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991, ‘Evidence Before The Southborough Committee’, pp. 247-77, (emphasis mine). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BAWS* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>37</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 68.

class to *demand* Home Rule for India?”<sup>38</sup> He went on to state that “... the real obstruction in their (Hindus’) way is ... their less fortunate (Untouchable) countrymen belonging to the *same* religion, following the *same* custom ... for whose backward condition the advanced (Hindu) classes are morally responsible.”<sup>39</sup> This was Ambedkar’s exposition publicly given, in which he affirmatively acknowledged that the Untouchables and the Hindus are ‘co-religionists’. It was therefore precisely in order to make the Untouchables qualify for separate electorates that Ambedkar testified for them being a *separate* community from the Hindus. Eleanor Zelliot is of the opinion that in 1919, Ambedkar “asked for separate electorates, as did Jains, Marathas, Lingayats, Marwadis and a number of other groups in a ‘sort of separate electorate fever’ ...”<sup>40</sup> By 1919, therefore, “a new consciousness in the various Hindu groups ...” that a “... community may claim representation only on the ground of separate interests which require protection,”<sup>41</sup> as the British were advocating, gained ground among the Depressed Classes. This is evident (as discussed above) from the views publicised, resolutions passed and testimonies presented by the various Depressed Classes’ Associations before the Southborough Committee, the Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India.

So far as representation of the Depressed Classes in the Legislature was concerned Christophe Jaffrelot argues that “[it] was only in an appended document that Ambedkar emphasised the need for a ‘community electorate’ for the Untouchables at the *expense* of reserved seats formula.”<sup>42</sup> Sukhadeo Thorat and Narender Kumar fully accept this view. They argue that “Ambedkar recommended

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<sup>38</sup> *The Times of India*, 19th January 1919, (emphasis mine).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>40</sup> E. Zelliot, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means: The Mahars Of Maharashtra’, in R. Kothari, (ed.), *Caste In Indian Politics*, (Revised by J. Manor), Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2010, p. 43, (emphasis mine). Also, E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit: Essays On The Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1996, p. 103, (emphasis mine).

<sup>41</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 71, (emphasis mine). Ambedkar argues that “[in] India, such interests are of three kinds only: either they arise out of religious antipathies which are pretty strong in India, or out of the backward state of a community in educational terms, or out of the socio-religious disabilities to which a community may be subjected.”

<sup>42</sup> C. Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar And Untouchability: Analysing And Fighting Caste*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 54, (emphasis mine).

either to reserve seats in plural constituencies for communities who otherwise cannot secure personal recommendation *or* grant communal electorates on the lines of Muslim representation.”<sup>43</sup> The records, however, do not substantiate these assessments. Ambedkar believed that “the interests of the Untouchables can be represented by the Untouchables alone”<sup>44</sup> because they “are distinctly their own interests and no one else can *truly* voice them.”<sup>45</sup> For this, it was necessary that “they must have their own men in the Legislature to speak for them.”<sup>46</sup> In this context, Ambedkar strongly asserted that “[the] importance and necessity of ‘communal’ representation of the Untouchables’ in the Legislature ‘is *beyond* question.”<sup>47</sup> The evidence before the Southborough Committee by Ambedkar, however, had no substantial impact on the GOI Act 1919, so far as separate political representation through elections was concerned.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, he was able to convince the Committee that the “Untouchables were a *separate* entity in Indian society”<sup>49</sup> and *needed* separate representation. It was provided in the form of representation through *nomination* to the Depressed Classes and Ambedkar was *nominated* to the Bombay Legislative Council in 1926.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 17, (emphasis mine).

<sup>44</sup> G. Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar And The Dalit Movement In Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, p. 146; Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 71, (emphasis mine).

<sup>46</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 98.

<sup>47</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 84, (emphasis mine). D. Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life And Mission*, 4th Edition, New Delhi, Popular Prakashan, 2015, p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> According to the 1909 Act, only Muslims could vote in Muslim constituencies, while they could vote along with Hindus in the general seats. After the Act of 1919, Muslims could vote for Muslim candidates only and Hindus for Hindu candidates only.

<sup>49</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 61, (emphasis mine).

<sup>50</sup> The Southborough Committee, ignoring Ambedkar, gave them one nominated representative in the Bombay Legislative Assembly. The first man selected for representation was D. D. Gholap, a Mahar from Satara who had been in charge of Ambedkar’s newspaper, *Mooknayak*. Following the Muddiman Committee report on the working of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in 1925, another nominated Untouchable representative was added to the Bombay Legislative Council, and Ambedkar was named to this seat in 1926. Zelliott, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 39; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 98.



The British had an exact understanding of the Indian psyche. Historian Howard Malcolm in his work *Travels in South-Eastern Asia* advocated that “Hindustan could never have been subdued *but* by the help of her *own* children.”<sup>51</sup> The British were fortunate. They had *not* to create the divisions. They had *only* to feed the divisive forces. The feeding process began with the Act of 1909, which gave separate electorates to the Muslims. The Act of 1919 extended that privilege to other religious minorities and also gave *official recognition* to the Depressed Classes with representation in Central and Provincial Legislatures. Their representatives were the *nominees* of the Government. The British recognised the Untouchables as a specific social category, as is evident from the creation of an administrative notion, ‘Depressed Classes’, which was used in the Census of 1921 for the first time.<sup>52</sup> However, efforts to identify depressed groups as *distinct* proved inconclusive. The Director of the Census of India for 1921 observed that “[it] has been usual in recent years to speak of certain sections of the community as the ‘Depressed Classes’. So far as I am aware the term has no final definition, nor is it certain, exactly whom it covers.”<sup>53</sup> M. G. Hallett, Secretary to the Government of India, in a telegram to the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, on 21st August 1932, also admitted that “the Depressed Classes have not yet been defined, and ... possibly in some provinces there will be no such cases.”<sup>54</sup>

#### [4]

The British interest in the Depressed Classes, however, became livelier as the nationalist pressure grew with the advent of Gandhi. The Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement (1919-21) reminded them of the 1857 uprising which conclusively proved that the Hindus and Muslims were not irreconcilably inimical. In pursuance of the

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<sup>51</sup> H. Malcolm, *Travels In South-Eastern Asia: Embracing Hindustan, Malaya, Siam, And China*, Boston, Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1839, p. 26, (emphasis mine). Also quoted in A. M. Rajasekhariah, *B. R. Ambedkar. The Politics Of Emancipation*, Sindhu Publications, Bombay, 1971, p. 114, (emphasis mine).

<sup>52</sup> C. Jaffrelot, ‘Caste And Politics’, *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Autumn 2010), p. 96.

<sup>53</sup> Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Government of India, Home Department (Political), *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

common pursuit they could again come together and fight under a common banner.<sup>55</sup> Though the British continued to equate freedom struggle with Hindu nationalism, they had a lurking fear that it was unsafe to rely on Hindu-Muslim dissensions for keeping the growing nationalist sentiment under control. This realisation was to have a lasting effect on the evolution of their policy towards the Depressed Classes. The British started looking for other divisions in Indian society to use them as counterpoise against growing Hindu-Muslim solidarity and as a safety valve for crises periods. Amongst the 'other divisions', the traditional division of the Hindu community into caste-Hindus and the Untouchables was, perhaps, the strongest.<sup>56</sup> They were next only to Muslims in number. Though not as well organised as the Muslims, they were of late acquiring some political consciousness. Not only that, the educated among them had all along been anti-Congress.<sup>57</sup>

The British had realised that Hindu-Muslim relations, the Brahman-Non-Brahman differences and the special positions of Indian Princely States could all be surmounted through adjustment in the political arrangements. The condition of the Untouchables, however, was believed to be not amenable to such adjustments, as the British believed that the disabilities of the Untouchables were inextricably bound up with the Hindu social system. The British, however, became aware that they had done little to win the confidence of the Untouchables. This speeded up the British efforts to ameliorate their condition, while attempting simultaneously to *politicise* and to *communalise* them so that they could be weaned favourably towards the British. This was meant to provide an effective counterpoise to the national movement.

The British embarked on a series of unprecedented schemes to systematically advance the interests of the Depressed Classes to achieve their political purpose. In order to achieve this, the Government appointed a Commissioner of Labour in Madras in 1919. He was meant to supervise such matters as the improvement of water supply, education, co-operative societies, and housing conditions, which were meant to help the Depressed Classes.<sup>58</sup> This preliminary step was soon followed in the other Presidencies. In the United Provinces, for example, special district supervisors were

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<sup>55</sup> S. Sinha, *Indian Independence In Perspective*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 200.

<sup>56</sup> S. C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle: 1920-1942*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 319.

<sup>57</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 80.

<sup>58</sup> *The Pioneer*, 19th January 1924, cited in Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 81.

appointed to work among the Depressed Classes. The Government of Bombay, too, appointed inspecting officers to spread educational facilities among the Depressed Classes.<sup>59</sup> Special scholarships were floated, allowances were made to help them purchase books and other educational requirements, while stress was laid upon the *right* of the outcastes to participate in the educational system. This was followed by the Government's action in 1923 to refuse grants-in-aid to *any* aided educational institution, which refused admission to the children of the Untouchables.<sup>60</sup> Such actions won the gratitude of the Untouchables towards the Government and they began to look up to the British as the guardian of their interests who would lend support in achieving their aspirations. Trilok Nath argues that "distressed by the indifference of the caste-Hindus and opportunistic stand of the Muslim leaders, the Depressed Classes became more critical of the general atmosphere and correspondingly enhanced their reliance on British."<sup>61</sup>

This was displayed through varied expressions. In 1922, the Depressed Classes succeeded in making a very insistent appeal for help through an enormous conference in Delhi, which was attended by at least thirty-thousand delegates. The conference discussed the wrongs done to them and simultaneously welcomed the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. In fact, the delegates sent a telegram to the Government requesting to approach the Prince personally and they were permitted to do so. The Chairman of the conference requested His Royal Highness to convey to His Majesty "their message that there are in India ... millions of human beings who are Untouchables and that they should be raised if India is really to be fit for Swaraj."<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, in the light of the 'Adi-Hindu' Movements in Manipur, Itawah, Etah and Kanpur districts, the Untouchables were prompted to demand *separate representation* and a fair proportion in the services *and* right to rise in revolt against

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<sup>59</sup> *The Indian Review*, March 1922, p. 199; August 1922, p. 550, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>60</sup> G. S. Ghurye, *Caste And Class In India*, Bombay, Popular Book Depot, 1969, p. 275.

<sup>61</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> *The Indian Review*, March 1922, p. 199; August 1922, p. 550, cited in *ibid*.

the caste-Hindus.<sup>63</sup> In 1924, the leaders of the Depressed Classes were protesting *against* further Indianisation of the services through written statements submitted to the Reform Enquiry Committee in which they argued the presence of a predominant European personnel in the services in the interest of the Depressed Classes.<sup>64</sup> M. C. Rajah, a popular Depressed Classes leader with a large following all over India, and especially in South India, even spoke of the necessity of maintaining the British character of the administration – “ask any ‘depressed classman’ whether he would serve under an Englishman or under an Indian, ... [the] answer would come out unhesitatingly in favour of the British.”<sup>65</sup> These sentiments and expressions were reiterated in the farewell address given to Lord Willingdon in 1924 in Madras. The address explained that “they (the Depressed Classes) were entirely opposed to the controlling hand of the British Government being removed from India, that they were against immediate Indianisation of the services, and that they strongly desired that the nation building departments, including education, should be entrusted to a senior European civil officer working under a European Executive Council Member.”<sup>66</sup>

The Depressed Classes expressed their *gratitude* to the British Government in other ways. In Madras, they argued before the Lee Commission (1923) that whatever improvement in their status had occurred was due to the efforts of the British Government and the European services. They even expressed the fear that if the European services were reduced, then they would lose what they had already won.<sup>67</sup> In 1926, the Depressed Classes were expressing gratitude to the Government in an ‘Untouchable’s’ conference at Allahabad for acknowledging their “political entity as a class” and restoring to them the right that had been usurped by the caste-Hindus. In fact, the President of the conference went a step further than expressing mere gratitude. In his address he complained of the paucity of their representation on the councils and the local bodies and argued that the Hindus who sat in the Assembly as their representatives were far from being the guardians of their interests. “They were

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<sup>63</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 8, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, p. 219. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>64</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 83.

<sup>65</sup> *The Pioneer*, 7th April 1924, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>67</sup> *The Pioneer*, 25th December 1925, cited in Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 84.

the very men whose oppression they could no longer tolerate.”<sup>68</sup> A *complete separation* in everything from the Hindus, Muslims and Christians was being demanded. In that alone they saw their salvation.<sup>69</sup>

While the Untouchables were struggling to assert their political identity, the British announced the appointment of an ‘all-white’ Statutory Commission in 1928, headed by Sir John Simon in response to the growing nationalist agitation. Non-inclusion of Indians in the Commission provoked protests from all political groups and resulted in a successful nation-wide boycott in which both the Congress and the Muslim League participated. By now, the Untouchables had more or less organised themselves and were beginning to press their demand for a share in the political power. They thus ranged themselves on the side of the Commission.

The popular belief in Dalit literature is that though *united* in welcoming the Simon Commission, the Depressed Classes were *divided* on the question of the means to be adopted for advancing their interests. Trilok Nath argues that two types of thinking prevailed – one led by M. C. Rajah, with a following all over India, especially in South India, and the second view was articulated by Ambedkar. The champions of the first school had been giving public expression to their views for some time now. Babu Ram Charana, representative of the Depressed Classes in the United Provinces Legislative Council and a close follower of Rajah, had declared that his community did not hope to get any political right in partnership with the Hindus. In his opinion, the only proper course was “*partition of rights*” as they could not fare well in “*jointness*.”<sup>70</sup> A special session of the Depressed Classes with representatives from all over India was convened in New Delhi to discuss “the question of reforms and to accord a benefiting welcome to the Simon Commission.”<sup>71</sup> Swami Achhutananda, Chairman of the reception committee, delivered a strong speech exhorting the Depressed Classes to assert themselves against the caste-Hindus and admire the blessings of the British Raj. G. A. Gavai of Central Provinces, Chhatrapati Shivaji Bhosely of Bombay and Janaki Das of Delhi delivered similar speeches. The

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<sup>68</sup> *The Indian Social Reformer*, 1st May 1926, cited in *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>70</sup> *The Indian Social Reformer*, 19th March 1927, cited in Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 96, (emphasis mine).

<sup>71</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 25th December 1927, cited in *ibid.*, p. 97.

conference urged the Government to create ‘separate electorates’ for the Untouchables by widening the franchise to enable their representatives to seek elections to Provincial and Central Legislatures.<sup>72</sup>

Eleanor Zelliot has argued that in 1928-29, the Depressed Classes were represented by different groups in their testimony before the Simon Commission, who were demanding separate electorates for themselves similar to that won by the Muslims.<sup>73</sup> Trilok Nath shows that out of eighteen Depressed Classes Associations, sixteen, “... including the All-India Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha of (M. C.) Rajah demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Classes.”<sup>74</sup> But, Ambedkar’s position *differed*. In his speech before the Simon Commission, Ambedkar was insisting “... upon *reservation of seats in joint electorates but only if adult franchise was granted* to the Depressed Classes.” Ambedkar had made it clear that *if* universal suffrage was *not* granted for the Depressed Classes, he would campaign for separate electorates.<sup>75</sup> In response to the popular belief that there was *no* consensus among the Depressed Classes’ leaders on the issue of separate electorates, Christophe Jaffrelot asserts that “in 1928, [Ambedkar] was not yet sure which was the best formula.”<sup>76</sup> But, according to Thomas Pantham, “... Ambedkar clearly and firmly *preferred* a separate electorate for the Untouchable minority as long as adult suffrage was not granted.”<sup>77</sup> Scholars like Eleanor Zelliot, emphasise that Ambedkar “did not renew,”

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<sup>72</sup> *The Statesman*, 28th February 1928, cited in *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>73</sup> Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 165; E. Zelliot, ‘Gandhi And Ambedkar – A Study In Leadership’, in J. M. Mahar, (ed.), *The Untouchables In Contemporary India*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1972, p. 84.

<sup>74</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 99, (emphasis mine).

<sup>75</sup> *BASW*, Vol. 2, pp. 356-60, ‘On Electorates And Franchise’; pp. 459-89 ‘Evidence Before the Indian Statutory Commission’. Christophe Jaffrelot argues that in 1928, Ambedkar “was not yet sure which was the best formula.” (Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, pp. 55-56) This ambivalence explains that, according to Dhananjay Keer, Ambedkar considered both options, whereas for Eleanor Zelliot, Ambedkar prioritised “a common electorate with reserved seats.” Zelliot, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>77</sup> T. Pantham, ‘Against Untouchability: The Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, in G. Guru, (ed.), *Humiliation: Claims And Context*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 189, (emphasis mine).

but “reversed his 1919 request for separate electorates.”<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Gail Omvedt also asserts that Ambedkar did “not insist upon communal electorates.”<sup>79</sup> According to Sukhadeo Thorat and Narender Kumar, Ambedkar’s stand before the Simon Commission represented a “major shift.”<sup>80</sup> And to some scholars Ambedkar’s stand on the issue threw up a “surprise element.”<sup>81</sup>

It may be pointed out that Ambedkar’s testimony before the Simon Commission was much more elaborate. It contained other evolving concerns. Ambedkar argued that “under joint electorates a minority gets a larger advantage ... than it does under a system of separate electorates, for with separate electorates a minority *only* gets its *own* quota of representation and no more. The rest of the House owes no allegiance to it and is therefore not influenced by the desire to meet the wishes of the minority. Under a system of joint electorates and reserved seats, the minority not only gets its quota of representation but every member of the majority ... if not a member of the minority, will certainly be a member of the minority” in the Legislatures.<sup>82</sup> The testimony demonstrates Ambedkar evolving as a leader with political grit, playing on the politics of numbers, but at the same time envisaging the possibility and potentiality of a bigger role for the Depressed Classes in the process of nation-building. In this context, Christophe Jaffrelot asserts that Ambedkar’s “reservations about separate electorates stemmed from his fear that they would divide the Indian nation. The choice of joint electorates with reserved seats was a compromise whose aim was to reconcile the defence of a minority and the desire to

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<sup>78</sup> Zelliott, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, pp. 42-43; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, pp. 101 & 103, (emphasis mine).

<sup>79</sup> G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards An Enlightened India*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2004, p. 38, (emphasis mine).

<sup>80</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 19, (emphasis mine).

<sup>81</sup> According to Christophe Jaffrelot, this attitude of Ambedkar in favour of reserved seats in joint electorates was all the more surprising given that sixteen of the eighteen Depressed Class organisations consulted by the Simon Commission in the Bombay Presidency favoured separate electorates. Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, fn. 11, p. 179.

<sup>82</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 2, p. 351. It is also argued that Ambedkar saw reserved seats in joint electorate to be in the best interest of the Untouchables. Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 99.

strengthen the Indian nation,”<sup>83</sup> which in the words of Gail Omvedt “can be described as nation building.”<sup>84</sup>

Ambedkar had thrown the bait of ‘adult franchise’ on the tables of the British Government which was keenly aware that Ambedkar was not the *sole* leader of the Depressed Classes, and that the Congress too had support among the Depressed Classes. The Government, therefore, could *never* agree to extend adult franchise to all the Untouchable adults, even though that would have met one of the major demands made by Ambedkar and would have also ensured, perhaps, the unqualified support of the Depressed Classes to the colonial state. The method of acquiring such support was however not politically expedient from the colonial perspective. It would have compelled the leaders among the Depressed Classes to embark on mass contact programme for the Depressed Classes. This could result in strengthening the mass base of the Congress in those provinces where the Congress had support of the Depressed Classes. That would have made the Congress emerge as a more popular force, something which the colonial state would not have gambled upon. It did not matter to the colonial state whether Ambedkar’s views changed from separate electorates to joint electorates but because the demand for joint electorates came with the proviso of adult franchise, that became unacceptable to the British.

The Simon Commission made careful enquiries as to the extent of changes which had come about in the status of the Depressed Classes in recent years. It particularly admired the efforts of the Depressed Classes Mission Society and the Salvation Army to the cause of the Depressed Classes and highly appreciated the work of individual higher caste-Hindus.<sup>85</sup> The Depressed Classes would “make no headway,” the Commission felt, so “long as they were represented solely by nominations, for nomination provided no opportunity for training them in politics.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 39. It is also argued by scholars, for example, Trilok Nath, that according to Ambedkar, “reservation of seats in joint electorates was in the best interests of the Depressed Classes.” Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 99.

<sup>85</sup> Government of India, Indian Statutory Commission, *Report Of The Indian Statutory Commission* (Simon Commission Report on India), Vol. 1 – Survey, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1929, pp. 39-40.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2 – Recommendations, p. 65.



At the same time, the Commission rejected the demand for separate electorates as it was opposed to “stereotyping the differences between the Depressed Classes and the remainder of the Hindus but such a step which,” if introduced, would produce “a new and serious [impediment] to their ultimate political amalgamation with others.” The Simon Commission Report finally granted reserved seats to the Depressed Classes, with the *proviso* that candidates’ competence would have to be endorsed by Provincial Governors.<sup>87</sup> The Report, furthermore, stipulated that “[these] seats would, of course, be reserved in *non-Muhamaddan* constituencies,”<sup>88</sup> as the Hindus were seen as splintered by caste and sect and, consequently, not as dangerous as a ‘community’ as the more cohesive Muslims. However, a balance was also maintained, as the number of seats reserved in the general constituencies for the Depressed Classes in all the provinces was insignificant.<sup>89</sup> Reserving a large number of seats for the Depressed Classes in general constituencies would have reduced the number of seats for the caste-Hindus. This would have encouraged Hindu ‘communalism’, by integrating them into a ‘community’. Hindus being in majority would have become a popular force and proved dangerous to colonialism, therefore serving a purpose opposite to that of divide and rule. The Report, however, remained a dead letter as the Congress had taken no part in its drafting.

Subsequently, the Indian Central Committee (1929) presented its report. This Report did not differ much from that of the Simon Commission. The Committee rejected the principle of nomination since it felt that the Untouchable leaders

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>89</sup> Government of India, *Report Of Indian Central Committee*, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1929, p. 45.

<i>Province</i>	<i>Proposed No.</i>	<i>Existing No.</i>
Madras	14	10
Bombay	8	2
Bengal	8	1
United Provinces	10	1
Punjab	6	0
Bihar & Orissa	6	2
Central Provinces	8	4
Assam	9	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>20</b>

themselves remained divided over the issue. At the same time, it extended the vicious system of communal electorates for the Untouchables in the Madras Presidency for a period of ten years. It was felt that since the Untouchables in South India were better educated and better organised, the provision of separate electorates could be implemented far more smoothly than in other parts of India.<sup>90</sup> The Government of Madras also admitted that separate constituencies were possible in certain areas where there were a sufficiently large number of Untouchable voters.<sup>91</sup> The Government, therefore, proposed that separate electorates for the Untouchables should be created wherever possible and that for the rest their representation should be done on the basis of nomination.<sup>92</sup>

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The British Government appointed the Simon Commission and it submitted its report to the Government in 1930 when the Labour Party had formed the Government in England. The persistent hostility of the Indian National Congress towards the Commission, and the subsequent demand of the Congress for 'Complete Independence' or 'Dominion Status' had given the recommendations of the Commission, and all commentaries thereon, an air of unreality. It became imperative to devise means, which would prevent a head-on collision between the Government and the Indian nationalists and thus divert the Congress from the hard-line which it had adopted against the Commission. The Labour Government of Britain, which came into office following the General Election in May 1929, therefore, announced its *intention* of giving Dominion Status to India and also of convening a Round Table Conference by inviting various groups for their opinion on constitutional reforms. The Indian Viceroy, Lord Irwin, made an announcement on 31st October 1929, for inviting representatives of different *parties* and *interests* in British India and representatives of the Indian States for the purpose of a Conference and discussion with regard to both the British Indian and All-Indian problems.<sup>93</sup> In response to Lord Irwin's announcement of 31st October 1929, Gandhi, Motilal Nehru and Madan

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>92</sup> Government of India, Reforms Office (Reforms), *File No. 163/111/30-R*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

<sup>93</sup> *The Indian Quarterly Register*, Vol. II, Issue III, Calcutta, The Annual Register Office, July 1929, pp. 47-48.

Mohan Malaviya met him to seek further clarification on the Round Table Conference. During the talks, the Congress leaders insisted on an assurance from the Viceroy that discussion in the Round Table Conference would proceed on the basis to grant full Dominion Status to India. However, the Viceroy did not extend an invitation to the Round Table Conference with any definite promise of Dominion Status. This heralded, on the part of the Congress, a determination for a grim struggle in the near future. The Congress Working Committee at its meeting in Lahore considered the Viceroy's reply unacceptable and decided to meet the challenge by observing 26th January 1930 as the 'Purna Swaraj Day' all over India.<sup>94</sup> An independence pledge was taken at numerous meetings throughout the country on 26th January 1930. The pledge was read out in local languages. This was followed by the hoisting of the newly adopted tri-colour flag of freedom and with this the message of freedom spread to all villages and towns. Encouraged by the success of 'Independence Day' celebrations following the Lahore Congress, the Congress Working Committee gave a call for the Civil Disobedience Movement with an emphasis on no-tax payments in a meeting held at Sabarmati in February 1930.<sup>95</sup> The Civil Disobedience Movement was launched, however, the Depressed Classes chose to remain outside its ambit because distressed by the indifference of the caste-Hindus and the opportunistic stand of the Muslim leaders and they relied on the British as guardians of their interests.

This aspect is clearly brought out in the declarations made and resolutions passed at various meetings organised by the Depressed Classes on the issue. Subedar Ghatge, a Depressed Classes leader of Poona declared that his people wanted to enlist the sympathy and co-operation of the Government in the fight against untouchability and not that of the 'non-co-operators'.<sup>96</sup> K. G. Patage, General Secretary of the All-India Anti-Untouchability Conference stated that the Depressed Classes generally were not in agreement with the 'Independence Resolution' of the Lahore Congress, which according to them, had touched on the question of untouchability very half-

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<sup>94</sup> A. M. Zaidi & S. Zaidi, (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia Of The Indian National Congress*, Vol. 9, *India Demands Independence: 1925-1929*, New Delhi, S. Chand, 1967-1994, p. 667.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 10, *The Battle For Swaraj: 1930-1935*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>96</sup> *The Times Of India*, 30th December 1929.

heartedly.<sup>97</sup> The All-India Depressed Classes special conference, with Mahant Fakindas Jethadas of Gujarat in the Chair, passed a similar resolution emphatically condemning the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Thiyya (Untouchable) community held a public meeting of its members at Calicut (Kerala), under the leadership of A. P. Balaram, the Municipal Councillor, adopting resolutions which condemned the Civil Disobedience Movement as “dangerous, contemptuous and highly detrimental to the progress of the country.” Strongly opposing the grant of Dominion Status, it opined that if unrestricted powers of administration were entrusted to Indians in such circumstances, conditions of the millions of Depressed would become unbearable. Further, the second session of Nagpur Division of Depressed Classes conference, advised the Depressed Classes not to be misled by such Indians who ardently desired political freedom but were reluctant to make the Depressed Classes free by giving their social and religious rights. Emphasising the importance of self-reliance, the Chairman of the conference advised his brethren that instead of joining the Congress, they should try to free themselves from social and religious slavery. The Executive Committee of the Depressed India Association (Bombay), in its meeting under the Presidentship of R. S. Nikaljay, emphatically denounced the Civil Disobedience Movement as one “started by Congress to overthrow the British rule in India” and considered it to be injurious to national interest. It advised the members of the Depressed Classes not to join the movement and urged the leaders of the Congress to call off the Civil Disobedience Movement. At Simla, on 13th July 1930, the Executive Committee of the All-India Depressed Classes Association passed resolutions condemning the Civil Disobedience Movement as “misadventure of extremist politicians.” The Committee lodged its opinion with the Government against granting of full-fledged Dominion Status to India in immediate future.<sup>98</sup> The stands taken by the Depressed Classes played into the British inclinations, particularly when the Untouchable groups were claiming that they were *not* part of the national movement for freedom, and that, what was going on in India was *not* a national movement *at all*, and that the Congress represented only the caste-Hindus among the people of India.

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<sup>97</sup> *The Times Of India*, 10th January 1930.

<sup>98</sup> Government of India, Reforms Office (Franchise), *File No. 163/III/30-R of 1930*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

The Round Table Conference, it seems, was a priority for the British to make a show of taking steps towards constitutional advance in India. It was also necessary for them that the Indian National Congress should participate in the Conference in order to lend it legitimacy – an unsaid admissibility that viewed the Congress as representing the people of India. On the other hand, the British were also clear that if the Congress attended the Conference, and had its way, the British would have to forgo more of their power over India than they had any intension of doing. According to scholars, the British wanted to convene the Round Table Conference, *but* only to foment its focus through separatist groups. Therefore, in choosing the delegates to the Round Table Conference, the British Government showed a marked favour towards communal leaders as participants.<sup>99</sup> In the First Round Table Conference, there were ‘nominated’ representatives of the All-India Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Justice Party, Sikhs, Parsis, Indian Christians, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, landlords, women, labour, and the Government of India. The Indian National Congress decided to boycott the Round Table Conference. The Depressed Classes decided to attend. Among the Depressed Classes however consensus had not reached as to who would represent them as a community.

The various Depressed Classes Associations, though unanimous in their condemnation of the Congress and the national movement that it led, but were *divided* on the question of *who* would represent the Depressed Classes at the Round Table Conference. A General Body Meeting of the Madras Provincial Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha held on 29th June 1930, suggested names of M. C. Rajah and Rao Saheb V. I. Muni Swami Pillai, “to be included among those who were attending the Round Table Conference.” In a memorandum dated 11th July 1930, the Arundhateeyas (leather workers of Madras) emphasised the fact that they were *different* from the Adi-Dravidas and Adi-Andhras and thus demanded *separate* representation of their community at the Conference. They demanded protection of the interest of their community by their own leader. Requests were also made to the Viceroy requesting him to take steps that would devote special attention to the Thiyya community at the Round Table Conference.<sup>100</sup> In the United Provinces, the Adi-Hindu Registered Association urged the Government to see that they were “adequately and

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<sup>99</sup> See, Chandra, *Communalism*.

<sup>100</sup> *File No. 163/III/30-R of 1930*.

effectively represented by the accredited leaders belonging to their *own* community.”<sup>101</sup> Members of Adi-Hindu Depressed Classes Society (United Provinces), at a meeting on 4th and 5th May 1930, adopted resolutions claiming *separate* identity for their ‘depressed community’ and ‘full representation’ in the Round Table Conference. On 11th September 1930, the All-Bengal Namasudra Association sent a representation to the Secretary of State for India to request him to choose at least two representatives from their own community for the Round Table Conference from the province of Bengal.<sup>102</sup>

Politically, the Depressed Classes were fast progressing, but there was *lack* of unity among them.<sup>103</sup> The prominent leaders among them in the 1930s, like M. C. Rajah with a large following at an All-India level, and especially in South India, and B. R. Ambedkar, more popular in Western India, *failed* to meet on a common ground to create a community of interest, even though efforts were being made to bring the two together. In 1926, for example, the leaders of the All-India Depressed Classes organised a conference at Nagpur, which gave birth to the first pan-Indian Untouchables’ organisation – the All-India Depressed Classes Association– which elected Rajah as its President and Ambedkar as the chosen Vice-President, although Ambedkar was not present at the conference. In 1928, Ambedkar’s name was also proposed for the Presidentship at the annual conference of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, indicating that Ambedkar was growing popular among the Untouchables.<sup>104</sup> Between 1928 and 1930, Ambedkar was emerging as a leader within his own right. He had become conscious of the colonial rule and was talking against one country rule over another. In the context of the caste-Hindus, he had become class oriented. He was emphasising the dominance of (the caste-Hindus as) a class ruling over another class as unjustified.<sup>105</sup> He was also unhappy with the Congress’s

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> S. Bandyopadhyay, ‘Transfer Of Power And The Crisis Of Dalit Politics In India, 1945-47’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), p. 897; Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 142.

<sup>104</sup> Ambedkar’s friend, Dr. Solanki, tried to move a resolution to have two presidents, both Rajah and Ambedkar at the same time. But the resolution failed, as there was no seconder. Bandyopadhyay, ‘Crisis Of Dalit Politics In India’, p. 896.

<sup>105</sup> As Anupama Rao argues, “[in] articulating a new Dalit identity, Ambedkar experimented with the Marxian discourse of class to distinguish a Depressed Class minority ... by specifying the materiality

approach towards untouchability. According to Ambedkar, the Congress was seeing the issue from a religious point of view only, as if untouchability was solely the problem of Hinduism. Whereas in Ambedkar's view untouchability touched on political, economic and social issues, and he emphasised that it was based on class discrimination.<sup>106</sup> He was vocal about improving the economic conditions of the Untouchables and believed that with their economic uplift, the religious outlook of the caste-Hindus towards the Untouchables would change.

Ambedkar was also ideologically at variance with M. C. Rajah in demanding freedom for the Depressed Classes from the political, social and economic oppression of the caste-Hindus. Unlike Rajah, who was demanding separate electorates and was extolling the British not to grant independence to the country in one stroke, Ambedkar began to identify the interests of the Depressed Classes with the demand for India's independence. Ambedkar was critical of the British for not taking adequate steps toward ameliorating the conditions of the Depressed Classes. He wanted the British to pass such laws that would give adequate protection to them.<sup>107</sup> He even began to emphasise that steps for the removal of social evils of the Untouchables could be taken *only* by a 'Swaraj Government'.<sup>108</sup> On the eve of the First Round Table Conference, Ambedkar's tone had thus become different. According to scholars, he had donned a tone, which can be seen as 'nationalist' in approach.<sup>109</sup> In order to lend credibility and legitimacy to his stand, Ambedkar went ahead and found a new

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of caste." In 1918 and 1928, Ambedkar testified before two British commissions, the Southborough and the Simon commissions, which considered the extension of the franchise and the functioning of the dyarchy, in both cases representing the Depressed Classes as a distinctive community with separate interests. As he argued in 1918, "a minority which is oppressed, or whose rights are denied by the majority, would be a minority that would be fit for consideration for political purposes." Noting that the caste-Hindus could represent "the material interests of the Mohammedans and vice versa," Ambedkar distinguished the Depressed Classes as "educationally backward ... economically very poor, socially enslaved." Material deprivation and social stratification united them as a class. Rao, *The Caste Question*, p. 133.

<sup>106</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi And Emancipation Of Untouchables*, Jullander, Bheem Patrika Publications, 1943, pp. 196-97.

<sup>107</sup> See Ambedkar's testimony before the Southborough Committee (1919) and the Simon Commission (1928).

<sup>108</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 118.

<sup>109</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 55; Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 39.

organisation in 1930, which came to be known as the All-India Depressed Classes Congress. Its foundation came as a ‘shock’ to Rajah and other like-minded leaders, who held a special meeting of the All-India Depressed Classes Association at Allahabad on 24th August 1930, and de-recognised Ambedkar by stating that the Depressed Classes leaders had “no confidence in the President and members of the All-India Depressed Classes Congress.” They also passed a resolution and declared that the All-India Depressed Classes Congress of Ambedkar was a ‘bogus’ organisation, and that the All-India Depressed Classes Association was the real representative body of the Depressed Classes.<sup>110</sup>

Gail Omvedt argues that M. C. Rajah and the other like-minded leaders of the community had begun to slowly tilt towards the Indian National Congress in the 1930s. This trend was visible in response to the possibilities of reform for the Untouchables being undertaken by the Indian National Congress. In the 1930s, the Indian National Congress leaders ranging from Tilakites to Gandhians followers were courting the Untouchables through various untouchability programmes. From “Rajah of Madras and Arigay Ramaswamy of Hyderabad to the early generation of Mahar leaders in Nagpur, as well as many western Maharashtrian non-Mahar leaders (Rajbhoj, Shivtarkar) continually *swayed* towards the Congress and towards seeing themselves as Hindus.”<sup>111</sup> Omvedt has also shown that even the Non-Brahman Movement was tilting towards the Congress in the 1930s.<sup>112</sup> Ambedkar, however, “fought this tendency tooth and nail and maintained the *independence* of the Dalit Movement.”<sup>113</sup> This could be a probable reason for Ambedkar’s unwillingness to

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<sup>110</sup> Government of India, Reforms Office (Reforms), *File No. 163/III/30-R*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

<sup>111</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 166, (emphasis mine). Also see Zelliott, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 43; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, pp. 101-02; G. Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt In A Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement In Western India, 1873-1930*, Bombay, Scientific Socialist Educationalist Trust, 1976, pp. 45-47.

<sup>112</sup> Gail Omvedt argues that the process of absorption into the Congress happened with the Non-Brahman Movement in spite of the historic opposition to and distrust of the Congress by Jyotirao Govindrao Phule and in spite of the efforts of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy to prevent it. Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 165.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166, (emphasis mine).



work with Rajah and the All-India Depressed Classes Association. He also kept away from the Indian National Congress.<sup>114</sup>

From the British perspective, anyone who was anti-Congress, was a legitimate candidate for the Round Table Conference. The final list of invitees for the first Conference included the name of Ambedkar along with R. Srinivasan, a popular Untouchable leader and a rival of M. C. Rajah in the South, as ‘nominated’ representatives of the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar and Srinivasan’s name in the nomination indicated that the Government regarded the Untouchables as “a *separate* element from the Hindus.”<sup>115</sup> Ambedkar was preferred because, to quote Subhas Chandra Bose, a contemporary of Ambedkar, “his services were necessary to embarrass the nationalist leaders.”<sup>116</sup> Conversely, it can be argued that Ambedkar “... has had leadership *thrust* upon him by a benign British Government.”<sup>117</sup> Eleanor Zelliot shows that “the very fact of his participation” in the Conference “extended his fame to every corner of Maharashtra and beyond,”<sup>118</sup> and “helped in no small measure to consolidate [his] leadership position among the Untouchables.”<sup>119</sup> Later, *The Free Press Journal* reported that “before the arrival of the unwelcome and largely boycotted Simon Commission Dr. Ambedkar was quite a nonentity, so much so that outside the student world of the Law College not a soul knew that there existed in the city of Bombay a person of the blessed name of Dr. Ambedkar.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argues that “Ambedkar [thus] took a very clear anti-Congress and a mildly anti-British position.” Bandyopadhyay, ‘Crisis Of Dalit Politics In India’, p. 897, (emphasis mine). Also see, Presidential Address, All India Depressed Classes Congress, First session, Nagpur, 8th-9th August 1930, by B. R. Ambedkar, Ambedkar Papers, *File No. 9, Part 1, Roll 3*, Nehru Memorial Museum Library (hereafter, NMML), New Delhi, India.

<sup>115</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 40-41.

<sup>116</sup> S. C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle: 1920-34*, Part II, Calcutta, Thacker, Spink and Co., 1948, p. 40. Trilok Nath argues that “[even] in his own Presidency, Madras, [M. C. Rajah’s] claim to leadership had been effectively curbed by the formation of the Madras Depressed Classes Association.” Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 120.

<sup>117</sup> Bose, *Indian Struggle*, Part II, p. 40, (emphasis mine).

<sup>118</sup> Zelliot, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 43; Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 102.

<sup>119</sup> H. Coward, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar, And Untouchability’, in H. Coward, (ed.), *Indian Critiques Of Gandhi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 47.

<sup>120</sup> *The Journal Of Free Press*, 17th October 1931.

The First Round Table Conference convened on 12th November 1930. After the general discussion in the plenary session, the Conference appointed nine Sub-Committees to deal with separate questions of federal structure, provincial constitution, minorities, Burma, North West Frontier Province, franchise, defence, services and Sind.<sup>121</sup> Of all the Sub-Committees, the one dealing with franchise was of critical importance and implications for the Untouchables. The recommendations of this Sub-Committee, however, failed to satisfy the aspirations of the Depressed Classes leaders, both Ambedkar and Srinivasan. The Sub-Committee had recommended, by a majority vote, an extension of franchise to a minimum of ten percent and maximum of twenty-five percent of the total population in India. This was a very constrict response from the Colonial Government particularly when it was known that Ambedkar had demanded adult franchise with reserved seats for the Depressed Classes. But Ambedkar and Srinivasan were not the only ones who were disappointed. They were soon joined by other Indian representatives – N. M. Joshi,<sup>122</sup> B. Shiva Rao,<sup>123</sup> K. T. Paul,<sup>124</sup> and B. V. Jadhav.<sup>125</sup> All of them, along with Ambedkar, dissented from the majority opinion and described the recommended extension in franchise as inadequate while demanding an immediate introduction of adult franchise. The dissenters also proposed that a programme of automatic extension of franchise for the future should be laid down in the constitution itself.<sup>126</sup> The report of the Franchise Sub-Committee when passed by the Conference was a fallout. It put on record that “... it was agreed that the basis of franchise could forthwith be

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<sup>121</sup> Ambedkar served on the Sub-Committees for Provincial Constitution, Minorities, Franchise, and Services, while Srinivasan was put on the Sub-Committees for Minorities, Franchise and Burma. Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 268.

<sup>122</sup> Narayan Malhar Joshi or N. M. Joshi (1879-1955) was an Indian trade union leader.

<sup>123</sup> Benegal Shiva Rao (26th February 1891 – 15th December 1975) was an Indian journalist and politician. He was a member of the Constituent Assembly of India and an elected representative of the South Kanara constituency in the first Lok Sabha.

<sup>124</sup> Kanakarayan Tiruselvam Paul was an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He was the first Indian born National General Secretary of the National Council of Young Men's Christian Association's of India.

<sup>125</sup> Bhaskarrao Vithojirao Jadhav was among the Justice Party (a political party in the Madras Presidency of British India) representatives at the Conference.

<sup>126</sup> Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference: Proceedings*, 12th November 1930 – 19th January 1931, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1931, pp. 386 & 388.

broadened and that a large increase was desirable.”<sup>127</sup> But the franchise that was announced was a ‘restricted’ franchise. It was limited by property and educational qualifications, something from which the Untouchables could not have benefitted on a large scale. The restricted franchise meant that elections would be mostly confined to the middle classes in India, who would hunt for jobs and other economic opportunities leading to further rivalries among communities.<sup>128</sup> At the same time, introduction of restricted franchise meant that there was to be no adult franchise involving the Untouchables.

Leaders like Ambedkar, supported by Srinivasan, however, persisted in their demands at the First Round Table Conference. They submitted an exhaustive memorandum during the proceedings of the Minorities Sub-Committee. The memorandum gave details of the *safeguards*, which the leaders wanted to be enshrined in the constitution for the protection of the Depressed Classes.<sup>129</sup> This memorandum had socio-political implications. It demanded the abolition of untouchability along with the grant of equal citizenship rights and equality before the law for the Depressed Classes. The demands for safeguards also touched on aspects of social discrimination. The leaders wanted that the Depressed Classes should *not* be debarred from inns, educational institutions, roads, paths, tanks, wells, public conveyances, places of public amusement, etc. The memorandum wanted safeguards against the dominance of the caste-Hindus by maintaining that the infringement of the rights of the Depressed Classes be declared an offence; that the institution of social boycott practiced against the Depressed Classes be declared illegal and that its abetment, threat or practice be made a cognisable offence punishable by law. It also asked for a right to appeal to the Governor-General and the Secretary of State for India in case the interests of the Depressed Classes were neglected and also recommended the putting up of a special department for their uplift and for their representation in the Cabinet.

The memorandum was most marked on the issue of granting electoral rights to the Depressed Classes. This was a highly publicised negotiation of Ambedkar as it

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 367-68.

<sup>128</sup> Chandra, *Communalism*, p. 310.

<sup>129</sup> ‘A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of a Self-Governing India’, *BAWS*, Vol. 2, Appendix I, pp. 546-54.

depicted incongruity from his earlier stances. So far as the representation of the Depressed Classes in Legislatures was concerned, the memorandum strongly *supported* separate electorates for the Untouchables for first ten years and thereafter joint electorates with reserved seats accompanied by universal suffrage. Harold Coward argues that “[even] though Ambedkar knew that separate electorates could result in increased disunity, he chose to join with the Muslim and Sikh appeal for separate electorates to safeguard their minority status, which the British seemed *willing* to grant.”<sup>130</sup> According to Eleanor Zelliot, Ambedkar “reversed himself on the matter of electorates” at the Conference and “... came out strongly for separate electorates” for the Depressed Classes “[perhaps] under a sense of representing *all* Depressed Classes, most of whom wanted separate electorates, perhaps because communal electorates for Muslims seemed to be guaranteed, perhaps because Gandhi would not even concede that reserved seats for Untouchables were necessary ....”<sup>131</sup> In this context, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Marc Galanter also argue that although Ambedkar “... was initially opposed to separate electorates, ... he gradually moved towards it, as it was demanded by most of his comrades in India.”<sup>132</sup>

If such was the case, then a question arises as to why Ambedkar, in his representation before the Franchise Sub-Committee remained “firm in his view that no joint electorates should be *forced* upon the Depressed Classes unless and until it ... was accompanied by adult suffrage.”<sup>133</sup> It is probable that the announcement of the restricted nature of franchise heightened the prospect of separate electorates. It can be said that Ambedkar was *compelled* to change his position in support of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes when it became obvious that there would be *no* universal suffrage granted for them. In fact, the rejection of Ambedkar’s demand for adult franchise for the Depressed Classes by the Franchise Sub-Committee at the Round Table Conference *must have steered* him towards *demanding* separate electorates for them. The British attempted to legitimise such moves when they put on

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<sup>130</sup> Coward, ‘Ambedkar And Untouchability’, p. 47.

<sup>131</sup> Zelliot, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 43-44; Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 103.

<sup>132</sup> S. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics And The Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi, 1990, p. 166; S. Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey To Partition: A History Of Modern India*, New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2009, p. 354; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, p. 31, (emphasis mine).

<sup>133</sup> Pantham, ‘Discourses Of Gandhi And Ambedkar’, p. 189, (emphasis mine).

record that “*only* separate electorates was *acceptable*” to the minority communities,<sup>134</sup> indicating that the Depressed Classes’ demand for reserved seats in joint electorates was “a minority position”<sup>135</sup> in tune with the colonial scheme of things. However, the First Round Table Conference was not a success. The British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, admitted the failure of the Conference to evolve an agreed solution to the minorities’ question. Differences persisted among different communities on such questions as the number of seats each community should have in the Legislatures and whether separate or joint electorates, with reserved seats, should be employed. The Depressed Classes’ issue thus remained unsettled, as the Conference yielded no consensus on the matter. In any case, the Conference was a meaningless exercise with the Indian National Congress boycotting it. The First Round Table Conference was adjourned *sine die*.

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After the failure of the failure of the First Round Table Conference, many leaders, members of the Indian Liberal Party such as Tej Bahadur Sapru, C. Y. Chintamani and Srinivas Shastri appealed to Gandhi to talk with the Viceroy in an endeavour to bring about a rapprochement between the Government and the Indian National Congress. The Colonial Government itself was clear that if its strategy of survival in India was to be based on constitutional advance, “then an olive branch to the Congress was imperative.”<sup>136</sup> The British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, made an appeal to the Indian National Congress to participate in future deliberations. Accordingly, the Governor-General, Lord Irwin (3rd April 1926 – 18th April 1931) issued a statement on 25th January 1931, withdrawing a notification which had declared the Indian National Congress an unlawful body. Orders were simultaneously issued to release Gandhi and other members of the Indian National Congress from jail and to give them all possible assistance so as to enable them to consider the Prime Minister’s offer. This was the first ever instance arranged between the British and the Indians as equals. The colonial offer also implied that the colonial state considered the

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<sup>134</sup> *Indian Round Table Conference: Proceedings*, p. 317.

<sup>135</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 41.

<sup>136</sup> B. Chandra, et al., *India’s Struggle For Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 280.

Indian National Congress to be the “proper spokesman for the whole of India.”<sup>137</sup> Gandhi was chosen to be sole representative of the Indian National Congress at the Conference. Gandhi negotiated peace terms with the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, on behalf of the Indian National Congress and after considerable vicissitudes entered into a pact with him on 5th March 1931. The pact is popularly known as the Gandhi-Irwin Pact – variously described as a ‘truce’ and a ‘provisional settlement’ between the Government, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress.<sup>138</sup> The pact had many terms, the most important being the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi’s acceptance to attend the second session of the Round Table Conference on the constitutional question, the release of political prisoners in India and the distancing of the Indian National Congress from political violence.

The British Government had engaged with Gandhi in a highly publicised negotiation. Immediately after the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Gandhi attended the Indian National Congress session at Karachi, which endorsed his understanding with the Viceroy and chose him as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress to the Second Round Table Conference. The Karachi Congress bestowed this responsibility on Gandhi on the understanding that “he would work for a constitution wherein the minorities – Muslims, Sikhs and Christians – were assured that they would be consulted on every issue affecting their material and cultural interests; at the same time, the provision of separate communal electorates, which had created so much tension and strife in the political system, would stand cancelled.”<sup>139</sup> On his part, Gandhi’s plank was clear. He was going to make three demands to the British: (1) complete independence for India, (2) the status of India within the British Empire to be only on a co-equal basis, and (3) safeguards during the transitional stage, if the first two conditions were accepted.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> R. M. Fontera, ‘Gandhi And The Round Table Conference’, in V. Grover, (ed.), *Political Thinkers Of Modern India: M. K. Gandhi*, Vol. 17, New Delhi, Deep & Deep Publications, 1990, p. 471.

<sup>138</sup> Chandra, *India’s Struggle*, p. 280.

<sup>139</sup> R. Kumar, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And The Poona Pact, 1932’, in J. Masselos, (ed.), *Struggling And Ruling: The Indian National Congress, 1885-1985*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1987, p. 92.

<sup>140</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 47, p. 133. Gandhi in his interviews to *The Yorkshire Post*, *The Daily Herald*, *The New York Times*, *The Bombay Chronicle*, *The Daily Mail*, *The News Chronicle* and to *Reuter* and *The*

Gandhi was shrewd enough to understand that going to London would be pointless without coming to an agreement with Muslims and winning the sympathies of other minorities. The Congress therefore prepared a formula on the communal question and wanted it to be endorsed by the Muslim leaders.<sup>141</sup> In his meeting with the Muslim leaders in Bombay, in March 1931, Gandhi offered to guarantee the Muslims one-third of the seats in the Legislatures, which was considerably more than the one-fourth proportion of Muslims to Hindus in the country, in return for their acceptance of joint electorates. William Shirer, the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, recounts that “Shaukat Ali ... had told [him] (Shirer) ... in Bombay that he (Ali) had accepted Gandhi’s offer, at least provisionally. It would give him and his co-religionists a greater representation in the Legislatures than their numbers called for.” However, Shaukat Ali, who had been Gandhi’s principal aide in the Indian National Congress and a fierce champion of Indian independence, had changed his mind. This was apparent as Ali told Shirer that “[if] the Hindus don’t meet our (Muslims’) demands this time, we’re going to make war on them.”<sup>142</sup> He now told Shirer that “Moslems had already drawn up plans to fight the Congress boycott of British goods unless the Hindus give in to him.” They “would counter-picket,” Ali said, “Congress’s picketing of shops selling foreign wares.” Congress circles “believed that [Ali] had secretly sold out to the British.”<sup>143</sup> Shirer says that even if Ali “hadn’t sold out to the [British], he was acting as if he had.” Later, the *loyalist*-Muslims met the nationalist-Muslims at Simla at the end of June 1931, to iron out *their* differences, however “the two warring Moslem factions could not get together and their meetings broke up without an accord.” Shirer rightly pointed out that if the *loyalist*-Muslims and the nationalist-Muslims “could not agree among themselves on the only major

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*Associated Press* explained that his mandate at the Round Table Conference was to work for securing the acceptance of the Karachi Resolution, which demanded control by India of finance, the army and foreign relations, subject to safeguards “demonstrably in the interests of India.” *CWMG*, Vol. 47, pp. 414-19.

<sup>141</sup> B. P. Sitaramayya, *The History Of The Indian National Congress: 1885-1935*, Vol. 1, Bombay, Padma Publications, 1935, p. 486.

<sup>142</sup> W. L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1979, pp. 155-56.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

issue at stake,” – whether separate or joint electorates was in their best interest – “how could they reach an accord with the Congress and the Hindus”<sup>144</sup> at the Conference.

Before departing for London, Gandhi met Ambedkar in a personal meeting in Bombay in August 1931, to apprise himself about the stand of the Depressed Classes and to reach a compromise position on the issue of the communal question. Ambedkar was forthright in impressing upon Gandhi that so far the Indian National Congress had not done anything tangible for the Depressed Classes, “...that the Congress was not sincere about its profession ... had it been sincere, it would have surely made the removal of untouchability a condition,” for the membership of the Congress just “like the wearing of khaddar.”<sup>145</sup> Continuing his argument further when Ambedkar asked Gandhi what he thought of the debates of the First Round Table Conference, Gandhi replied that he was “against the political *separation* of the Untouchables from the Hindus.”<sup>146</sup> This was hardly a veiled criticism of the stand of the Untouchables’ leader in favour of separate electorates. But Ambedkar had touched on a more sordid cord in this meeting when he concluded that “Gandhiji, I have no homeland. ... [How] can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink?”<sup>147</sup> This statement made Gandhi gauge the position of his opponent, but still to Gandhi, this was not a justification apt enough to demand separate electorates on communal lines. It was an argument for continued social reforms for the Untouchables. To Ambedkar, Gandhi’s response on separate electorates for the Untouchables appeared to be hyperbolic. He believed that the Congress was ready to give only formal recognition to the Untouchables. Ambedkar left the meeting saying “they now knew where they stood,”<sup>148</sup> leaving Gandhi saddened that no compromise could be reached with the Untouchables on the communal question before the Conference. Later, the same night, Ambedkar declared in a meeting of the Depressed Classes in Bombay that “Gandhi was unable to promote their interests. They must stand on their own feet and

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<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>145</sup> D. C. Ahir, *Gandhi And Ambedkar: A Comparative Study*, New Delhi, Blumoon Books, 1995, pp. 38-41.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41, (emphasis mine); Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 168, (emphasis mine).

<sup>147</sup> Ahir, *Gandhi And Ambedkar*, p. 40.

<sup>148</sup> D. C. Ahir and Dhananjay Keer quote their discussion in full. See Ahir, *ibid.*, pp. 38-41; Keer, *Life And Mission*, pp. 165-68; *The Navayug-Ambedkar Special Number*, 13th April 1947.



fight as best as they could for their rights.”<sup>149</sup> According to Eleanor Zelliott, the ‘unproductive’ meeting with Gandhi hardened Ambedkar’s attitude towards him,<sup>150</sup> thus contributing to British inclination to keep the Indians divided.

Gandhi and Ambedkar would come together in another personal meeting on 27th September 1931, on the eve of the Minorities Sub-Committee meet in London. In this meeting, Ambedkar placed in his cards on the table and ended up speaking for three hours, while Gandhi, spinning the charkha, listened mutely to him.<sup>151</sup> If Gandhi had nothing to say, why had he invited Ambedkar to call on him? “Maybe,” speculates Joseph Lelyveld, “Gandhi had been hoping to find common ground and discovered instead that Ambedkar had *stiffened* his position.”<sup>152</sup> In any case, not much was expected from the Second Round Table Conference. In British, the Right-Wing led by Winston Churchill was strongly objecting to the attempts of the British Government to negotiate with the Congress on equal basis. Uttering his famous alarm, Churchill said, it was ‘nauseating’ that “a seditious Middle Temple Lawyer<sup>153</sup> now posing as a fakir [was] striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceregal Palace to parley on *equal* terms with the representative of the King-Emperor.”<sup>154</sup> The British Right-Wing demanded a strong Government in India at the time. Churchill endorsed this view further when he said that the “truth is that Gandhism, and all it stands for, will have to be grappled with, and finally crushed.”<sup>155</sup>

The colonial strategy at the second session of the Round Table Conference was to have the Indian National Congress attend the Conference and then wreck it through ‘separatists’ groups in order to neutralise Gandhi and his efforts. The British used an overwhelming majority of conservative, loyalist and communal representatives and the Untouchables from India for their purpose. Leading British

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<sup>149</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, pp. 168-69.

<sup>150</sup> Zelliott, ‘Leaning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 44; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 103.

<sup>151</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 43.

<sup>152</sup> J. Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, pp. 213-14, (emphasis mine).

<sup>153</sup> This was an error. Gandhi had joined the Inner Temple.

<sup>154</sup> R. S. Churchill & M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: The Prophet Of Truth, 1922-1939*, Vol. 5, London, Houghton Mifflin, 1967, p. 390, (emphasis mine).

<sup>155</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *This Was Bapu* (comp., R. K. Prabhu), Ahmadabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1954, p. 139.

policy-makers placed their “highest and most permanent hopes in the *eternity* of the communal situation.”<sup>156</sup> Pitted against Gandhi in the Conference, therefore, were numerous British leaders of distinction, as well as fellow Indians “handpicked by the authorities, to represent those *counterpoised* constituencies of class, community and religion, upon whom the British *relied* to retard the constitutional progress of India.”<sup>157</sup> Gandhi nailed the mischief in this strategy when he remarked, “[as] I studied the list of Indian delegates here, I suddenly realised that they were not the chosen one of the nation but chosen ones of the Government.”<sup>158</sup>

The second session of the Round Table Conference began on 7th September 1931, with the Minorities Sub-Committee “charged with the task of finding a *workable* solution to the growing communal problem.”<sup>159</sup> But the main hurdle was a deadlock in the Minorities Sub-Committee itself on the question of representation for the minorities. The Muslim representatives insisted on having separate electorates on communal basis. The Sikhs objected that the solution would not be brought about if Hindus and Muslims alone negotiated. Sikhs pointed out to their own minority status along with the Europeans, Indian Christians and the Untouchables. Their claims as minorities had to be adjusted in any negotiation. But, again the Conference yielded no consensus and a solution to the issue of intricate minorities’ problem eluded the representatives. For example, Gandhi and Ambedkar remained irreconcilable opponents on the issue.

In an impassioned speech before the Federal Structure Committee of the Conference, Gandhi depicted Indian National Congress’s inclusive character and named some of the Muslim, Parsi and Christian Presidents the Congress had chosen.

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<sup>156</sup> Lord Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India (1924-1928) to the Viceroy, March 1925, quoted in G. R. Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations In British India: A Study Of Controversy, Conflict And Communal Movements In Northern India, 1923-1928*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1975, p. 173, (emphasis mine). Lord Elphinstone wrote in 1858: ‘*Divide et impera* was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours’. A. R. Desai, *Social Background Of Indian Nationalism*, 3rd Edition, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1959, p. 363.

<sup>157</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 93, (emphasis mine).

<sup>158</sup> J. D. Hunt, *Gandhi In London*, New Delhi, Promilla & Co., 1978, p. 149.

<sup>159</sup> A. Roy, ‘The Doctor And The Saint’, in B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (ed. & annotated by S. Anand), New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2014, p. 121, (emphasis mine).

He spelt out the Congress's commitment for the rights of minorities, the Untouchables and women. The Congress which Gandhi represented, he said, was "the oldest political organisation in India, it is what it means – national. It represents no particular community, no particular class, no particular interest. It claims to represent all Indian interests and classes. ... [Above] all, the Congress represents in its essence, the dumb semi-starved millions scattered over the length and breadth of the land in its 700,000 villages, no matter whether they come from what is called British India or what is called Indian India."<sup>160</sup> While referring to the problem of special representation by different communities, Gandhi asserted that "the Congress has reconciled itself to special treatment of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh tangle. There are sound historical reasons for it, but the Congress will not extend that doctrine in any shape or form. Therefore, I would most strongly resist any further special representation."<sup>161</sup> Gandhi rejected the plea for special representation being conceded not only to the Untouchables but also to Europeans and Indian Christians. He did want Europeans, Indian Christians and certainly the Untouchables in the Legislature, and if none were elected, then it would be the duty of the Legislature to co-opt them.<sup>162</sup> Gandhi proposed that informal discussions be held among those who had been invited to the Conference to solve the communal problem and went on to request the Premier to adjourn the formal proceedings of the Conference till these discussions were completed. Madan Mohan Malaviya,<sup>163</sup> the Aga Khan<sup>164</sup> and Sir Syed Ali Imam<sup>165</sup> supported the motion for

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<sup>160</sup> Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference: Second Session*, 7th September, 1931 – 1st December, 1931, *Proceedings Of The Federal Structure Committee And Minorities Committee*, Vol. I, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1932, p. 43.

<sup>161</sup> Quoted in *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 57.

<sup>162</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, pp. 26-38.

<sup>163</sup> Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861–1946) was an Indian educationist and politician notable for his role in the Indian independence movement and as the two time president of Indian National Congress.

<sup>164</sup> Sir Sultan Muhammed Shah, Aga Khan III was one of the founders and the first president of the All-India Muslim League. Aga Khan called on the British Raj to consider Muslims to be a separate nation within India.

<sup>165</sup> Sir Syed Ali Imam (1869-1932) returned to Patna (Bihar, India) in 1890 after getting his Bar-at-Law from England and became a Judge of Patna High Court (1917). He also served as Chief Minister of Hyderabad (1919), a Princely State of British India and was a law member in the Imperial Legislative Council. British India conferred him the title of Sir. Sir Ali Imam, being a politician, served as the President of Muslim League at Amritsar Annual Session (1908) and President Nationalist Muslims Conference at Lucknow (1931).

adjournment. But Ambedkar stated, “[this] was nothing but a declaration of *war* by ... Gandhi and the Congress against the Untouchables.”<sup>166</sup>

Ambedkar could not accept Gandhi’s claim that the Congress also represented the Untouchables. He also objected to the proposal to adjourn the proceedings. Ambedkar was suspicious that Gandhi was planning to *bypass* the Untouchables and to close the issue by bringing about a settlement among the three parties – the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. Ambedkar suspected that Gandhi had been carrying on negotiations privately with the Muslims.<sup>167</sup> He said that “those who are negotiating ought to understand that they are not plenipotentiaries appointed by the Committee to negotiate a settlement; that whatever may be the representative character of Mr. Gandhi or of the other parties with whom he wishes to negotiate, they certainly are not in a position to bind us – certainly not.”<sup>168</sup>

The British Government, however, entertained a very different view of the manner in which the Round Table Conference could proceed to the business of framing a new constitution for India. The British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, told the assembled delegates that the “real challenge before them lay in devising a system of representation whereby *power* could be *equitably shared* by different classes, communities and religious groups, before the shape of an independent all-India polity was hammered out.”<sup>169</sup> Prompted by the Prime Minister’s statement, Ambedkar put a document before the Minorities Sub-Committee setting out the quantum of representation that was fair and equitable for the Untouchables in different popularly elected Legislatures.<sup>170</sup> In doing so, Ambedkar challenged Gandhi’s assertion that the Indian National Congress represented all classes and communities in India, not excluding the Untouchables.

After the speech, Gandhi and Ambedkar faced each other as adversaries, both claiming to be the representatives of the Untouchables. The Minorities Sub-

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<sup>166</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 57, (emphasis mine).

<sup>167</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 93.

<sup>168</sup> Quoted by A. G. Noorani, ‘Ambedkar, Gandhi & Jinnah’, *Frontline*, 12th June 2015, p. 3, (<http://www.frontline.in/the-nation/ambedkar-gandhi-jinnah/article7247331.ece>)

<sup>169</sup> *Indian Round Table Conference: Second Session*, Vol. 3, pp. 1358-1386, (emphasis mine).

<sup>170</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 2, pp. 652-53.

Committee failed to reach a consensus, as Ambedkar denied Gandhi's claim that the Congress represented the Untouchables by noting that there was no evidence for that. Gandhi went on to make an emotional appeal for it: "I claim ... to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables. ... I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of [the] Untouchables, their vote, and that I would top the poll."<sup>171</sup> While the Government failed to concede the basic Indian demand for independence at the Conference, the second session soon got deadlocked on the question of the minorities' representation. Gandhi lamented that "things looked dark,"<sup>172</sup> but he did not give up. He was trying to move mountains, both with his own people and the British. He had acidly remarked to his fellow countrymen just before the adjournment that they were quarreling among themselves about their share in the spoils – spoils which the Government had not yet given to them and would never give to them until they bury their differences. Gandhi admonished that "by our internal squabbles, we are playing right into the hands of the British."<sup>173</sup>

The Muslim delegation was in an uncompromising mood, the separatists among them being opposed to any settlement with the Hindus until *all* their demands were conceded. In addition, the Muslim delegates advocated separate electorates for other minority groups such as the Depressed Classes, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans, who had joined them in a 'Minorities Pact'.<sup>174</sup> In particular, the communal Muslims were supporting the *separation* of the Untouchables from the Hindus, as that would make the proportion of Muslims much larger against the Hindus. Dhananjay Keer argues that the communal Muslims "feared that [if] the

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663.

<sup>172</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 187.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>174</sup> B. R. Nanda shows that the Muslim delegates were themselves divided among themselves at the Second Round Table Conference. Whereas M. A. Jinnah "demanded a definite advance towards self-Government at the centre as well as in the provinces," according to Fazl-i-Husain "it was not in the interest of the Muslims to demand responsibility at the centre where the continuance of British control was in Muslim interest." However, Jinnah's views did not prevail against the reactionary group organized by Fazl-i-Husain, which was opposed to any settlement with the Hindus until all their demands were conceded, and opposed any responsibility at the centre. B. R. Nanda, *Road To Pakistan: The Life And Times Of Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, London, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010, pp. 152-55.

caste-Hindus and the Untouchable Hindus ... [became] a united force ...” they together would “oppose their (Muslims’) demands jointly.”<sup>175</sup> The Muslims at the Second Round Table Conference “were playing other minorities against vital national interest.”<sup>176</sup>

Gandhi volunteered to hold informal meetings in succession with the minorities to work in such a manner as to submerge their differences until they learnt what the British Government was granting to India. He stressed, “[let] us make a *united* demand to the British Government,” and suggested “to discuss its decision on our political demands for self-Government, leaving such matters as separate electorates and special representation for minorities to be settled either by an impartial tribunal or by a special convention of Indian leaders, elected by their constituencies.”<sup>177</sup> According to William Shirer, Gandhi met the Muslims night after night and even indicated that an agreement between them was near.<sup>178</sup> The newspapers declared that Gandhi had conceded to the Muslims their fourteen points, accepted that the residuary powers be vested in federating provinces, allowed Muslim majority in the Punjab and in Bengal.<sup>179</sup> Ambedkar, who published the full text, of what he called the ‘Congress-Muslim Pact’,<sup>180</sup> believed the agreement as Gandhi’s ‘climb-down’ where he “expressed his willingness to concede most of the Muslim demands which the Congress leaders in the All Parties Conference had dismissed out of hand only three years earlier ....”<sup>181</sup> Ambedkar argued that Gandhi “was prepared to give everything to the Muslims on condition that the Muslims agreed to side with him in *opposing* the claims of the Depressed Classes, the Indian Christians and the Anglo-Indians for special representation.”<sup>182</sup> On their part, the Aga Khan himself assured Gandhi in the presence of several Indian delegates, that if the Hindus or the

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<sup>175</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 154.

<sup>176</sup> *The Tribune*, 15th December 1933.

<sup>177</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 186, (emphasis mine).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 176; S. Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, Delhi, Macmillan, 1983, p. 319.

<sup>180</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Thoughts On Pakistan*, Bombay, Thacker and Company Limited, 1941, ‘Appendix X’, pp. 364-65; *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 72-73.

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Nanda, *Road To Pakistan*, p. 155.

<sup>182</sup> Ambedkar, *Pakistan*, p. 364, (emphasis mine).

Congress agreed to Muslim demands, the *entire* Muslim community would be ready to serve as Gandhi's camp-followers in the political struggle.<sup>183</sup> It seems that the Muslim demands were presented to arrive at a common action. "If they accepted [him] as their ally, as [he] offered to be in uttermost sincerity, [his] alliance could only be for *combating* every force that was *inimical* to India's freedom."<sup>184</sup> It was, therefore, necessary to fight the *spirit of separateness* no matter from what source it arose. But Gandhi's offer to accept the Muslim demands was hedged around with two conditions.<sup>185</sup> First, that Gandhi would accept the Muslim demands in his *personal* capacity and would *try* to secure, but *not* guarantee, the acceptance of his position by the Congress.<sup>186</sup> Second, that the Muslims should *not* support the special claims of the Untouchables, particularly their claim to special representation.<sup>187</sup> The Muslims would *not* stand in their way if Gandhi could arrive at a mutual understanding with the Untouchables.<sup>188</sup> According to Iqbal's testimony, the Muslims were *not* to support rather than 'oppose' the Untouchables' claim to special representation.<sup>189</sup>

Gandhi's agreeing to the Muslim demands, in his own words, stemmed from "the necessary *consequence* of [his] acceptance. Political *unity* was desired for political end which for [him] as for any Indian be a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian or any other, could *only* be 'complete national independence' in the fullest sense of the term."<sup>190</sup> Earlier also Gandhi had said that he was prepared to accept the Muslim demands *in toto* provided those demands had the backing of *all* Muslims including the Nationalist Muslims,<sup>191</sup> that is, provided the demand was made by the Muslim community as a *whole* and not merely by a section of it. At the Second Round Table

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<sup>183</sup> Noorani, 'Gandhi & Jinnah', (emphasis mine).

<sup>184</sup> *The Tribune*, 15th December 1933, (emphasis mine); *The Hindustan Times*, 14th December 1933; 'Statement To The Press', 13th December 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 62, pp. 277-79.

<sup>185</sup> M. Iqbal, *Speeches And Statements Of Iqbal*, (ed., Shamloo), Lahore, Al-Manav Academy, 1944, pp. 190-92. Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), widely known as Allama Iqbal, was a poet, philosopher, and politician, as well as an academic, barrister and scholar in British India who is widely regarded as having inspired the Pakistan Movement.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *The Tribune*, 15th December 1933.

<sup>191</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, pp. 5-7.

Conference, the Congress-Muslim Pact stipulated that the question whether seats for the Muslims should be reserved through a joint electorate or whether they should have separate electorates was to be ‘determined by Musalman voters by a referendum under the new constitution, and their verdict should be accepted’. According to Ambedkar, instead of unifying the Indian delegation at the Conference, Gandhi widened the breach.<sup>192</sup>

The informal meetings held outside the Conference and presided over by Gandhi, were abortive. Negotiations at the Conference broke down as the delegates failed to reach an agreement either constitutionally or on the communal representation. The Muslim delegates insisted that the question of separate representation must be settled before the drafting of a new constitution.<sup>193</sup> The Depressed Classes, represented by Ambedkar, lined up with the Muslims. Like the Muslims and the Sikhs, they also demanded satisfactory solution to their claims before any constitutional advance. The Minorities Sub-Committee could not arrive at any decision, unanimous or otherwise. It was adjourned indefinitely giving leeway to the London newspapers which began to express their pleasure at the break-up of the Conference in its second session and deflation of Gandhi, whom they blamed for the failure. J. L. Garvin, editor of the most influential newspaper in England – *The Observer* – concluded that Gandhi’s “exalted and unconstructive ideology suggest the breaking and not the making of India.”<sup>194</sup> William Shirer, who was associated with Gandhi in 1931, however, argues that “behind the scenes, the British were doing their best to *prevent* an understanding between ...” the Hindus and the Muslims.<sup>195</sup>

An editorial in the liberal newspaper, *News Chronicle*, wrote, “[powerful] influences are at work in this country (Britain) which would make the Indian communal differences an effective *excuse* for breaking up the Conference

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<sup>192</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 55. S. K. Gupta argues that such an uncharitable criticism of Gandhi, was, however, not free from the bitter feelings that Ambedkar harboured in his mind that Gandhi would never permit the Conference to assign a separate communal political status to the Depressed Classes, for which the former had been fighting and had achieved considerable success at the Conference. Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 275.

<sup>193</sup> Nanda, *Road To Pakistan*, p. 156.

<sup>194</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 192.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186, (emphasis mine).



altogether.”<sup>196</sup> William Shirer recounts that such influences became more bolder and more public. This became evident when the Tory members gathered in the House of Commons on the evening of 1st October 1931, with the intention to convince an invited group of Indian Muslims that “their future would best be served in an India still ruled by the British Raj and not by the Hindus.”<sup>197</sup> Led by Lord Lloyd and Lord Brentford, the British Tory members of the Parliament were assuring to the Muslims of India that if they remained loyal to the Crown, they would be properly rewarded by (1) according them important role in building up the Indian Army, and (2) bestowing on them a greater role in the Central and Provincial Governments. The British would never let them down, “never permit them to be dominated by the Hindus.” Shirer graphically recounts that “[it] was pretty strong stuff.”<sup>198</sup> According to Sumit Sarkar, Muslim delegates at the Second Round Table Conference were cultivated by British Parliamentarians like Sir Edward Benthall,<sup>199</sup> who succeeded in obtaining Muslim support in return for a promise that “we [could] not forget their economic plight in Bengal and ... do what we can to find places for them in European firms.”<sup>200</sup> The Muslims, led by Mohammad Shafi and Shaukat Ali, were overwhelmed. “You grant us our demands and we will remain loyal subjects of the King and Emperor,” said Ali.<sup>201</sup>

Ambedkar forwarded an uncharitable criticism of Gandhi when the negotiations failed to materialise at the Second Round Table Conference. “The Muslims dropped Gandhi’s proposal because they refused to betray the other minorities.”<sup>202</sup> Ambedkar believed that Gandhi would never permit the Conference to assign a separate ‘communal political status’ to the Depressed Classes for which he

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<sup>196</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>199</sup> Sir Edward Benthall was the head of Bird and Company, one of British India’s biggest managing agency firms. G. Piramal, *Business Legends: G. D. Birla, J. R. D. Tata, Walchand Hirachand, Kasturbhai Lalbhai*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 457; S. A. Kochanek, *Business And Politics In India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974, p. 15.

<sup>200</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 319.

<sup>201</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 186.

<sup>202</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 185.

had been fighting and had achieved considerable success at the Conference<sup>203</sup> and he was also aware that “[the] Musalmans who were out to demand safeguards for themselves could not stand up and oppose the demands of the Untouchables.”<sup>204</sup> Trilok Nath argues that Gandhi’s refusal to give ‘security’ to the Depressed Classes and other minorities except the Muslims and the Sikhs constituted a great obstacle at the Conference, as “the Muslims would stand by all minorities.”<sup>205</sup> What was recognised, therefore, was that the communal principle was bound to remain a part and parcel of the constitution. Even the Minorities Sub-Committee was unanimous that “the new constitution should contain provisions designed to assure minority communities that their interests would not be prejudiced.”<sup>206</sup> A satisfactory solution to the intricate minorities problem thus eluded Gandhi at the Conference.

A divided Hindu community was to the advantage of both the British and the Muslims. The Muslims feared losing their number game if the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables joined hands. Similarly, a very open, active and all-out support of the British to the Untouchables could prove dangerous to the British rule. It would have earned the hostility of Hindu communalists on the one hand, and on the other, would have, most likely, pushed the Hindus and their supporters to the Congress camp, spurring at least seventy percent of India’s population against imperialism. Therefore, the British pushed forward their support to the Muslims, who the British believed were shrewd enough to not reject the Untouchables’ demand for separate electorates. The big British game was thus to keep the Hindus, the Muslims, the Untouchables and other minorities divided, so that the Government could proclaim that it was futile for them to make any proposal on its own until the Indians decided to agree among themselves on what they wanted.

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<sup>203</sup> Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 275.

<sup>204</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 74.

<sup>205</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, pp. 137-38. Dhananjay Keer, the biographer of Ambedkar, however tells us that at the Third Round Table Conference, Ambedkar was “surprised to note was that the Muslim leaders were not only *self-centred* but also *narrow-minded* and *regressive* in their social attitude. Ambedkar drew the *inevitable conclusion* that it was *unsafe* to count on their support with regard to the demands of the Depressed Classes.” Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 223, (emphasis mine).

<sup>206</sup> R. G. Revankar, *The Indian Constitution: A Case Study Of Backward Classes*, New Jersey, Associated University Press, Inc., 1971, p. 71.

Historians, Trilok Nath and Sumit Sarkar are of the opinion that the talks in the Conference failed on the Muslim-Sikh question. Nath argues that Gandhi's scheme to bridge the gap between the Sikhs and the Muslims by meeting their demands "could not take off because of Sikh and Muslim distrust ... of each other."<sup>207</sup> Sarkar further writes that while "the Muslim delegates bluntly rejected [Gandhi's] offer, ... [his] generosity was certainly not shared by the [Hindu] Mahasabha delegates, who along with the Sikhs bitterly opposed anything that could give a majority to the Muslims in the Punjab."<sup>208</sup> Dhananjay Keer, however, puts the responsibility on the Muslim leaders for the communal deadlock. He argues that it was the unwritten policy of the Muslim leaders to drag the Hindu leaders to a certain line of agreement and then to turn the British Government for more concessions. They knew that it was the British Government that had the power to give. Keer also asserts that the Muslims moved heaven and earth to get separate electorates,<sup>209</sup> while the Sikhs demanded that the safeguards guaranteed to the Sikhs in the constitution should *not* be rescinded or modified without their express consent. However, the question of the Untouchables' representation broke-up the Second Round Table Conference as it ended in a stalemate when Gandhi strongly opposed separate representation for the Untouchables. The Minorities Sub-Committee had a division of votes on the question of separate electorates for the Untouchables. The proposal to create separate electorates for the Untouchables was *rejected* with fifteen votes against and ten votes in favour of the proposal.<sup>210</sup>

The Second Round Table Conference has been aptly described by Pyarelal as a "sordid drama of 'high diplomacy', wire-pulling and intrigue."<sup>211</sup> The British strategy for *avoiding* any serious commitment to Indian self-rule was working. Despite Gandhi's pleadings, the British Government had not uttered one word about how far it would go in granting India self-rule, whereas "Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians and the Untouchables fairly flew at each other's throats."<sup>212</sup> The result was

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<sup>207</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 137.

<sup>208</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 319-20.

<sup>209</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 185.

<sup>210</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *My Life Is My Message: Satyapath: 1930-1940*, Vol. III, (trans. Narayan Desai), New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2009, p. 22, (emphasis mine).

<sup>211</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1932, p. 5.

<sup>212</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 186.

a standstill in the Conference which was not unwelcome to the British. The British Prime Minister admitted the failure of the Conference to evolve an agreed solution to the minorities' question. On 8th October 1931, Gandhi announced, with deep sorrow to the Minorities Committee, his utter failure in securing an agreed solution to the communal question through informal conversations amongst and with the representatives of different groups. He said that the causes of failure were inherent in the composition of the Indian Delegation, for they were almost all not the elected representatives of the parties or groups whom they were presumed to represent but they were nominees of the Government. On the other hand, Gandhi regretted, that those whose presence was absolutely necessary for an agreement were not to be found at the Conference.<sup>213</sup> In the Minorities Sub-Committee, a fundamental disagreement arose between Gandhi and Ambedkar as to how the Untouchables' problem was to be resolved in a free India. Ambedkar had been successful in obtaining a recommendation of separate electorates for the Untouchables in the First Round Table Conference. At the second Conference in 1931, the idea of separate electorates for the Untouchables was strongly opposed by Gandhi.<sup>214</sup> David Hardiman argues that Gandhi had a strong case – “distinct electorates for Muslims had undoubtedly been *divisive*, creating as they did a class of politicians whose basis was that of separatist politics.”<sup>215</sup> Hardiman adds that Ambedkar's position also had a strong justification: “the interests of the Dalits, who were in a minority everywhere, would be submerged in the politics of the majority.”<sup>216</sup> Ambedkar was convinced that recognition of the distinct and separate entity of the Untouchables and the grant of separate electorates were *sine qua non* for the elevation of their political, social and economic status. A separate Untouchable electorate was however contrary to all that Gandhi had worked for. He and other reformist caste-Hindus had broken the barrier of untouchability and built a slender bridge on which many caste-Hindus and Untouchables were

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<sup>213</sup> *Indian Round Table Conference: Second Session*, Vol. 1, pp. 530-31.

<sup>214</sup> Separate electorates for Muslims and Sikhs were included in the 1916 Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the Muslim League, which Tilak and Jinnah had helped forge and Gandhi had backed but ‘only as a necessary evil’. Though both sides complained about the Pact, they had not agreed on an alternative.

<sup>215</sup> D. Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time And Ours*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 131, (emphasis mine).

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

courageously walking. A separate electorate would restore the barrier, weaken the bridge and reverse the reform process among the caste-Hindus. Worst of all, it would “divide the Hindu community into armed camps”<sup>217</sup> and expose the Untouchables to greater hostility. Gandhi observed that such provisions could only be advocated by those who were ignorant of social conditions in India or ill-disposed towards the country.

Contrary to Gail Omvedt’s assertion that Gandhi was not only ignorant of the division that existed in the villages between the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables, he was also ignorant of the violence in the lives of the Untouchables,<sup>218</sup> Gandhi’s speech at the Indian Majlis at Oxford (Britain), show how accurately he knew the condition of the Untouchables. In his speech, Gandhi explained that “Muslims and Sikhs are all well organised. The Untouchables are *not*. There is very little *political consciousness* among them and they are so horribly treated that I (Gandhi) want to save them against themselves. If they had separate electorates, their lives would be miserable in the villages, which are the strongholds of Hindu orthodoxy. ... By giving them separate electorates, you will throw the apple of discord between the Untouchables and the orthodox. ... It would be a positive danger for the Untouchables. I am certain that the question of separate electorates for the Untouchables is a modern manufacture of a Satanic Government.”<sup>219</sup> During discussions at ‘Friends House’, Gandhi had signalled that he was one “who feels with them and knows their life” and added that “[the] ‘Untouchables’ are in the hands of superior classes. They can suppress them completely and wreak vengeance upon the ‘Untouchables’ who are at their mercy. ... [How] can I invite utter destruction for them? I would not be guilty of that crime.”<sup>220</sup> Gandhi stressed that the Hindu conscience was already stirred to remove the blot and that untouchability would soon be a relic of the past. He was convinced that ‘special representation’ to the Depressed Classes would do them no good but do them much harm. According to Gandhi, “[this] enumeration of opinion [was] very crucial for [his] purpose,” because this demonstrated that there existed the necessary consensus and climate within the Hindu

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<sup>217</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 119.

<sup>218</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 172.

<sup>219</sup> *Young India*, 12th November 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 48, pp. 223-24.

<sup>220</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 258.

community capable of recognising the inhumanity of untouchability, and mounting a campaign against it.<sup>221</sup> Gandhi argues that if adult franchise was granted, it would put millions of Depressed Classes on voters' list which no political party could afford to ignore.

The 'pernicious concept' of separate electorates introduced by the British, writes Aditya Mukherjee, had "divided Indian society irreparably at the very initial stages of modern electoral politics. Inherent in it was the two-(or more) nation theory."<sup>222</sup> Bipan Chandra argues that separate electorates had turned elections and the Legislative Councils into an arena of communal conflict. Since the voters were exclusively the followers of one community, the candidates did not have to get votes from persons of other community. Many of such community leaders made communal speeches and appeals, and the community members, therefore, tended to think and vote communally and had begun to perceive in terms of communal power, progress, and to express their socio-economic grievances in communal terms.<sup>223</sup> Gandhi was aware that the policy of permitting 'special interests' within the Indian society whether for the Muslims, the Sikhs or other minorities could hardly be looked upon as an equitable policy. It would have retarded the progress of the entire country. It was for these reasons that the Congress opposed separate electorates for the Depressed Classes and also because of Gandhi's convictions that a separate Depressed Classes electorate would help divide and rule elements in the Raj. This weakens Arundhati Roy, Christophe Jaffrelot, and others, argument that Gandhi essentially represented the upper caste-Hindus at the Second Round Table Conference, and therefore, refused to accommodate the interests of the Depressed Classes. In fact, Gandhi had promised at the second session that he would have the most drastic legislation enacted against the disabilities to which the Depressed Classes were subjected. He had also

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<sup>221</sup> The method Gandhi adopted was to mobilise the feelings of 'shame' and 'guilt' among the upper caste-Hindus, and his movement against the practice of untouchability was a 'penance' for the caste-Hindus. He demanded that upper caste-Hindus should not just abandon their false consciousness but also should participate in the social, economic and political uplift of the Untouchables as part of their 'penance'.

<sup>222</sup> A. Mukherjee, 'Challenges To The Social Sciences In The 21st Century: Some Perspectives From The South', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 48, No. 37, (14 Sep., 2013), p. 34.

<sup>223</sup> Chandra, *Communalism*, p. 310.

acknowledged that “the informal work of discovering a true *solution* of the communal problem ... must continue.”<sup>224</sup>

Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi’s contentions. He believed that to exclude the Untouchables, to keep them down, was the very essence of Hinduism. “The caste-Hindus excluded the Untouchables as a matter of faith. They looked upon the latter as an enemy. The enmity between the two was permanent.”<sup>225</sup> Ambedkar insisted that “there was no chance of a harmonious ideology developing, no chance of a common outlook developing which took account of the interests of all.”<sup>226</sup> Moreover, the Untouchables “have their very *persona* confiscated.”<sup>227</sup> Arundhati Roy argues that to Ambedkar caste would only be further entrenched unless Untouchables were able to develop into a political constituency with their own representatives. Ambedkar believed, she further writes, that reserved seats for the Untouchables within the ‘Hindu fold’, or within the Congress, would just produce pliable candidates – servants who knew how to please their masters.<sup>228</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot fully accepts this view. He emphasises that separate electorates was likely to endow the Untouchables with their *own* representatives, thereby constituting themselves into a *real* political force, whereas the reserved seats left open the possibility of upper caste-dominated parties co-opting the Untouchables, handing out tickets during elections and electing them, even when this ran *contrary* to the wishes of the local Untouchables.<sup>229</sup> Roy and Jaffrelot’s view-point resonate what the British Viceroy, Lord Minto, had expressed to the Muslim delegation in 1906. Minto had approved of the views that in bodies such as Legislative Councils a Muslim elected with Hindu votes would sacrifice his views “to those of a *majority* opposed to his community.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 2, p. 660; Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 160.

<sup>225</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 192-94.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-94.

<sup>227</sup> Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, p. 75.

<sup>228</sup> A. Roy, ‘All The World’s A Half-Built Dam’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 50, No. 25, (June 20, 2015), p. 168.

<sup>229</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 54.

<sup>230</sup> Reproduced in R. Gopal, *Indian Muslims: A Political History, 1858-1947*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 338; B. L. Grover, *A Documentary Study Of British Policy Towards Indian Nationalism: 1885-1909*, Delhi, National Publications, 1967, p. 272.

With no consensus being reached on the communal question, Gandhi concentrated on hammering out the fundamentals of a new constitution expeditiously without letting the deadlock in the Minorities Sub-Committee paralyze the work of the Conference as a whole. However, not only did the British refuse to spell out a timetable for India's independence, they also questioned the Congress's right to speak for all of India by pointing to the delegates opposed to Gandhi and the Congress at the Conference. To the delight of the British officials, Ambedkar joined by leaders of some other 'separatist' groups – the Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians and Europeans – at the Second Round Table Conference, formed a united front of anti-Congress minorities to prevent the Conference from endorsing Gandhi's proposals. They produced a settlement document acting on the suggestion of the British Prime Minister, popularly known as the Minorities Pact, bypassing Gandhi and submitted it to the Premier.<sup>231</sup> The Minorities Pact had a supplementary memorandum attached, formed by Ambedkar and Srinivasan, the Untouchables' representatives at the Conference, which asked for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. The supplement also added that if the system of joint electorates was to exist with reserved seats, it should take place only after a referendum after twenty years.<sup>232</sup> The Europeans had also joined the Muslims and other minorities in signing the pact. The memorandum was signed by the Aga Khan, B. R. Ambedkar, Rao Bahadur Pannirselvam, Sir Henry Gidney and Sir Hubert Carr,<sup>233</sup> a British member of the Minorities Sub-Committee, indicating that the Minorities Pact had both implicit and explicit backing of the British Government. Carr believed that

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<sup>231</sup> The memorandum, submitted "on behalf of the Mohammedans, the Depressed Classes, the Anglo-Indians, the Europeans and a considerable section of Indian Christian groups", demanded, inter alia, that these communities 'shall have representation in all Legislatures through separate electorate ... provided that, after a lapse of ten years, it will be open to Muslims in Punjab and Bengal and any minority communities in any other province to accept joint electorate. ... With regard to the Depressed Classes, no change to joint electorate ... shall be made until after twenty years ..." (*CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 293) The conception of such a Pact was not altogether new. The representative of the European Group in Bengal, Mr. Villiers had said in a speech in India earlier, that unless the Congress behaved, the Europeans would join the Muslims and other minorities to fight it. M. B. Verma, *History Of The Harijan Sevak Sangh: 1932-1968*, (trans., Viyogi Hari), Delhi, Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1971, p. 29.

<sup>232</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 2, Appendix II, pp. 669-72; Thorat & Kumar, *Perspectives On Social Exclusion*, pp. 167-70.

<sup>233</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 293.



Gandhi's failure had resulted in bringing the minorities together. Gandhi replied to this charge thus: "I will not deprive Sir Hubert Carr and his associates of the feeling of satisfaction that evidently actuates to them, but, in my opinion, what they have done is to sit by the carcass, and they have performed the laudable feat of dissecting the carcass"<sup>234</sup> around primordial identities of religion, caste, tribe, etc. As for the document produced by the self-proclaimed leaders of the minorities, Gandhi said, it was designed not to achieve 'responsible Government' but to share power with the bureaucracy. Gandhi had a point as Ambedkar pointed out at the Conference that the Untouchables "are not anxious, they are not clamorous, they have not started any movement for claiming that there shall be immediate transfer of power from the British to the Indian people."<sup>235</sup> S. K. Gupta argues that the representatives of the Untouchables "continued to hold on tightly to the ground they had prepared in the first session of the Conference. They did not budge an inch from their stand. Instead their *separatist* attitude got stiffened ...."<sup>236</sup> An American observer wrote, "Gandhi's voice is only one against many. They may be small fry and the Mahatma may be speaking on behalf of a most influential organisation. To my mind the Mahatma should have brought a strong contingent of representatives of the *nationalist sections of the great minorities*'."<sup>237</sup>

The Minorities Pact was a triumph of the British strategy. The pact conceded to the Depressed Classes much fewer seats than their proportion to the Indian population.<sup>238</sup> Of the projected total of 1100 seats in the Provincial Councils, the

<sup>234</sup> C. Rajagopalachari & J. C. Kumarappa, (eds.), *The Nations Voice*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1967, p. 37.

<sup>235</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 3, pp. 661-63.

<sup>236</sup> Gupta, *Scheduled Castes*, p. 273, (emphasis mine).

<sup>237</sup> Quoted by Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 184, (emphasis mine).

<sup>238</sup> Minorities Pact Distribution of Seats in Provincial Legislatures:

<i>Province</i>	<i>Caste-Hindus</i>	<i>Depressed Classes</i>	<i>Muslims</i>	<i>Total</i>
Madras	102	40	30	200
Bombay	88	28	66	200
Bengal	38	35	102	200
United Provinces	44	20	30	100
Punjab	14	10	51	100
Bihar and Orissa	51	14	25	100
Central Provinces	58	20	15	100

Depressed Classes were to have only 180 seats, whereas they should have been allotted 209 seats on the basis of constituting at least nineteen percent of the population of British India. On the other hand, Muslims, forming 21.5 percent of the population, were given 338 seats, whereas they should have got 237 seats. Why then did Ambedkar and Srinivasan accept so reduced a level of Depressed Classes representation in Provincial Legislatures? As *The Tribune* reported later that, Ambedkar and Srinivasan agreed to the Minorities Pact because of “the promise of weightage given to them in *their* provinces,”<sup>239</sup> although the joined claims of those claiming to represent the Muslims, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, etc., jointly undermined Ambedkar’s stand.<sup>240</sup> Eleanor Zelliot writes that the Second Round Table Conference found the Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Indian Christians all demanding separate electorates to guarantee their political rights, and it was “in this context [that] Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate for the Untouchables.”<sup>241</sup>

British Premier, Ramsay MacDonald, offered his services for the settlement of the communal question by asking the Indian parties to send him a *signed request* asking his help. MacDonald stated that in the absence of *any* agreement between the representatives of different minorities, on the one hand, and the statesman of the Congress, on the other, he would be *obliged* to take note of *its provisions* in any decision which His Majesty’s Government took regarding the constitutional progress of India.<sup>242</sup> Gandhi refused to sign such a request to be made to the Prime Minister by the Indian delegates.<sup>243</sup> His objection had a sound basis, for he argued that MacDonald would be arbitrating not in his personal capacity, but as the Prime

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Assam	38	13	35	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>453</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>354</b>	<b>1100</b>

Sitaramayya, *Indian National Congress*, Vol. I, p. 665.

<sup>239</sup> *The Tribune*, 25th March 1932, (emphasis mine).

<sup>240</sup> Remember that the Minorities Sub-Committee had a division of votes on the question of separate electorates for the Untouchables. The proposal to create separate electorates for the Untouchables was rejected with fifteen votes against and ten votes in favour of the proposal.

<sup>241</sup> Zelliot, ‘Congress And The Untouchables’, p. 190.

<sup>242</sup> *Indian Round Table Conference: Second Session*, Vol. 3, pp. 1385-86, (emphasis mine).

<sup>243</sup> S. Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi: Preparing For Swaraj*, Vol. VII, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1996, p. 380.

Minister of the Government. The Congress would not accept any arbitration by the Government in the solution of the communal question for that would mean, Gandhi opined, “selling the country,” as “no Government in the nature of things would suggest a solution *unfavourable* to themselves.”<sup>244</sup>

The Minorities Pact was announced on 13th November 1931, signed by Ambedkar and by the Aga Khan, among others. This pact demanded separate electorates in Indian Legislatures for the Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Indian-based Europeans and the Untouchables. Speaking at the meeting, Gandhi admonished the British Government for having egged on the minority groups to press their demands. He reminded the British Government that it had not convened the Round Table Conference for settling the communal question, but for starting a process of constitution building. Arguing that a separate electorate for the Untouchables means “the perpetual bar sinister,” Gandhi added, “I would not sell the vital interests of the Untouchables *even for the sake of winning the freedom of India.*”<sup>245</sup> He went on to emphasise that those demanding separation “do not know their India, do not know how Indian society is today constructed.” Separate electorates would entrench divisions in every village. “What these people need more than election to the legislature is protection from social and religious persecution.” Gandhi ended the meeting with a declaration: “I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist it with my life.”<sup>246</sup> Gandhi told William Shirer that he had never felt humiliated.<sup>247</sup> When a questioner told Gandhi in London that the stubborn fact against him (Gandhi) was that he was *not* an Untouchable. Gandhi replied in the affirmative – “I know it very well.”<sup>248</sup>

Bidyut Chakrabarty sees Gandhi’s protest against the extension of separate electorates to the Untouchables as *double-edged* as that would have “split the Untouchables from the Hindu community and absolve the latter of its moral responsibility to fight against the practice of untouchability.”<sup>249</sup> In this context,

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<sup>244</sup> CWMG, Vol. 48, pp. 257-58.

<sup>245</sup> CWMG, Vol. 54, pp. 158-59, (emphasis mine).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Shirer, *A Memoir*, p. 194.

<sup>248</sup> CWMG, Vol. 48, p. 161, (emphasis mine).

<sup>249</sup> B. Chakrabarty, *Social And Political Thought Of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Routledge, 2006, 106.

Bhikhu Parekh concentrates on political calculations that governed Gandhi's mind – “separate electorates would have reduced the numerical strength of the Hindu majority, encouraged minority alliance against it, and fragmented the country yet further.”<sup>250</sup> So Gandhian intervention at the Second Round Table Conference was the result of skilful political strategy and Gandhi's passionate concern for Indian *unity*.

Yet there are critics who have been less than favourable in viewing Gandhi's role at the Conference. Scholars have indicted him for being obstinate, stubborn and intransigent. It has been stated that if he had only agreed to the Untouchables' demand for a certain number of seats being *reserved* for them in the Legislatures, they would have been reconciled to the joint electorates and not been forced to enter into the Minorities Pact. Eleanor Zelliott argues that Ambedkar had to “[confront] Gandhi, who not only refused to consider separate electorates for the Depressed Classes but also *opposed* any form of special representation involving reserved seats.”<sup>251</sup> Trilok Nath and Dhananjay Keer<sup>252</sup> support this view. Nath asserts that “there were strong arguments against power being given to [the Untouchables] through separate electorates .... Gandhi felt *unable* to throw in his lot with those who held” that the Untouchables should be given “reservation of seats in general electorates,”<sup>253</sup> otherwise “the problem would have been solved long before.”<sup>254</sup> Nishikant Kolge argues that Gandhi “was not [against] ... separate electorate alone; he was [against] ... any kind of special arrangements or any kind of separate political representation for the Untouchables, that is, a separate electorate, a joint electorate with reserved seats or reserved seats.”<sup>255</sup> To Gail Omvedt, Gandhi denied “empowerment and political protection of the Dalits.”<sup>256</sup> This was because, as Arundhati Roy puts it: Gandhi viewed the Untouchables in need of “missionary ministrations,” and *not* “political representation” because “[it] was an antithetical, intimidating idea to Gandhi” to conceive that the Untouchables who “had been physiologically hardwired into the

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<sup>250</sup> B. Parekh, *Gandhi*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>251</sup> Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 166, (emphasis mine); Zelliott, ‘A Study In Leadership’, p. 84, (emphasis mine).

<sup>252</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 196.

<sup>253</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 134, (emphasis mine).

<sup>254</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 181.

<sup>255</sup> N. Kolge, *Gandhi Against Caste*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 172.

<sup>256</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 44.

caste system, too, might need to be roused [from] being conditioned to think of themselves as sub-humans.”<sup>257</sup> According to Tanika Sarkar, “as per Gandhi, the Untouchables should seek transform of their condition neither by legal redress nor by political autonomy.”<sup>258</sup> All this stemmed from the fact that while Ambedkar’s leadership of the Untouchables was “natural, actual, and practical,”<sup>259</sup> because he “had grown up in India as an Untouchable,”<sup>260</sup> Gandhi’s leadership was “sentimental and assumed,”<sup>261</sup> he needed “to travel all the way to South Africa to learn about humiliation and social segregation.”<sup>262</sup>

The critics however forget that Gandhi had never objected to the representation of the Depressed Classes in the Legislature or even to their over-representation. On the contrary, he was anxious to secure their adequate representation. He even expressed his readiness, under certain conditions, to guarantee by statute, a specified number of seats to be filled by them. This is evidenced in the published records of the proceedings of the Second Round Table Conference. Quoting from the resolution of the Congress Working Committee, Gandhi emphasised that the Congress was *committed* to adult franchise and could not support any alternative franchise. It stood for joint electorates as the basis for any future constitution, with reservation of seats for minorities in Sind, Assam, Punjab, North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.) and wherever else there were minorities forming less than twenty-five percent of the population. Congress also supported the Muslim demand that the form of Government in N.W.F.P. and Baluchistan should be the same as in other provinces and that Sind should be constituted into a separate province.<sup>263</sup> The Indian National Congress position on this question, asserted Gandhi, “was one of the greatest possible *accommodation*.”<sup>264</sup> Having explained the Indian National Congress position, Gandhi assured that if the Congress position was

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<sup>257</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, pp. 129-30.

<sup>258</sup> T. Sarkar, ‘Gandhi And Social Relations’, in J. M. Brown & A. Parel, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion To Gandhi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 182.

<sup>259</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 182.

<sup>260</sup> Roy, ‘Half-Built Dam’, p. 169.

<sup>261</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 182.

<sup>262</sup> Roy, ‘Half-Built Dam’, p. 169.

<sup>263</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, pp. 257-58.

<sup>264</sup> *Indian Round Table Conference: Second Session*, Vol. 1, p. 119, (emphasis mine).

unacceptable, the Congress would be prepared to endorse any other reasonable scheme which might be acceptable to the other parties. He further clarified his position by saying that “[it] seems to have been represented that I am opposed to *any* representation of the Untouchables. What I have said, and what I must repeat, is that I am opposed to their *special* representation.”<sup>265</sup> Gandhi had also told a questioner at the Round Table Conference that though he pronounced to represent the Untouchables at the London Conference, in the Legislatures they should have “their own representatives, drawn from their own class.”<sup>266</sup> This “was a hint that [Gandhi] might agree to reserved seats.”<sup>267</sup> Gandhi discussed several alternative proposals in the place of the scheme of separate electorates with the representatives of the Depressed Classes. But there *never* was put before him a specific scheme for statutory reservation of seats for his acceptance or rejection.<sup>268</sup> Gandhi returned empty-handed from the Second Round Table Conference and was arrested soon after his arrival in India while the Civil Disobedience Movement was resumed. Meanwhile, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, adjourned the Conference. On 16th August 1932, he announced the Communal Award, which provided for separate communal electorates for the Untouchables, Muslims, Europeans, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Indian-based Christians.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>266</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 48, p. 161.

<sup>267</sup> R. Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi*, New Delhi, Viking, 1995, p. 250.

<sup>268</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, p. 12.

<sup>269</sup> Ambedkar, *Pakistan*, Appendix XI, pp. 371-72.

## The Communal Award and the Poona Pact The Role of British Policy

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*“Obviously, no one can say that there was not an inherent tendency towards division in India, and with the prospect of the approach of political power, this was likely to grow. It was possible to adopt a policy to tone down this tendency; it was also possible to accentuate it. The Government adopted the latter policy and encouraged in every way every fissiparous tendency in the country.”*<sup>1</sup> – Jawaharlal Nehru

### [1]

As mentioned earlier, this and the previous chapter together aim to analyse British policy towards the Depressed Classes. In the previous chapter we saw that in British India, it was the Muslim community that was first granted separate electorates by the British Government through the Indian Councils Act 1909, commonly known as the Morley-Minto Reforms. From 1919 onwards, many Untouchable leaders including Ambedkar had been time and again demanding either reservation of seats in joint electorates or separate electorates for the Untouchables. Ultimately, the Simon Commission in its report suggested that the Depressed Classes must be granted reserved seats. However, its recommendations could not be implemented as the Congress had taken no part in its drafting. To resolve the problem, the British Government announced the Round Table Conferences that were to be held in London. Representatives of the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christians, the Untouchables, and the Hindu Mahasabha, along with many other participants, attended the First Round Table Conference in 1930. Again, this conference could not produce any results as the Congress had boycotted it. However, in 1931, Gandhi participated as the sole representative of the Congress in the Second Round Table Conference organised by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms for India. The conference, starting in September and going up to November, was held in London. At the conference, Ambedkar supported separate electorates, while Gandhi opposed it. The two leaders failed to find any common ground and this conference, too, ended inconclusively.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Jawaharlal Nehru’s Letter To Lord Lothian’ (1936), J. Nehru, *Selected Works*, (ed., S. Gopal), First Series, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1972, p. 190.

Gandhi returned empty-handed from the Second Round Table Conference and was arrested soon after his arrival in India as he decided to resume the Civil Disobedience Movement. On 16th August 1932, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, announced the Communal Award, which provided for separate communal electorates for the Untouchables, Muslims, Europeans, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Indian-based Christians. This chapter argues that Gandhi's "epic fast" was successful in preventing the emergence of a 'fatal' divide amongst the Hindus. He performed brilliantly and succeeded to defeat the very purpose of the British policy in augmenting divisions within the Hindu community by taking recourse to constitutional provisions. The breach was mended with the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar.

## [2]

Gandhi had recognised that the problem of minorities had to be solved. He himself was of the view that without the solution of the problem, there could be no freedom for India. However, he also knew that so long as the wedge in the shape of foreign rule divided community from community and class from class, the problem could not be solved.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, as soon as he got back to India, he decided to launch a campaign to awaken people, especially the Untouchables, to the evil inherent in the separate electorates. He mentioned this to the Inspector General of Prisons, E. E. Doyle, when the latter visited him at the Yeravda Jail to assess whether Gandhi would actually carry out his resolve to fast unto death. In the *Secret Report*, which he submitted to the Governor of Bombay, Doyle noted that Gandhi "had intended when he returned to India from England, to arouse, by organised agitation, to political consciousness, the [Untouchables], who were *not* politically minded, and who did *not* understand what separate electorates meant or implied, or what was being decided in

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<sup>2</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 48, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, pp. 356-68. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as

*CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).



their name.”<sup>3</sup> The “only way he could now fight the [Communal] Award ... was to starve himself to death if need be ....”<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the Indian Franchise Committee with Lord Lothian at its head, landed in India in January 1932, to concretise the GOI Act 1935, that is, to devise franchise, to frame constituencies and to recommend adjustments required in the form of proposed popular Government. Earlier, the Prime Minister in his letter to Lord Lothian had hinted that the system of nomination of the Untouchables to Legislatures would be replaced by a system of election and had asked Lord Lothian to ascertain what system of election – whether joint electorates with reservation of seats or separate electorates – would be useful for them.<sup>5</sup> From the news that trickled to him in jail, Gandhi foresaw that the British were set to pursue their design to divide the Indian society, and considered it necessary to warn the British Government against creating separate electorates for the Untouchables. He reminded Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India, of the resolve he had expressed at the second Round Table Conference that he would “resist with [his] life the grant of separate electorates to the [Untouchables].”<sup>6</sup> Gandhi wrote that he was “*not* against their representation in the Legislatures.”<sup>7</sup> He was willing to put “every one of their adults, male or female” on the voter’s list “irrespective of education or property qualifications, even though the franchise test may be stricter for the others.”<sup>8</sup> Samuel Hoare answered that he fully realised the strength of Gandhi’s feelings on the question of separate electorates for the Untouchables and that the Government would give a decision on the question *only* on *merit* after the report of the Franchise Committee had been received and

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<sup>3</sup> Report of Inspector General of Prisons, 26th August 1932, Forwarded by the Governor of Bombay, F. H. Sykes to the Viceroy, the Earl of Willingdon in his Very Secret, Private and Personal Letter, 28th August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> British Prime Minister’s Letter To Lord Lothian, 29th December 1931, Government of India, *Report Of The Indian Franchise Committee*, Vol. I, Appendix I, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1932, p. 253.

<sup>6</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113, (emphasis mine).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* It may be recalled that Ambedkar had in his testimony before the Simon Commission demanded reservation of seats in joint electorate ‘but only if’ adult franchise was granted to the Depressed Classes.

considered.<sup>9</sup> The *Bombay Chronicle* however reported that “the Committee had come with definite instructions and pre-conceived decision to recommend separate electorates for the minority communities and that any amount of support for joint electorates would not improve matters”.<sup>10</sup>

Even as Gandhi waited with unease, negotiations seemed to carry on with the Depressed Classes in India through the initiation of leaders like B. S. Moonje of the Hindu Mahasabha, keen to win the favour of the Untouchables. Moonje offered the prospect of separate electorates initially to Ambedkar. In his proposal for a pact, Moonje offered separate electorates for five years subject to the proviso that the constitution should provide that this system would lapse after the end of that period. Ambedkar, however, insisted for separate electorates for fifteen years and the negotiations ended at that.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter, Moonje approached M. C. Rajah, President of the All India Depressed Classes Association, with a strategy for wooing the Untouchables. Rajah and Moonje subsequently entered into a pact, popularly known as the Rajah-Moonje Pact, signed on the basis of *reserved seats* in proportion to their population in *joint electorates* for the Depressed Classes.<sup>12</sup> Following this, the All-India Depressed Classes Association, with Rajah as its President, adopted a resolution that expressed the “opinion that reservation of seats in joint electorates will be highly beneficial for returning members of the community to the Legislatures.”<sup>13</sup> Rajah also submitted a memorandum, telegraphically, to Ramsay MacDonald, the British Premier, giving details of his pact with Moonje. He added that the Premier should not worry about Ambedkar’s demands as the problem was being settled by an agreement between “the *only* central organisation of the Depressed Classes and the organised body of Hindus taken as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The Hindu Mahasabha’s strategy to present a united front of the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables got a boost when Moonje

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<sup>9</sup> CWMG, Vol. 49, pp. 190-93 & 534-35.

<sup>10</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 23rd February 1932.

<sup>11</sup> T. Nath, *Politics Of The Depressed Classes*, Delhi, Deputy Publications, 1987, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> D. Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life And Mission*, 4th Edition, New Delhi, Popular Prakashan, 2015, p. 195; Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 144; C. Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar And Untouchability: Analysing And Fighting Caste*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *The Statesman*, 24th February 1932.

<sup>14</sup> N. N. Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. I, Calcutta, The Annual Register Office, January-June, 1932, p. 16, (emphasis mine).

advised the caste-Hindu members of the Central Provinces Franchise Committee to strike a bargain with G. A. Gavai on the basis of joint electorates. Gavai was the Depressed Classes member on the Franchise Committee representing Central Provinces. The bargain with Gavai was struck which made the Colonial Government to undertake more steps to dissuade the Depressed Classes from giving up the schemes originally proposed in the Minorities Pact that was signed at the second Round Table Conference. The British members of the Central Provinces Franchise Committee tried to wreck the Rajah-Moonje efforts of coming to a compromise by putting out the fear that the caste-Hindus would have to forgo a greater number of seats in the general constituencies to the Depressed Classes as the number of their (Depressed Classes') seats would be subtracted from the caste-Hindu seats. However, in reality the Government did not propose to give the Depressed Classes more than eleven seats, whereas if Gavai's proposal for joint electorates was supported, the Rajah-Moonje Pact would have accorded the Depressed Classes twenty-two seats in a House of 110. With Gavai's initiatives 'Rajah-Moonje Pact' became an actuality.

Ambedkarite-scholars interpret the context of the Rajah-Moonje Pact variously. Gail Omvedt argues that from the time of Gandhi-Ambedkar confrontation in London "a political battle ensued in which the entire Congress elite ... sought to organise meetings of the Untouchables, [to] manoeuvre or *produce* Dalit spokesmen ... who took a line opposing Ambedkar, and [to] do whatever they could to show that 'Untouchables are denouncing Ambedkar' and that there was a 'wave of support for joint electorates'."<sup>15</sup> Ambedkar asserts that M. C. Rajah's support for joint electorates for the Depressed Classes "had none but personal motive behind [it]."<sup>16</sup> Trilok Nath believes that the outcome of the Rajah-Moonje Pact was sheer political 'opportunism' on the part of Rajah.<sup>17</sup> Nath argues that Rajah who was already

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<sup>15</sup> G. Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar And The Dalit Movement In Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, p. 172. In an interview to *The Times Of India* on 18th September 1932, Ambedkar charged Congress and Gandhi, in particular, thus: "Silver bullets had been used to create divisions in the ranks of the Depressed Classes." *The Times Of India*, 18th September 1932.

<sup>16</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings And Speeches*, (ed., V. Moon), Vol. 9, Bombay, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991, p. 114. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BAWS* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>17</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, pp. 143-45.

‘grieved’ at his omission from the Round Table Conference, was ‘stupefied’ to see the credit for championing separate electorates for the Depressed Classes going to Ambedkar. This seemed to sound Rajah’s death knell in politics. “The only way out for him to keep himself in politics,” argues Nath, “was to co-operate with his former opponents, the caste-Hindus,” who troubled by the militant posture of Ambedkar were desperately trying to devise some tactics to counteract Ambedkar’s propaganda. Thus, the aims of Rajah and Moonje, asserts Nath, “brought them nearer and prompted them to work out a plan to *isolate* Ambedkar.”<sup>18</sup> Raj Sekhar Basu<sup>19</sup> and Christophe Jaffrelot echo the same suspicion. Jaffrelot, however, adds that apart from ‘opportunism’, “ideological motives were also at stake” for Rajah. “Rajah was convinced,” asserts Jaffrelot, “of the need to organise the Untouchables *within* Hindu society and blamed separate electorates for making them ‘politically Untouchable’ ....”<sup>20</sup>

While Ambedkar remained silent on the reasons for his transformation into a proponent of separate electorates, M. C. Rajah and his colleagues publicly proclaimed their motives for moving in the reverse direction. According to Ambedkar, Rajah and G. A. Gavai were simply acting as upper-caste agents in the matter, and he had already condemned the association in his Nagpur speech of 1930, as being a nominal organisation, existing only on paper. On the other hand, Rajah repeatedly emphasised that separate electorates would have protected the interests of the Depressed Classes under the system of Dyarchy, but under the prospects of the proposed provincial autonomy, it would compel them to “play a second fiddle to one or another party,” and hinder their integration with any party. It would also deprive them of the opportunity “which will come sooner or later” of sharing in the governance of the provinces.<sup>21</sup> The demand for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, he said,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> R. S. Basu, *Nandanar’s Children: The Paraiyans’ Tryst With Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850-1956*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2011, fn. 193, p. 286. Also see, V. Geetha & S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards A Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass To Periyar*, Kolkata, Samya, 2011; *Indian Annual Register*, Vol. I, 1932, pp. 331-32.

<sup>20</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 58; Also see, Government of India, Reforms Office (Reforms), *File No. 111/32-R*, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi, India; *The Hindustan Times*, 13th and 25th March 1932; *The Bombay Chronicle*, 22nd April 1932; *The Free Press Journal*, 28th April 1932.

<sup>21</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 1st May 1932.

had been made at a time when power still rested with the British who could arbitrate, whenever the need arose, in the interests of the Depressed Classes. But, in the changed context of impending provincial autonomy, separate electorates would place the Depressed Classes “permanently in the opposition.” Their representatives could hope for a share in the governance of the provinces only when they merged in common electorates and subscribed to a common political view. Rajah clarified that even a joint electorate with reservation of seats was “a temporary expedient” till the Depressed Classes, as integral constituent of the Hindu community, were able to stand on their own.<sup>22</sup>

G. M. Thaware, Assistant General Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, reiterated that the Premier’s speech at the Round Table Conference announcing provincial autonomy was the catalyst for his Association’s shift to a joint electorate after twelve years of demanding separate electorates. Under majority rule in the provinces, the minorities would be unable to overcome the Hindu majority even if they acted in unison. In the Central Provinces, for instance, according to the Government’s proposal of hundred seats, ten were to be allotted to Muslims ten to the Depressed Classes and Labour combined, three to Christians and two to the hill tribes making a total of twenty-five. The remaining seventy-five seats would go to the caste-Hindus who would constitute the permanent majority. The welfare of the Depressed Classes thus demanded that they always be with the Hindus. Thaware added that untouchability would not disappear, were the Depressed Classes to become a distinct community.<sup>23</sup>

M. C. Rajah severely criticised the Minorities Pact for its failure to provide seats in proportion to their numbers and accused Ambedkar and Srinivasan of having given a greater weightage in their provinces at the cost of unrepresentative provinces. This weightage, as Rajah argued, “was purchased at the expense of their brethren elsewhere.”<sup>24</sup> He also showed how that pact had favoured Muslims at the cost of the Untouchables. While in population the Untouchables were nearly equal to the Muslims, with the Untouchables forming nineteen percent and the Muslims 21.5

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<sup>22</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 25th March 1932.

<sup>23</sup> Statement by G. M. Thaware, Assistant General Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, 31st March 1932, *File No. 111/32-R*.

<sup>24</sup> *The Tribune*, 25th March 1932.

percent of the population of India, in the Provincial Legislatures the Muslims had been provided 338 seats, which was in excess of their fair share, while the Untouchables were given only 180 seats. Similarly at the Centre, in an Upper House of 200 members, the Muslims had been allotted sixty-seven seats, where rightfully they should have got thirty-eight. In the Lower House of 300 members, the Muslims on the basis of population should have been given sixty-five seats; the Minorities Pact gave them hundred, while the Untouchables got only forty-five seats instead of fifty-seven. The Rajah-Moonje Pact gave the Untouchables the exact number of seats at the Centre justified by the population figures, *viz.*, forty-five in the Upper House and fifty-seven in the Lower House. In the provinces there was only a marginal increase compared to the number provided in the Minorities Pact from 180 to 194.<sup>25</sup> Rajah pointed out that the Rajah-Moonje Pact not only rectified this discrimination but also invested the Untouchables with the power of influencing Hindu elections. What was of importance was that a representative Untouchables' organisation had squarely stood up for joint electorates and dissociated itself from the demand for separate electorates for those classes.

The Rajah-Moonje Pact soon attracted wide attention. Members of the Hindu Mahasabha, the Indian National Congress and the national press, for example, *The Bombay Chronicle*, *The Indian Daily Mail*, *The Hindustan Times*, and *The Times of India*, among others, acclaimed M. C. Rajah as a bold and imaginative leader of the Depressed Classes.<sup>26</sup> The Rajah-Moonje Pact was further strengthened by its being ratified by the Sikh and Hindu leaders, who, *The Indian Daily Mail* reported, "were anxious to *weld* the whole Hindu community into *one*."<sup>27</sup> This "ought to cut off," the paper hoped, "the ground under the feet of the communalists ...."<sup>28</sup> However, Rajah was being supported by the national press, Ambedkar, too, had his support. He was

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<sup>25</sup> *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. I, 1932, pp. 333-37.

<sup>26</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 9th & 17th March 1932; *The Bombay Chronicle*, 30th March 1932; *The Times Of India*, 31st March 1932.

<sup>27</sup> *The Indian Daily Mail*, 9th March 1932, (emphasis mine). At a meeting of Hindu and Sikh members of the Central Legislature and other Hindu leaders held at Moonje's residence, the pact made between Moonje and Rajah regarding the representation of the Depressed Classes in Legislatures through a joint electorate with reservation of seats on a population basis was approved and it was decided to give Rajah and the Working Committee of the All-India Depressed Class Association every support.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

assisted by the bureaucracy and the European controlled print media in India.<sup>29</sup> *The Madras Mail*, a leading newspaper of South India, derided Rajah for playing into the caste-Hindu hands. The newspaper seriously questioned the usefulness of the caste-Hindu members' support to the Rajah-Moonje Pact and observed that Rajah should have secured approval of those whom he sought to represent; his own personal conviction was valueless without his community's endorsement.<sup>30</sup> The Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, himself declared that Rajah's view would not find "general acceptance among the Depressed Classes."<sup>31</sup>

Ambedkar, who had been keeping a very close watch on the activities of M. C. Rajah since his return from England, got upset by the Rajah-Moonje Pact. He started making moves to subvert it or at least to minimise its impact. Ambedkar campaigned in favour of separate electorates by preparing a set of stereotypical answers to a questionnaire issued by the Franchise Committee which came from England to devise franchise and to seek clarity whether the Depressed Classes were in favour of separate or joint electorates with reservation of seats.<sup>32</sup> Ambedkar circulated copies of his answers to individual members of his community as also to different Untouchable associations which had mushroomed. The stereotyped replies to the Franchise Committee questionnaire that was circulated had the following details: "The ... (the blank space is to be filled up by the name of the Association) is of the opinion that the Depressed Classes cannot secure representation in the general electorates. Much less can they secure representatives of their own choice, [even] if there was adult franchise." Answers made by Ambedkar were meant to be an *effective check* on the growth of any opinion in favour of joint electorates in the Untouchables' community.<sup>33</sup> *The Hindustan Times* reported about Ambedkar's attempt "to communalise the Depressed Classes, ... thereby perpetuating the stigma of untouchability on its brow."<sup>34</sup> But Ambedkar persisted. He wrote a letter to G. A. Gavai, then General Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, asking

<sup>29</sup> See Nath, *Depressed Classes*, pp. 147-52.

<sup>30</sup> *The Madras Mail*, 7th March 1932. See also, *The Eastern Tribune*, 30th March 1932.

<sup>31</sup> Viceroy's Telegram to the Secretary of State for India, Telegram R. No. 714, 5th March 1932, *File No. 111/32-R*.

<sup>32</sup> *Report Of The Indian Franchise Committee*, Vol. I, Appendix I, p. 253.

<sup>33</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 23rd February 1932.

<sup>34</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, 29th February 1932, (emphasis mine).

him to *not* discuss the question of separate electorates in their meetings. Ambedkar suggested that in case Gavai could not prevent the Association from considering the question, then his minutes should say that he refused to discuss it because it was outside the terms of reference of the Franchise Committee. Otherwise there would be a permanent breach or even a war between them.<sup>35</sup>

But all this did not help. Rajah-Ambedkar differences were echoed in the memorandum and evidences of various Untouchable Organisations that put their cases before the Franchise Committee. S. K. Gupta argues that a majority of them, who had demanded separate electorates earlier, had definitely thinned and a sizeable number of them led by M. C. Rajah were more and more veering towards the view that joint electorates with reservation of seats were better than separate electorates.<sup>36</sup> Ambedkar's position was thus considerably weakened on account of change in Rajah's attitude. The supporters of the Rajah-Moonje Pact represented the majority of the Untouchables. The Viceroy in his communication to the Secretary of State for India also noted that the Rajah-Moonje Pact had received considerable endorsement in the Hindu press.<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, whether or not M. C. Rajah's view found general acceptance among the Depressed Classes, it was surely *not* to find acceptance by the Government. *The Indian Daily Mail* predicted that though "Dr. Moonje has cabled to the Premier of this pact, ... it is *not* likely to have any healthy effect on the Premier and *affect* greatly his decision on the communal question which has been so *foolishly left to his arbitration*, as he, more than anybody else, has been *mainly* responsible for the fictitious importance it has acquired."<sup>38</sup> As predicted, the "British *ignored* the missive," argues Christophe Jaffrelot, and Ambedkar rest secured "in the knowledge that his rival's (Rajah) influence' with the British 'was at best very weak."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> File No. 111/32-R.

<sup>36</sup> See, S. K. Gupta, *The Scheduled Castes In Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence As A Political Power*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, pp. 280-81.

<sup>37</sup> Viceroy's Telegram to the Secretary of State for India, Telegram R. No. 714, 5th March 1932, File No. 111/32-R.

<sup>38</sup> *The Indian Daily Mail*, 9th March 1932, (emphasis mine).

<sup>39</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 59, (emphasis mine).



From the British side, its attitude towards the Depressed Classes leaders – Ambedkar, M. C. Rajah and others – was of patronage, while at the same time the British Government entertained the possibility of using the Depressed Classes to weaken the Indian freedom struggle. There are references in the private papers of the British officials about their meetings with Ambedkar that show a close understanding between him and the officials. For example, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, in his discussion about Ambedkar’s performance at the second Round Table Conference with the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, wrote that “Ambedkar has behaved very well at the Conference, and I am most anxious to strengthen his hands in every reasonable way.” He suggested that the Viceroy should explore the possibility of forming a separate battalion for the Untouchables as desired by Ambedkar. Hoare said: “Could you (the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon) not induce the Commander-in-Chief to give them (the Untouchables) at least a Company?” Hoare further pointed out that “[in] any case, I feel that at this juncture it would be a really valuable *political* act to make a move of this kind.”<sup>40</sup>

The British Government circulated a White Paper at the closing of the second Round Table Conference, containing the statement of the British Prime Minister, which laid down the views of His Majesty’s Government that “responsibility for the Government of India should be placed upon the Legislatures, Central and Provincial, *with such provisions as may be necessary to guarantee, during a period of transition, the observance of certain obligations and to meet other special circumstances and also with such guarantees as are required by the minorities to protect their political liberties and rights.*”<sup>41</sup> The idea thrown was that the British Government must also retain the *responsibility for securing* the observance of the constitutional rights of the minorities and for ultimately maintaining the tranquility of the (colonial) state.

The White Paper ardently advocated the rights of the minorities, representing a shift in tactics on the part of the British. From now on the plea of *protecting* the rights of the minorities was meant to block India’s progress towards freedom. The White Paper said that there must first be “the settlement of the key question of how to

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<sup>40</sup> Private Letters From Sir Samuel Hoare To Lord Willingdon, *Mss. Eur. E.240/2*, 22nd April 1932 – 28th December 1932, NAI, New Delhi, India. Hereafter, *Mss. Eur. E.240/2*.

<sup>41</sup> *The Indian Annual Register*, Vol. II, 1931, pp. 444-48, (emphasis mine).

safeguard the minorities under a responsible Central Government,” and to device checks and balances that protect the minorities “from an unrestricted and tyrannical use of the democratic principle expressing itself solely through the majority power.” The British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, warned that to secure the ‘natural rights’ of the minorities, it would not be enough to provide for their representation in the Legislatures. The constitution must contain provisions to ensure that the principle of majority Government was not employed to their moral and material disadvantage in the body politic.<sup>42</sup> A shift in the British tactics to rule India was thus clearly visible as the colonial policy tilted towards working to widen the differences among the Indians.

Meanwhile, the report of the Indian Franchise Committee, presided over by Lord Lothian, was published on 3rd June 1932. Surprisingly, the Report made no specific recommendation and provided no guidance on the question of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, except mentioning these to be one of several alternatives to ensure adequate representation to that segment of the population in the Legislatures.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the British had already determined that it would proceed to separate the Untouchables from the rest of Hindu community by decreeing separate electorates for them and lining them up as the possible allies of the colonial state. Correspondence had ensued between the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon and the Governor of Bombay, Sir Frederick Sykes, highlighting the Government’s bent on the issue. In a ‘Confidential Letter’ written to Sykes, the Viceroy set out the idea of what he expected to be accomplished in the province. The Viceroy wrote that the British aim is “of course” to *detach* the people of the province from the Congress movement, to get them interested in the forms, and to restore normal conditions as soon as possible.<sup>44</sup> Sykes concurred that the British can come down on the minorities’ side. In

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, 1932, pp. 458-59.

<sup>44</sup> Sir Frederick Sykes: Papers As Governor of Bombay, 1928-33, *Mss. Eur. F.150/4(a)-(b)*, Correspondence with the Viceroy, the Secretary of State and Government of India, January 1932 – December 1932, NAI, New Delhi, India. Hereafter, *Mss. Eur. F.150/4(a)-(b)*. The Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, had suggested that the Viceroy, Willingdon, should explore the possibility of forming a separate battalion for the Untouchables as desired by Ambedkar. He further pointed out that “in any case, I feel that at this juncture it would be a really valuable *political act* to make a move if this kind.” *Mss. Eur. E.240/2*.

fact, he asserted that the British should, for “there is some hope that the minorities will organise on the [British] side”. In order to achieve this, Sykes suggested that no reconciliation should be made with the Congress and the main thing should be to prevent them from interfering. “If this is ensured,” Sykes believed that there would not be much “likelihood of any adverse effect on law and order from a decision in favour of the Muhammadans and other minorities.” By April 1932, three months before the announcement of the Communal Award, Sykes was telling Willingdon that “it is only by helping people to lose faith in the ultimate supremacy of the Congress that we can hope to encourage other parties to organise themselves in such away as to form a strong effective opposition in the future.” Sykes emphasised in a letter written to Willingdon on 7th June 1932, that for political purposes the Depressed Classes should be considered as a community *distinct* from the Hindus and their representation should be treated as a subtraction from the Hindu vote.<sup>45</sup> He also desired, as he wrote to the Viceroy, that there should be no attempt made now to win over the Congress for “[any] such attempt will inevitably *estrangle* the Muslims and other minorities.”<sup>46</sup>

While the British had decided to press ahead with their plans, Ambedkar anxious of the growing support for the Rajah-Moonje Pact and finding that the Indian Franchise Committee’s Report was “*not* much favourable to him,”<sup>47</sup> as the Committee “did *not* touch the question of electorates,” secretly decided to leave for England on 26th May 1932.<sup>48</sup> In London, he engaged himself in hectic activities, ‘lobbying’ with the British officials including the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Ministers before presenting an exhaustive memorandum to the British Government elaborating that separate electorates were in the best interests of the Depressed Classes. Gail Omvedt argues that “[the] result of all these maneuverings was to swing the British support towards Ambedkar.”<sup>49</sup> Ambedkar was reasonably *assured* that separate electorates would be granted to the Untouchables in the selected, if not all, provinces.<sup>50</sup> On the

<sup>45</sup> *Mss. Eur. F.150/4(a)-(b)*.

<sup>46</sup> *Mss. Eur. F.150/4(a)-(b)*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>47</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 202, (emphasis mine).

<sup>48</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 31st May 1932.

<sup>49</sup> G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards An Enlightened India*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2004, p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, 202. Ambedkar remarked that “it was in the air that the Depressed Classes in the provinces of Bombay, Madras and Central Provinces would get separate electorate.”

same day that Ambedkar returned to India, that is, on 16th August 1931, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, announced the Communal Award.<sup>51</sup> It came into force in 1932 with the manifest purpose to widen the divides in the Indian society, and in so doing, splinter the national movement against the colonial state for an indefinite future.

### [3]

The Communal Award of 1932 was the basis of providing a responsible Government in India through communal settlement, but it was an institutional arrangement that would further split the Indian electorate. The Award of 1932 concretised an arrangement which the Government had already achieved through the 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms and the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. This dimension was starkly clear when the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, defended his Government's decision by referring to the fact that "the contrast between these intermingled population[s] extends far beyond a difference in religious faith: differences of race and of history, a different system of law, widely opposed social observances and absence of intermarriage, set up barriers which have no analogy in the distinctions that may exist between religious denominations in any other existing state. It is not therefore altogether surprising that ... separate representation, namely, the grouping of a particular category of voters in territorial constituencies by themselves, so as to assure to them an adequate number of members of their faith and race, has been favoured."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Upendra Baxi also points out that "Ambedkar's participation in the Round Table Conferences in 1930 was really responsible for the ultimate policy announcement by the Premier Ramsay MacDonald." U. Baxi, 'Emancipation As Justice: Babasaheb Ambedkar's Legacy And Vision', in U. Baxi & B. Parekh, (eds.), *Crisis And Change In Contemporary India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1995, p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> *IOR, L/PO/78(i)*, Prime Minister's statement for release on the afternoon of Tuesday, 16th August 1932, in time for publication in the morning newspapers in India and U.K. of Wednesday 17th August 1932, cited in B. Chakrabarty, 'The Communal Award Of 1932 And Its Implications In Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (1989), p. 494.

There was, however, *no* mention of the removal of untouchability in the Communal Award.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, it completely splintered the electorate by giving statutory recognition to minorities not only on the basis of religion but also on the basis of community and class and caste divisions. The Award recognised the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians as minorities in addition to Anglo-Indians and Europeans. It also created new minorities such as the commercial and industrial classes, landholders, labour, Mahrattas and the universities. The Award introduced a novel recognition for the Untouchables, that is, the Untouchables would be (1) part of the general electorates, and that (2) they would have a separate electorate of their own. In other words, they would have two votes each, that is, one vote in the general electorates to elect one of the candidates in the general constituencies, and the second vote to exclusively elect candidates from among the Untouchables only. The logic of duality gave recognition to the demands of that section of the leadership of the Untouchables, which was working for their separate representation. At the same time, it was meant to precisely fend off the charge that the British Government was dismembering the Hindu community.

There was a distinct political logic behind the Government's attempt to protect itself also. The representatives that the Government had chosen to settle the communal question with Gandhi before announcing the Communal Award had failed to arrive at an agreement. The Government had kept Gandhi after his return from the second Round Table Conference and other leaders in jail but the Government was acutely aware of the powerful role that Gandhi's warnings and threats, to stall the Award, could play. The Secretary of State, William Wedgwood Benn (7th June 1929 – 24th August 1931) had noted in his 'Private and Personal' telegram to the Viceroy, Willingdon, of "Gandhi's threat in the event of [them] deciding for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes." Importantly, the Secretary of State also noted that their *plan* was "*bad*," so it was "possible" that Gandhi would carry his threat out. He further suggested that "it would be well to make up our minds in advance what to do in this event."<sup>54</sup> The telegram to Lord Willingdon ended, advising him to

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<sup>53</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *My Life Is My Message: Satyapath: 1930-1940*, Vol. III, (trans. Narayan Desai), New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2009, p. 160, (emphasis mine).

<sup>54</sup> Government of India, Home Department (Political), *File No. 41-4/32-Poll. & K.-W.*, NAI, New Delhi, India.

“enlighten public opinion on the issue of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes sufficiently to *prevent* his (Gandhi’s) action having embarrassing consequences outside India if he acts for this reason.”<sup>55</sup>

The Communal Award had provided separate electorates for the Depressed Classes only for twenty years. And upon implementation, it tilted the balance heavily against the Untouchables, as the Award allocated an *insignificant* number of seats reserved for the Untouchables: Of the total 1748 seats in the Provincial Legislatures, only seventy-one seats (that is, less than five percent) were reserved for them. The special constituencies for them were provided in all the provinces except Sind, N.W.F.P. and the Punjab, where the Muslims predominated. The British saw raising separate electorates with special constituencies as a paramount principle, reminiscent of the Minorities Pact of the second Round Table Conference, on which any future constitution was to be based. ‘Para 9’ of the Communal Award contained an explanation for this. It said that the Depressed Classes would vote in a general constituency and that special seats allotted to them would be from selected areas where the Depressed Classes were most numerous. However, clubbing of the Depressed Classes with the general category did not lead to a proportionate increase in the number of general seats, whereas the Communal Award went many steps further to satisfy the Muslim demands in the distribution of seats. The Muslim share was raised to nearly thirty-one percent, that is, 453 seats out of a total of 1463 seats fixed for the provincial chambers. The allocation of seats was clearly disproportionate. The Untouchables were said to have formed nineteen percent of the country’s population according to the 1930 Census,<sup>56</sup> yet their interests were substituted in favour of other minorities.

In M. C. Rajah’s opinion the Communal Award injured the interests of Depressed Classes beyond repair. The number of seats allotted to them in special constituencies was so insignificant in comparison with the proportion of other communities that they were liable to be treated as political Untouchables. Therefore, he called upon members of his community to unitedly back the Rajah-Moonje Pact

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>56</sup> J. H. Hutton, *Census Of India 1931*, Vol. I, Part I – Report, Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1933, p. 230. The Muslims formed 5.8 percent of the country’s population according to the 1931 Census.

which he said was their best sheet-anchor.<sup>57</sup> He prepared a statement for the press showing the position of the various minorities under the Award and compared it with their position in the Minorities Pact. The statement showed that under the Minorities Pact, the Depressed Classes were to receive 237 seats whereas the Award gave them seventy-one. As regards the Muslims, they were to receive 480 seats under the Minorities Pact and they were given 477 seats. Similarly the Europeans under the Minorities Pact were to receive seventy-three seats and they received sixty-one. Reminding the signatories of the Minorities Pact of the promise made by them both in the pact and in the Round Table Conference discussions that they would stand by each other and that they would not accept any decision which went materially against the pact, Rajah asked the Muslims and Europeans to denounce the Award until the proportion agreed to by them for other minorities was conceded.<sup>58</sup>

M. C. Rajah's criticism of the Communal Award cornered Ambedkar, who had for long kept silence on the issue, to disown it.<sup>59</sup> He, too, though belatedly, issued a statement to express his opinion that the Award had ruthlessly scaled down Depressed Classes representation in the Provincial Legislatures to quite an insignificant proportion, "thus creating a positive grievance." He went a step further than Rajah in suggesting that his community might reject it. Ambedkar criticised the Award as an "injustice to the Depressed Classes by refusing adequate representation to the Depressed Classes." This became a positive grievance. Moreover, the *denial* of the right of representation to the Depressed Classes in the Punjab was most shocking to Ambedkar. He asserted that the case for special representation to the Untouchables' community in the Punjab was the strongest because their social condition was the worst in the Punjab compared to all other provinces. Ambedkar implored His Majesty's Government for an explanation for the injustice. The injustice was most flagrant as the Indian Christians and the Anglo-Indians, without a tithe of the population of the Depressed Classes and without any shadow of social grievances have been provided with "special seats."<sup>60</sup> Ambedkar felt betrayed by the

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<sup>57</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 18th August 1932.

<sup>58</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 19th August 1932.

<sup>59</sup> Ambedkar in his talks with Gandhi confessed that the Communal Award was "a just, reasonable, and definite allocation." See, *CWMG*, Vol. 41, p. 458.

<sup>60</sup> *The Times Of India*, 24th August 1932.

Government's attitude. They had conceded separate electorates in a manner that circumscribed the position of the Untouchables in British India *vis-à-vis* the other minorities. The Communal Award would be the turning point drawing Ambedkar to Gandhi's camp later on.

Ambedkar was joined by other Depressed Classes' associations that were organised regionally. Their response echoed the grievance and unanimously they protested against the insignificant number of seats allocated to them in the provinces under the Communal Award. The Adi-Hindu Sabha of the United Provinces (U.P.), the Nagpur Depressed Classes Federation, the Bengal Depressed Classes Association, the Trichinopoly Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha and the Punjab's Ad-Dharam Mandal, strongly condemned the injustice done to the Depressed Classes and earnestly desired that the number of seats allocated to the Depressed Classes might be *increased*. The President of the Adi-Hindu Sabha (U.P.) was forthright in welcoming the Award as the Magna Carta of the Depressed Classes but he regretted the *paucity* of seats for them in the U.P. In a meeting of the Untouchables in Nagpur of the Depressed Classes Federation, the delegates wanted the number of seats to be *increased*.<sup>61</sup> The Untouchables in Bengal did not lag behind. The President, M. B. Mallick, of the Bengal Depressed Classes Association consulted the all Namasudra Association and wrote to the Viceroy regretting that the Award did not give seats to them in proportion to their population. In Trichinopoly, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha prayed to the Prime Minister that twenty-six seats might be allotted to them at the rate of one per district instead of eighteen as had been decided. Mangu Ram, the President of the Ad-Dharam Mandal, submitted a strong memorandum to the Governor of Punjab, about the absolute non-representation of the Untouchables in the Punjab. He even threatened that if his demands were not conceded then the Depressed Classes would sacrifice their lives for their rights.<sup>62</sup>

The Communal Award was to debilitate India's unity by creating different spheres of interests. The British had a single point agenda through the Communal Award – to strike down nationalism and to create partisan and parochial loyalties among the minorities. Gandhi was aware that the Award would start a policy of

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>62</sup> Government of India, Reforms Office (Reforms), *File No. 199/32-R*, NAI, New Delhi, India.



appeasement and reservations that was bound to kill India slowly. The elections based on separate electorates were a powerful means working towards that end. Several years later, Gandhi described the Communal Award as a “wicked conspiracy against Indian nationalism.” In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, he further opined that for the first time, the Award created “a division amongst Hindus themselves.”<sup>63</sup> Gandhi strongly believed that separate electorates would ensure that the Untouchables remained Untouchables in perpetuity. What was required was not the protection of the so-called interests of the Depressed Classes, but the root and branch eradication of untouchability. The Award was conspicuously *silent* on this. Gandhi demanded that the Depressed Classes be elected through joint and if possible a wider electorate, through universal adult franchise.

Gandhi heard the news of the Communal Award, and its terms, in Yeravda Jail on the same day it was announced. He had, however, already warned the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, through a letter written on 18th August 1932, that unless separate electorates for the Untouchables were rescinded, he would commence a fast unto death against a plan that aimed to vivisection the Hindu community. But the British Government went ahead with its communal declaration. On 20th September 1932, Gandhi began a fast in jail to protest against the British attempts to separate India’s electoral system by caste. Gandhi advocated the emancipation of the Untouchables. By putting his life at stake from behind the prison walls, he fought to prick the conscience of the people and conveyed his own inner anguish. Gandhi saw through the divisive policies of the Government that focused on the colonial paradigm that “if all India was to unite against us, how long could we maintain ourselves.”<sup>64</sup>

Soon after the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, had received Gandhi’s letter to caution him, the Governor of Bombay wrote to the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, that in Gandhi’s “absence there has not been ... any very

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<sup>63</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 87, p. 315. Further, in his discussions with Vallabhbhai Patel, Gandhi lamented that “[the] Government has done this thing [that is, awarded separate electorates to the Untouchables] as a Christian Government .... Let our *Swaraj* come into being, then they may influence the *Antyajias* in any way they like, but they should *not divide* us today.” ‘Discussion With Vallabhbhai Patel’, 6th September 1932, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, Appendix I, p. 438, (emphasis mine).

<sup>64</sup> S. Gopal, *British Policy In India: 1858-1905*, New Delhi, Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 36.

marked effort to carry out this line of action.”<sup>65</sup> The Government, in fact, had promulgated ordinances in the wake of the Civil Disobedience Movement that were being vigorously enforced. The ordinances gave the British authorities unlimited power – the Congress Party was declared illegal, the properties of agitators were seized and public meetings were banned – initiating what a historian has called “a civil martial law” in the country. When the Viceroy asked the Governors and other high officials to report the reactions of the people to the Communal Award, one official after the other reported that the reaction had been lukewarm.<sup>66</sup> The publication of the Award was not followed by the kind of political activity that “might have been expected” among the Hindus, reported the Reforms Commissioner of the Government of Bengal in a ‘Confidential Letter’ to the Government of India. The Commissioner cited the causes for this political inactivity as “majority of the politically-minded population” in Bengal was “waiting [for] guidance from their political leaders.” The Commissioner also felt relieved that many of the more aggressive Hindu politicians, who might have carried out an intensive propaganda and campaign work against the Award, were “either under control or [were] at least restrained by the operation of the Ordinances.”<sup>67</sup> The Chief Secretary of Punjab Government reported that though the Hindus were “gravely dissatisfied,” they were “not strong enough to make much impression on Punjab politics by themselves.” They were “at one with a section of the Sikhs” in condemning the Award, but to the satisfaction of the Secretary, the Sikhs had their own conflicts and were unable to unite, “breaking up into parties,” for example, of rural Sikhs against communal Sikhs. The Secretary further reported that not only did the extremist Sikhs’ “attack [on] the Government” failed to “achieve any great results,” but the appeals of the Sikh Council of Action to “the members of the Legislative Council to resign their seats” also fell through.<sup>68</sup> The condition and position of those who were opposed to the Award like the Hindus in Bengal and the

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<sup>65</sup> Telegram XX From The Governor Of Bombay To The Viceroy Of India, No. 147, 19th August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*

<sup>66</sup> *File No. 41-4/32-Poll. & K.-W.*

<sup>67</sup> Letter From R. N. Gilchrist, Esq. I.E.S., Reforms Officer To The Government Of Bengal, No. 1160-A. R. D., 16th September 1932, *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Letter From C. C. Garbett, Esq., C.M.G., C.I.E., F.R.G.S., I.C.S., Chief Secretary To Government, Punjab, No. 16789-S.B., 14th September 1932, *ibid.*

Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab, had been undermined due to the Government's recourse to the ordinances.

The Government decided to refrain from publishing Gandhi's letter to the British Prime Minister indicating his intentions to go on 'fast unto death', much against Gandhi's wish. Gandhi had requested Ramsay MacDonald to publish his letter arguing that he wanted "public opinion to be affected."<sup>69</sup> The Government, however, decided to withhold the letter. It was "very important that Gandhi's threat should be kept absolutely secret for the present." The Government anticipated that publishing the letter might result in intensive propaganda in the form of a general attack against the Award. More importantly, the Government feared that it might be used as an appeal to the Untouchables to show that they supported Gandhi.<sup>70</sup> By withholding the letter, the British were trying to prevail in widening the divisions in India to fatal proportions. The Award turned out to be yet another vivid expression of the 'divide and rule' policy.

#### [4]

There was the argument that the British Government was peddling as the Communal Award had provided separate electorates for the Depressed Classes only for twenty years. The parties could do away with them at the end of that period.<sup>71</sup> In any case, the Government had stated in the text of the Award itself that should the Indian parties come to an agreement about some other plan before the Award was made the law, the Government would adopt that scheme in preference to its own. Gandhi, however, differed. He told the Inspector General of Prisons, E. E. Doyle, that neither argument had anything to it because by virtue of the Award the Depressed

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<sup>69</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 56, p. 348.

<sup>70</sup> Secret Demi-Official Letter From The Government Of India To The Governors Of Madras, Bombay, Bengal, United Provinces, Punjab, Burma, Central Provinces, Bihar And Orissa, Burma, North-West Frontier Province, And Delhi, No. S.-2410-Poll., 27th August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>71</sup> This colonial argument still holds sway in the twenty-first century, in Arundhati Roy's work. She argues that Ambedkar did not ask for the separate electorate to last in perpetuity. In addition to this, and in order that they retain their connection with mainstream politics, he suggested that they be given the right to vote for general candidates too. Both the separate electorate and the double vote were to last only for a period of ten years. Roy, 'Half-Built Dam', p. 169.

Classes were cut off from the rest of the Hindu community for twenty long years. “Once the Legislatures come into being,” Gandhi asked with his customary perspicacity and foresight, “who can possibly alter the schism caused?”<sup>72</sup> The ‘Confidential Reports’ which the Viceroy and his men were receiving from the provinces confirmed Gandhi’s apprehensions. The reports showed that one of the effects of the Award was to make any future agreement among Indians much more difficult. This was an outcome that was based on the calculations of the British when they announced their Award. The reason was manifest: no one would give up what he had got through the Award. In fact, there was the potential of demanding more. The Reforms Commissioner, with the Government of Bombay reported that Congressmen were opposing the Award on the ground that “the offer of substituting for the proposed scheme, a scheme agreed to by all communities, is purely *illusory*. The communities which may have gained as a result of the Award are not likely to come to an agreement with the other communities.”<sup>73</sup>

The reports from the Punjab and Bengal contained the reassuring assessments for the British that the positions of the minority communities were already hardening. In his ‘Confidential Letter’ of 14th September 1932, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Punjab reported that “Muslim opinion in the main has crystallised into a determination to adhere to the Award and to resist any negotiations which might diminish the solid advantages which they consider the Award gives them ....”<sup>74</sup> On 16th September 1932, the Reforms Commissioner with the Government of Bengal in another ‘Confidential Letter’ reported that “[there] are other signs, too, that the Muhammadans mean to safeguard the position they have won. There have been some rumours of Hindu and Muhammadan leaders coming to an agreement on a basis of communal equality, of a ‘fifty-fifty’ basis. These rumours, unsubstantial though they may be, led one Muhammadan paper to characterise Muhammadan leaders, who countenanced such proposals, as traitors. It appears exceedingly unlikely that the

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<sup>72</sup> Report Of Inspector General Of Prisons, 26th August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*

<sup>73</sup> Letter From C. W. A. Turner, Esq., I.E.S. Reforms Officer With The Government Of Bombay, No. 166, 10th September 1932, *File No. 41-4/32-Poll. & K.-W.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>74</sup> Letter From C. C. Garbett, Esq., C.M.G., C.I.E., F.R.G.S., I.C.S., Chief Secretary To Government, Punjab, No. 16789-S.B., 14th September 1932, *ibid.*

Muhammadans will agree to concede one seat from the quota allocated to them. There are indications that the Muhammadan leaders are to make every endeavour to secure seats in constituencies which [they] have hitherto regarded as more or less closed to them, [for example], landlord and commercial seats.”<sup>75</sup>

There was another angle, which Gandhi had drawn attention to, and, one which the British had been assiduously ignoring, although their officials had drawn attention to it. The confidential correspondence among the British officials show that far from there being any widespread yearning among the Untouchables for separate electorates, there was not even elementary awareness among them about the issue. They scarcely knew that an Award had been announced ostensibly for their emancipation.<sup>76</sup> A. E. Nelson, the Governor of Central Provinces, had hit the nail in his ‘Confidential Letter’ to the Viceroy stating that “the bulk” of the Untouchables in the province “were backward and illiterate and were incapable of giving an opinion on the question of joint versus separate electorates. They did not even understand what was meant by the disruption of Hinduism.” The Untouchables’ opinion, asserted Nelson, was nothing but the opinion of about half a dozen leaders, who were followers of either Ambedkar or M. C. Rajah. Even these had no settled convictions as they had transferred their allegiance from one to the other of these gentlemen. “It is, therefore, difficult,” Nelson furthered his argument, “to ascertain the real feeling” of the Untouchables on the Communal Award.<sup>77</sup>

The Governor of Bihar and Orissa, Sir James David Sifton, sent a ‘Very Secret’ assessment to the Viceroy. “In this province,” the Depressed Classes “were entirely unorganised, except in a few thanas, where experiments are being made in the preparation of the electoral rolls on the Lothian Plan,” but “the majority of the Depressed Classes were not aware that they were to have any franchise at all,” and “certainly not that they [were] offered a separate electorate.” “The truth is,” asserted Sifton, “that they are *not* at present in Bihar and Orissa ‘class conscious’, as they are

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<sup>75</sup> Letter From R. L. Gilchrist, Esq., I.E.S. Reforms Office To The Government Of Bengal, No. 1160-A. R. D., 16th September 1932, *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Willingdon’s Letter To The Secretary Of State For India, 23rd August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*

<sup>77</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Governor Of Central Provinces To The Viceroy, 30th August 1932, *ibid.*

elsewhere in India.”<sup>78</sup> E. E. Doyle, the Inspector General of Prisons, had reported that Gandhi told him that “the Depressed Classes had been given separate electorates, when as a class they did not desire them. A very small minority, the Mahars, under the leadership of Doctor Ambedkar demanded separate electorates, but they were *not* entitled to speak for the Depressed Classes as a *whole*, who in the United Provinces, Bengal and elsewhere had definitely declared for joint electorates.”<sup>79</sup> The participation of the Untouchables in the debate of the Legislative Council in the Central Provinces was reflective of what Gandhi was saying. According to A. E. Nelson, the Governor, one member from the Depressed Classes spoke in favour of the Award and another was against it. Nelson indicated to fragmented response as “the majority of them are pleased with the Award by which they can put up their own nominees and appreciate the value of the double vote conferred upon them. Those who favour joint electorates were caught by the bait of more seats and not by the glamour of the joint nationalist ideal.”<sup>80</sup>

On 16th September 1932, the Government of Madras informed the Home Secretary, M. G. Hallett, through their ‘Confidential Letter’, that it was difficult to say what the rank and file of the Depressed Classes thought about the matter. They said that “[probably], the majority has not even heard of it as yet and few of them can understand the full implications.” The leaders in Madras were adopting a cautious, waiting attitude and were inclined not to take any step “until they have heard what Ambedkar has in mind.”<sup>81</sup> The Chief Secretary to the Government of Madras in his assessment of 23rd September 1932, reiterated the point. “It must be understood,” he wrote, “that the majority of the Depressed Classes in this Presidency, being mainly uneducated and unorganised, know little or nothing of the trend of political events, understand little or nothing of what they are told and are generally indifferent to what is going on outside their immediate sphere .... Altogether there is a great deal of talk

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<sup>78</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Governor Of Bihar And Orissa To The Viceroy, 31st August 1932, *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>79</sup> Report Of Inspector General Of Prisons, 26th August 1932, *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>80</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Governor Of Central Provinces To The Viceroy, 30th August 1932, *File No. 41-4/32-Poll. & K.-W.*

<sup>81</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Government Of Madras To M. G. Hallett, Esq., C.I.E., I.C.S., Secretary To The Government Of India, Home Department, Simla, No. 699-S., 16th September 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*

in the air but very little action. The Depressed Classes opinion will probably follow the line taken by Ambedkar who commands a great deal of support.”<sup>82</sup> On 16th September 1932, the Reforms Commissioner to the Government of Bengal also sent a confidential and detailed assessment. The Commissioner said that the Depressed Classes of Bengal were “in a somewhat similar position to the Muhammadans.” They complained in public meetings, at which their recognised leaders were present that “the seats allocated to them are disproportionate to their population ....” The Depressed Classes pressed for additional seats “mainly to make sure that the ten seats allocated to them in the Decision [were] guaranteed to them by separate electorates.”<sup>83</sup>

The Governor of Bombay in his ‘Confidential Telegram’ to the Viceroy, had prophesied that if Gandhi tried to mobilise “public opinion against separate electorates, at any rate for the Depressed Classes, ... it may die a natural death from lack of support, if there is effective ‘counter propaganda’ by Government especially among the Depressed Classes.”<sup>84</sup> “*Supposing the Depressed Classes, out of sympathy for Mr. Gandhi, or for some other reason, were to decide in agreement with the caste-Hindus to forgo the system of special constituencies in certain areas which His Majesty’s Government are prepared to grant them, the latter would be quite willing to recommend to Parliament the abolition of this particular feature of the Award, provided this did not prejudice the position of other communities under the new constitution. If, however, the Depressed Classes should decide that the disabilities to which they have been subjected in the past necessitate their being afforded temporary protection, under a democratic constitution, by the means afforded by His Majesty’s*

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<sup>82</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Chief Secretary To The Government Of Madras, 23rd September 1932, *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Confidential Demi-Official Letter From The Reforms Commissioner To Government Of Bengal, 16th September 1932, *File No. 41-4/32-Poll. & K.-W.*

<sup>84</sup> Telegram XX, From The Governor Of Bombay To The Viceroy, No. 147, 19th August 1932, *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*

Government, and if Mr. Gandhi should persist in starving himself as a protest against this, the responsibility for the consequences will be his alone.”<sup>85</sup>

The Colonial Government circulated a ‘Secret Note’ to all the Provincial Governments “to be used solely for purposes of indirect publicity ...” but attaching greatest importance to launch a prompt and vigorous counter-propaganda, defending the Award. In order to give a ‘fair’ picture of its intentions, the Government attempted to emphasise and publicise that the Depressed Classes were not being separated from the Hindu community; that they would be voting in the general constituencies also; that separate electorates had been provided for them for only twenty years as a necessary safeguard ‘to ensure that *genuine* representatives of their interests are returned to the new Legislatures’ and that there would be little likelihood that the majority of the Untouchable candidates “would be other than mere nominees of the caste-Hindus.” The ‘Secret Note’ declared in mock-wonderment that “[it] is surely a matter for astonishment that a man like Mr. Gandhi, who unquestionably has the welfare of the down-trodden and oppressed much at heart, should make the introduction of measures designed for their protection the occasion for so drastic and extraordinary a protest.”<sup>86</sup>

In its conclusion, the circulated ‘Secret Note’ further laid emphasis on two aspects. First, a large section of the Depressed Classes did not accept Gandhi’s view that they would be treated fairly by the higher caste-Hindus, and second, that Gandhi’s plan is to sedulously foster popular compassion for himself in his suffering. By denying any responsibility for dividing the Indians, the ‘Secret Note’, nevertheless, exposed the British intention to use the Award as an expression of ‘divide and rule’ policy, as the note explicitly emphasised that “Mr. Gandhi himself is not one of the Depressed Classes but a caste-Hindu, and it is the Depressed Classes alone who are best entitled to determine where their own interests in this matter lie.” The Government even tried to absolve itself by insisting that the solution of the matter rested in Indian hands alone: “*Only* because the Indian parties had *not* been able to come to an agreement.” The ‘Secret Note’ concentrated on prompt and vigorous

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<sup>85</sup> Secret Demi-Official Letter From The Government Of India To The Governors Of Madras, Bombay, Bengal, United Provinces, Punjab, Burma, Central Provinces, Bihar And Orissa, Burma, North-West Frontier Province, And Delhi, No. S.-2410-Poll., 27th August 1932, *ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*



counter-propaganda by adding that “should all the Indian parties concerned come to an agreement, the Government would readily substitute the Award by the terms of that agreement.” Even then, “if ... Mr. Gandhi ... decides to make the ... Award ... the occasion for a ‘hunger-strike’, His Majesty’s Government will bear no share, whatever, of the responsibility for the probable outcome of this course of action.”<sup>87</sup>

Trilok Nath argues that Gandhi had never shown the slightest sympathy for “the methods which the Depressed Classes themselves ... considered essential for their political and material uplift.”<sup>88</sup> He further emphasises that “the majority of [them] were ... strongly convinced that Gandhi’s attitude towards their political demand ... was ... *wrong*.”<sup>89</sup> S. Anand adds that “[it] was to oppose the political rights granted to the Untouchables by the Communal Award that Gandhi took a dramatic and coercive step – a fast unto death.”<sup>90</sup> Gail Omvedt gives a religious colour to Gandhi’s role in the 1930s: “Gandhi was *not* speaking from *their* perspective; he was not even speaking as a *national* leader; he was speaking as a *Hindu*.”<sup>91</sup> This, even when, it is widely known that Gandhi had been forthright in stating at the second Round Table Conference that the demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables was a Government manufacture. The publicity employed by the British in the 1930s belied the reports of its own Provincial Governors that the Depressed Classes had “no opinion” of their own and that the bulk of them “did not even know” that an Award had been announced to grant them separate electorates.

## [5]

The Government released the correspondence that had passed between Gandhi, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, on 13th September 1932, a week before Gandhi was to start his fast. It sent shock waves all over the country. The country was stunned on learning that Gandhi had decided to *fast unto death* on the question of separate

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>88</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 160, (emphasis mine).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>90</sup> S. Anand, ‘A Note On The Poona Pact’, in B. R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation Of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, (ed., & annotated by S. Anand), New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2014, p. 359.

<sup>91</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 172.

electorates for the Untouchables. Among the very first leaders to react to the threatened fast was the distinguished Liberal, Tej Bahadur Sapru. He pointed to the need for prompt action on the part of all parties to save Gandhi's life and, in particular, asked the Government of India to release him from prison and restore to him freedom of movement and consultation. Sapru's plea was endorsed by G. D. Birla, a Marwari industrialist and a nationalist with an intense personal admiration for Gandhi.<sup>92</sup> Rajendra Prasad, a Congress leader, and very close to Gandhi, came out with a similar statement of concern.<sup>93</sup>

Dhananjay Keer asserts that there was confusion and nervous strain in all Hindu circles *not* because the caste-Hindus and their leaders felt ashamed of their cruelty to the Depressed Classes, but, because the life of their political hero, their political liberator, was at stake.<sup>94</sup> Other critics echo similar sentiments. Joseph Lelyveld, for example, interprets that "the move *not* just to give [the] Untouchables supposed legal guarantees of equal rights but" also not to give "separate political rights had become a Gandhian vow."<sup>95</sup> According to Gail Omvedt, "hard power politics was at play in the process of negotiation,"<sup>96</sup> and Gandhi's fast was "a purely *sectarian* one,"<sup>97</sup> aimed at "keeping (the Untouchables) in the Hindu fold"<sup>98</sup> for electoral purposes, which had been and still were, socially beyond the pale of the Hindu community.<sup>99</sup> Nishikant Kolge is more succinct in his assessment. He argues that since Gandhi saw "the growing political status of Ambedkar and his growing

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<sup>92</sup> *The Times Of India*, 14th September 1932.

<sup>93</sup> *The Times Of India*, 15th September 1932.

<sup>94</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 205.

<sup>95</sup> J. Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India*, New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, p. 219.

<sup>96</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 174.

<sup>97</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 160.

<sup>98</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 174.

<sup>99</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 160. A. R. Wadia, 'Gandhiji And Untouchability', in K. S. Saxena, (ed.), *Gandhi Centenary Papers*, Vol. 4, Bhopal, Publications Division, Council of Oriental Research, 1972, p. 53; Roy, 'The Doctor', pp. 54-55; V. Prashad, 'The Untouchable Question', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 9 (Mar. 2, 1996), pp. 551-559; W. Gould, 'The U. P. Congress And 'Hindu Unity': Untouchables And The Minority Question In The 1930s', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Oct., 2005), pp. 845-860, all argue that Gandhi stood up against separate representation being accorded to them for that would reduce the number of Hindus.

influence on the Untouchables ... as a threat to his well-established and long-standing position of an all-India leader, ... he took the MacDonald Award as an opportunity to reassert his political position as an all-India leader.”<sup>100</sup>

Thus, a critical problem in trying to understand the political nature of Gandhi's fasts is that they have been analysed and interpreted in two categorically opposed ways. In putting his life on the line, Gandhi is seen either as a great soul willing to sacrifice himself in order to uphold absolute, inflexible principles of truth and justice or as a shrewd, calculating, savvy politician who used charisma to force his will upon those who disagreed with him. Gandhi was *not* interested in the numerical strength of the Hindus. Gandhi's position was unambiguous in this regard.<sup>101</sup> “A careful reading of his collected works,” argues Joseph S. Alter, “makes it very clear that Gandhi was not, in any sense, a ruthless, calculating politician.”<sup>102</sup> Principally, he was opposed to reservations since they would absolve the caste-Hindus of the moral responsibility of striving for the uplift of the Depressed Classes. At the same time, Gandhi would not oppose the reservations of seats for the Depressed Classes, if they so desired. He was ready to abide by an agreement on the basis of joint electorates that might be arrived at between the leaders of the caste-Hindus and the Depressed Classes.<sup>103</sup> Gandhi reiterated his position/stand before the leaders who had called upon him just a day before the fast was to commence.<sup>104</sup>

Gandhi's recourse to fast unto death stirred even the most authoritative leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya, who represented the conservative and orthodox Hindu sentiment. According to Ravinder Kumar, his role at the time was exemplary.<sup>105</sup> Drawing attention to Gandhi's ceaseless endeavour for the uplift of the Untouchables,

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<sup>100</sup> N. Kolge, *Gandhi Against Caste*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 173.

<sup>101</sup> Gandhi had asserted “not [to] believe for one moment’ that he was “interested in the strength of the Hindus.” Quoted in M. B. Verma, *History Of The Harijan Sevak Sangh: 1932-1968*, (trans., Viyogi Hari), Delhi, Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1971, p. 27.

<sup>102</sup> J. S. Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, And The Politics Of Nationalism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>103</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1932, pp. 118-21.

<sup>104</sup> R. Kumar, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And The Poona Pact, 1932’, in J. Masselos, (ed.), *Struggling And Ruling: The Indian National Congress, 1885-1985*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1987, p. 96.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Malaviya appealed to their leaders as well as to the caste-Hindus leaders to devise an agreement that would render it wholly unnecessary for Gandhi to undertake the projected 'fast unto death'. He also took the initiative to convene a meeting at Bombay, a day before the fast was to start, where the caste-Hindu leaders including Tej Bahadur Sapru, G. D. Birla and C. Rajagopalachari among others, resolved that "one of the earliest Acts of the Swaraj Parliament would be to assure to the Untouchables equal access to public wells, public schools, public roads, and all other public institutions."<sup>106</sup>

The news of the fast stirred the minds and hearts of the Untouchable leaders also. It took M. C. Rajah to admit to his colleagues that "Gandhi has roused to consciousness, the caste-Hindus and has given the greatest impetus to the movement for the uplift of the [Untouchables], and it is up to the latter not to let such a benefactor die, or at least not to have the responsibility fall on their shoulders."<sup>107</sup> Rajah identified with Gandhi's position in other ways also. While speaking in the Central Legislative Assembly on 13th September 1932, Rajah showed surprise at the Prime Minister's statement that "there was *no* segregation because the Untouchables could vote for the caste-Hindus who would have to solicit the Untouchables' votes."<sup>108</sup> Rajah countered the Prime Minister by arguing that the policy of separate electorates prevented to bring "about a common ideal of citizenship" because the Untouchables' representatives were *not* to solicit votes of the caste-Hindus.<sup>109</sup> Rajah punctured the British stand further when he stated, in support of Gandhi, that Gandhi was ready to enroll every adult member of the Untouchables as a voter and impose stricter tests on the caste-Hindus. He enquired, "[may] I ask why the Premier is not prepared to consider this solution?" Rajah exposed an anomaly in the British Government's stand on the Untouchables by remarking that when the Untouchables claimed special protection from the Government for some share in official services which was given by the Government of India to other minorities and backward classes, they were told that they were classed as Hindus and "have *no* special claim." And when they declared that in the matter of Legislative representation they would

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<sup>106</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 57, p. 118.

<sup>107</sup> *The Times Of India*, 14th September 1932.

<sup>108</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 248-53, (emphasis mine).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

like to join the general body of Hindus, they were told that they were a separate community.<sup>110</sup> While concluding his speech, he reminded the Government that separate electorates were intended to merely give the Untouchables a minimum number of seats. Whereas Gandhi had proposed that they be given over-representation in excess of their share in the population. He cited the Rajah-Moonje Pact that Rajah had signed with the Hindu Mahasabha leader, B. S. Moonje, and pointedly stressed that “it had already been agreed that under the joint electorates the [Untouchables] would have seats in proportion to their population.”<sup>111</sup>

M. C. Rajah had devoted full careful consideration to Gandhi. Ambedkar, however, held his ground. “I do not care for these political stunts,” he told *The Times of India* in an interview on 14th September 1932. He asserted to the paper’s representative that his “decision stands,” and if Gandhi wanted to fight with his life, the interests of the Hindu community, the Depressed Classes would also be forced to fight with their lives to safeguard their interests.<sup>112</sup> Apparently Gandhi’s fast built no pressure on Ambedkar as the interview carried more assertions from him that he would not be satisfied even if a sufficient number of seats were reserved for the Depressed Classes in joint electorates. “I will not be satisfied,” he told the paper, “because what I want is *quality* as well as quantity.”<sup>113</sup> Arundhati Roy argues that “Untouchable leaders feared that Ambedkar would be held responsible if Gandhi succumbed to his fast, and this in turn, could put the lives of ordinary Untouchables in danger.”<sup>114</sup> S. Anand quotes Ambedkar as pointing out that should Gandhi die, it would “result in nothing but terrorism by his followers against the Depressed Classes all over the country.”<sup>115</sup> Trilok Nath concurs, as a critic, that Gandhi’s fast “was the old weapon to cow down an opponent to submission by asserting ‘either you agree to what I say, or I will starve myself to death and the *kalank* will be on you’.”<sup>116</sup> Ajay Skaria echoes similar sentiments. Skaria argues that “[Gandhi’s] fast-unto-death against the Communal Award ... compels Ambedkar to give up the gains the Award

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *The Times Of India*, 14th September 1932.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>114</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 126.

<sup>115</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 316, quoted by Anand, ‘A Note’, p. 365.

<sup>116</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 159.

had granted to the Dalits.”<sup>117</sup> Gandhi reiterated that the fast “is aimed at a statutory separate electorate in any shape or form, for the Depressed Classes. Immediately that threat is removed once for all, my fast will end.”<sup>118</sup> Gandhi, through his fast, had brought the issue of untouchability centre-stage.

The Depressed Classes, however, were literally split into two camps over the crucial issue put in so dramatic a form by Gandhi. This scenario soon became obvious to the British Government as well as to the nationalist leaders. While the leaders of the Depressed Classes’ community in Poona and Madras regarded the prospect of negotiations under intense moral pressure – because of a ‘fast unto death’ – as distasteful in the extreme, other Depressed Classes’ spokesmen voiced their confidence in the leadership of Gandhi at public meetings of the Untouchables held in Nagpur, or Karachi, or Lucknow, or Lahore.<sup>119</sup> Questions and doubts began to be raised about the community’s leadership also. For example, M. C. Rajah and P. N. Rajbhoj, a Chambhar (Untouchable) from Maharashtra, asserted in a letter to the Private Secretary of the Viceroy that the Depressed Classes in general, and the Chambhar and the Mang communities in particular, did not recognise Ambedkar and Srinivasan as their spokesmen insofar as they advocated separate electorates. Rajbhoj added that Depressed Class communities other than the Mahars had never expressed allegiance to Ambedkar and “are more ill at ease when in the company of his community than in that of the higher classes.” Ambedkar, he alleged, did “not even deign to look to the proposals sought to be placed before him by the representatives of smaller depressed communities ....” They feared for their interests under him.<sup>120</sup> Ravinder Kumar argues that such ‘differences’ within the community, would later oblige Ambedkar to soften his stand somewhat.<sup>121</sup> *The Times Of India* reported that when Ambedkar “claimed the right of negotiating with Mr. Gandhi alone and no one else,” P. Baloo, the leader of the Bombay Depressed Classes from Bombay or “from the opposite camp,” reminded Ambedkar that “he had no mandate from the

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<sup>117</sup> A. Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi’s Religion Of Resistance*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2016, p. 167.

<sup>118</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, p. 13.

<sup>119</sup> For an account of these meetings of the Untouchables in the main cities of India see, *The Times Of India*, 19th September 1932.

<sup>120</sup> P. N. Rajbhoj’s Letter To The Private Secretary Of The Viceroy, 7th June 1932, *File No. 111/32-R*.

<sup>121</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 96.

community to speak on their behalf.”<sup>122</sup> The charge of being only a Mahar leader against Ambedkar would be levelled again later in a Chambhar conference held in 1939.<sup>123</sup> Two years later, D. N. Kamble, the first educated Mang in the Nizam’s state of Hyderabad, repeated the accusation. By then the conversion movement to Buddhism among the Mahars would further alienated other Depressed Class groups.<sup>124</sup> The Chambhars in Bombay, in particular, would view it as a tactic to enhance the political fortunes of the Mahars.<sup>125</sup>

Gandhi’s one object now was to endeavour to make the meaning of his fast crystal clear to everyone. On 16th September 1932, Gandhi sent a statement to the Bombay Government to be released to the press. The Government sat over it and released it to the press only on 21st September 1932, when they were forced to do so by importunate pressmen who came to know about Gandhi’s statement. Contrary to Gail Omvedt’s assertion that Gandhi’s “fast [was] directed against Ambedkar,”<sup>126</sup> the statement proclaimed that the fast was not against the English official world or against those who were opposed to him. It was against those who had faith in him and believed that he represented a just cause. Gandhi’s statement emphasised that the fast was an expression of non-violence and there ought not to be any malice or anger against a single soul: “No violence was to be permitted against those inimical to the cause.”<sup>127</sup> Gandhi said, the fast was intended to sting the Hindu conscience into right action. He called for fullest freedom for the Untouchables inside the Hindu fold,

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<sup>122</sup> *The Times Of India*, 19th September 1932.

<sup>123</sup> *The Bombay Chronicle*, 4th July 1939.

<sup>124</sup> E. Zelliott, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means: The Mahars Of Maharashtra’, in R. Kothari, (ed.), *Caste In Indian Politics*, (Revised by J. Manor), Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2010, pp. 51 & 67; E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit: Essays On The Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1996, p. 126.

<sup>125</sup> J. Gokhale, *From Concessions To Confrontation: The Politics Of An Indian Untouchable Community*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1993, p. 167.

<sup>126</sup> Omvedt, *Towards An Enlightened India*, p. 47. Christophe Jaffrelot argues that “Ambedkar was the only Indian politician whom Gandhi contested by resorting to a fast.” Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 65.

<sup>127</sup> *CWVG*, Vol. 51, pp. 62-64.

which alone could be an adequate substitute for the contemplated separation. A patchwork agreement could only postpone the day of immolation.<sup>128</sup>

While the leaders representing different shades of Hindu opinion, orthodox, Gandhian and Liberal were on their way to Bombay in response to Madan Mohan Malaviya's call to hold a meeting, a Citizens Emergency Committee was constituted in that city, consisting, among others, of Mathuradas Khimji, Sir Purshotamdas Thakurdas, Sir Chunilal Mehta, and Ghanshyam Das Birla, with the objective of concerting measures to save Gandhi's life. A meeting of this Committee was held on the 16th September 1932, to plan an appropriate course of action. A decision was taken on the same day to send a delegation to Poona and to ascertain, in dialogue with Gandhi, the possible conditions upon which an agreement could be framed.

### [6]

The 20th of September came around. The Government did not alter the Award. Gandhi's fast started at noon. We are told that the first day passed without much happening, except in the afternoon, for the first time in nine months Gandhi was permitted to receive press representatives. Explaining his position on the fast, Gandhi again told the reporters that the fast was "*only* against separate electorates, and *not* against statutory reservation of seats." But Gandhi did not want to discuss untouchability as a political matter for it was his view that it would do the Untouchables more harm than good. He was "convinced that if they are ever to rise, it will not be by reservation of seats but will be by the strenuous work of Hindu reformers in their midst," and the separation "would have killed all prospects of reform."<sup>129</sup> Gandhi had written to P. N. Rajbhoj, the Depressed Classes leader from Maharashtra, that he was aiming at "a heart understanding" between the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables and "the greatest opportunity of repentance and reparation" on the part of the caste-Hindus. Pyarelal presented the fast in precisely this light: As a "supreme gesture" of "stupendous sacrifice," a "resplendent self-purification," a demonstration of the "power of satyagraha, of the matchless alchemy of love and self-sacrifice, once more bringing together the disrupted human family to live under a

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<sup>128</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, p. 13.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-21.



common paternal roof in perfect amity and love.”<sup>130</sup> “If however,” Gandhi said, “the representatives of the Depressed Classes will not look at my idea, *they are at liberty to have statutory reservation of seats.*”<sup>131</sup> There is not the slightest doubt about the immediate issue; there is also not the slightest doubt on the alternative formula – of joint electorates with reserved seats for the Untouchables – while Gandhi remained opposed to it in principle, he would accept any settlement which the leaders arrived at using this basis. Gandhi continued: “The withdrawal of separate electorates will satisfy the letter of my vow but will never satisfy the spirit behind it, and in my capacity of being a self-chosen Untouchable, I am not going to rest content with a patched-up pact between the ‘Touchables’ and the ‘Untouchables’. What I want, what I am living for, and what I should delight in dying for, is the eradication of untouchability root and branch.”<sup>132</sup> He, therefore, insisted on statutory declaration that all public places of worship, wells, schools, etc., should be opened to the Untouchables precisely on the same terms as the caste-Hindus.<sup>133</sup>

The fast did prick the Hindu conscience and activated the Hindu leaders. On the initiative of Madan Mohan Malaviya attempts were made to work out a dialogue between the representative caste-Hindu leaders and Ambedkar as well as others who claimed to represent the Depressed Classes. A meeting was held at the hall of the Indian merchants in Bombay on 19th September 1932, under the Presidentship of Malaviya. Pyarelal’s *Epic Fast* gives a day-to-day account of these discussions and the formulae that were being weighed to seek a solution to the question of separate electorates. There was regular to and fro activity among the caste-Hindus leaders – Gandhi – and Ambedkar. The leaders meeting in Bombay would come up with some alternative formula to that proposed in the Communal Award. They would then travel to meet Gandhi to get his reaction. Some hitch would develop. Ambedkar would insist on some point, which the others could not accept. They would again travel to Gandhi so that he may cut through the knot. All would again troop to Gandhi so that he may rule on the matter.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 88.

<sup>131</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 51, pp. 111-12, (emphasis mine).

<sup>132</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 118-21.

<sup>133</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 51, pp. 111-12.

<sup>134</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 51-62.

Once, in these developments, a breakthrough came when Tej Bahadur Sapru mooted a proposal. Sapru pleaded with Ambedkar to give up his insistence on separate electorates, and proposed its substitution by a system of primary and secondary elections, which, while conforming to the principle of joint electorates, would in fact enable the Untouchables to choose their candidates. The proposal was put before Ambedkar. There were no easy answers but it is notable that *The Times of India* had headlined its issue of 17th September 1932, with the caption “Ambedkar Ready to Consider Everything: Changed Attitude.” The newspaper reported that “[contrary] to his earlier uncompromising attitude, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar appeared to be in a conciliatory mood ....” He said that he was willing to consider everything, though “I am not willing to allow the rights of the Depressed Classes to be curtailed in any way.”<sup>135</sup> The mediation by Sapru did not result in repudiation of the proposal by Ambedkar. He signalled to consider the compromise formula, very much to the relief of everyone present on the occasion. The compromise formula stipulated that in regard to the seats mentioned in the Communal Award, the Untouchable voters would, in the first instance, elect for *each seat* a panel of three or four candidates. The panel would then be put before the Untouchable and caste-Hindu voters *jointly* for their choice. However, Ambedkar in working out a solution to secure an alternate formula said, “[to] save Gandhi’s life, I would not be party to any proposals that would be against the interests of my people.”<sup>136</sup> But he drafted a proposal, on the basis of Sapru’s compromise formula, for the consideration of the caste-Hindu leaders and Gandhi.

Accordingly, a group comprising Tej Bahadur Sapru, M. R. Jayakar, G. D. Birla, Rajendra Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) and Devadas Gandhi met Gandhi on 21st September 1932. Gandhi’s reaction and response to the proposed scheme showed a different view. He told Rajaji and Prasad that there was a serious flaw in the scheme. The scheme provided that for some seats reserved for the Depressed Classes there would be first, a primary election to elect a panel of candidates, for other seats there would be no such panel. Gandhi expressed the view that those elected through the panel would consider themselves superior to those directly elected. This would divide the representatives of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi could not be a party to

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<sup>135</sup> *The Times Of India*, 17th September 1932.

<sup>136</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 209.

this happening. “If the panel was good for some, it should be conceded for all the seats.”<sup>137</sup> He also indicated a desire for a face-to-face dialogue with Ambedkar even though the two held different views on the very important question of untouchability.

The Government itself was actively involved in manipulating the Untouchable leaders for their ultimate objective of introducing separatist trends among the Hindus in the political system. On 21st September 1932, *The Times of India* reported on Ambedkar as saying that Gandhi had invited him and M. C. Rajah to discuss the proposals which he had submitted to the Committee that was set-up by the Bombay conference. Ambedkar, however, told the paper that although he had accepted the invitation, he had made it clear to Gandhi that he would have nothing to do in the way of negotiation with Rajah and his party, as “the dispute is between me and my party on the one hand and Mr. Gandhi on the other.”<sup>138</sup> On 22nd September 1932, *The Times of India* was reporting on the lobbying that the British were trying to work on and about their efforts to put down leaders like Rajah, who was opposing Ambedkar. S. Anand makes the point even more specific: “The British Government said that it would *revoke* the Award *only* if Ambedkar agreed.”<sup>139</sup> At the same time, Rajah’s letter to Gandhi reveals how the British officials were manipulating to show that the Government was never far from the scene. Rajah wrote, “perhaps not all of them know how much pressure was brought to bear upon me by high Government authorities including the Viceroy, the House Member, and the Indian Law Member at the time of the fast to *prevent* me from advocating and including my people to accept to joint electorates upon which your heat was set and without which life was not worth living for you.”<sup>140</sup>

The ‘indirect publicity’ continued. A ‘fear’ was generated regarding the Princely States. *The Times of India* reported that once Gandhi succeeded by a self-imposed fast in driving the Untouchables into a particular line of action, against their will, what was there to prevent him from not “practicing this kind of *stayagraha* over

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<sup>137</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 51, p. 126.

<sup>138</sup> *The Times Of India*, 21st September 1932.

<sup>139</sup> Anand, ‘A Note’, p. 364, (emphasis mine).

<sup>140</sup> M. C. Rajah’s Letter To Gandhi, 12th March 1937, *M. C. Rajah Papers*, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML), New Delhi, India.

some other issue.”<sup>141</sup> The paper pictured the possibility of Gandhi proclaiming another self-imposed fast at a future date in order to mobilise public opinion in British India to “see to it that the moral authority of the Federal Government is thrown in his favour” against the Princely States like Bikaner, Travancore, Cochin, where the “caste system is very rigid” and thus would compel the rulers of these states, who may join the proposed Federation, to treat the Untouchables on an equal footing. It was as utterly impossible, the paper said, to persuade the average Marwari of the Rajputana and Central Indian States to treat a member of the Untouchables as his ‘brother’, as it was to ask the Nambudris of Travancore and Cochin to “permit the shadow of an Untouchable to fall on them.” Moreover, an agreement reached between the caste-Hindu and the Untouchable leaders would be examined by the Muslims to “see if it affected them in any way.” The Government made it clear that the Government would secure the ‘ratification’ of the Award if it “is convinced that any agreement reached does not upset the Communal Award in any *other* direction.” The newspaper concluded by saying that Gandhi’s fast and the fear of large-scale violence against the Untouchables by the caste-Hindus, should Ambedkar’s intransigence result in Gandhi’s death had “allowed caste-Hindus to make [Ambedkar] a tool in their hands.” The paper described Rajah’s pact with Moonje as a ‘somersault’ and accused him of having “indulged in metamorphosis,” which has upturned his earlier stand that “no constitutional reform without separate electorates would be acceptable” and the denouncement of “the caste-Hindus and Mr. Gandhi.” The newspaper cautioned that the “Government may well *doubt* what is the *real* voice of the Untouchables.”<sup>142</sup>

The Government continued its ‘indirect’ publicity to thwart any attempt towards an agreement between the caste-Hindus and the Untouchable leaders. *The Times of India* gave credence to P. N. Rajbhoj, another Untouchable leader from Maharashtra, who had expressed apprehensions about their leadership to Gandhi: “If Ambedkar were to be brought around, the Government could put up some other leader to take an extreme stand.”<sup>143</sup> In its publicity through the print media, the Government

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<sup>141</sup> *The Times Of India*, 22nd September 1932.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>143</sup> Meeting Gandhi in prison on 21st September 1932, P. N. Rajbhoj expressed his suspicion of the *bona fides* of the British Government to Gandhi. He felt that if Ambedkar accepted a reasonable compromise, Government might call another leader into being who would declare his opposition, thus

contemplated that any agreement reached in Bombay, if it was to receive official endorsement, “must fulfill two important tests.”<sup>144</sup> First, “the agreement must be *real* in the sense that it must have the full backing of the parties concerned and must be acceptable to the Depressed Classes *as a whole*.” Second, it *must* fall within the four corners of the Premier’s Award.<sup>145</sup> Conditioned on these two factors, the Government stated that should the caste-Hindu and the Untouchable leaders arrive at some settlement, it would “receive the immediate and most careful consideration of the Viceroy and his Executive Council.” Anticipating that the agreement may be a possibility, the Government played upon the issue that M. C. Rajah and Ambedkar were “*not the only* spokesmen of the Depressed Classes” and the Government may require evidence that any arrangement that the Depressed Classes may come to “has the support of their communities *as a whole*.”<sup>146</sup> The British seemed to go against the attempts by the caste-Hindus and the Depressed Classes to undo the injustice to the Depressed Classes and to prevent the Hindu community from fragmentation.

Gandhi’s fast started on 20th September 1932. Ambedkar issued a statement on 19th September 1932, in which Ambedkar admonished Gandhi: “... whether he (Gandhi) knows or not, the Mahatma’s act will result in nothing but terrorism by his followers against the Depressed Classes all over the country.” The fear of repressive reaction however did deter Ambedkar from maintaining a tough stand on the eve of Gandhi’s fast. Ambedkar ended his 19th September 1932 statement thus, “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 right of my people.”<sup>147</sup> The fast started and for the next three days, the sixty-three years old Gandhi went without food at the Yeravda Jail, “his body very weak and his voice sinking low to muttering.”<sup>148</sup> When Ambedkar was told by the negotiators that Gandhi had no personal objection to the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes, he told the conference, “[it] has fallen on my lot to be the villain of the

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making sure that the fast ended in Gandhi’s death. Gandhi said even if that should be so, he could not give up the fast undertaken.

<sup>144</sup> *The Times Of India*, 23rd September 1932.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>147</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>148</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 77-87.

piece.”<sup>149</sup> The question of the duration of the primary election and referendum to decide the duration of reserved seats remained undecided.<sup>150</sup> Contemporary accounts of the fast show bargaining at place and eventual compromise. Pyarelal wrote: “The redoubtable Doctor (Ambedkar), strongly supported by his colleagues, fought every inch of the ground.”<sup>151</sup> Later, it was decided to make the agreement without the condition of referendum.<sup>152</sup> An Englishman said of Ambedkar in 1932: “I think we may accept Dr. Ambedkar as the most important leader and accredited spokesman of the Depressed Classes. None of the local leaders have either his education, forensic ability, or pugnacity, and his recent conduct during Mr. Gandhi’s fast, the *extraordinarily favourable* argument which he exacted from Hindu negotiators, reveal him as a political tactician of quality.”<sup>153</sup>

While Ambedkar seems to have promoted his opposition to Gandhi as a principled one, he did sign the Poona Pact. The moment the fast began, texts, constitutions, awards, elections, etc., lost their significance. Gandhi’s life had to be saved.<sup>154</sup> Pyarelal recounts that defying hoary prohibitions, temples across India opened their doors overnight to the Untouchables. In city after city, *Brahmins* and Untouchables dined together. Sarojini Naidu’s daughter, Padmaja, thought she was witnessing “a ‘catharsis’ cleansing of Hinduism of ‘the accumulated corruption’ of centuries.”<sup>155</sup> Louis Fischer, a Jewish-American journalist,<sup>156</sup> argues that by the criterion of cold logic and arid legalisms, Gandhi need not have fasted to reach an agreement with Ambedkar. But Gandhi’s relationship with the Indian people was not

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<sup>149</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 209.

<sup>150</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 77-87.

<sup>151</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, p. 59.

<sup>152</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 77-87.

<sup>153</sup> John Coatman’s Speech Before the East Indian Association, *Asiatic Review*, Vol. XXIX, No. 97, London January 1933, pp. 46-47, cited in Zelliott, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 43-44; Zelliott, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 103, (emphasis mine).

<sup>154</sup> L. Fischer, *The Life Of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Harper Collins, 2014, p. 398.

<sup>155</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 89 & 93.

<sup>156</sup> Louis Fischer came to India in May 1942. He was in India for two months. In June, he spent one week with Gandhi in this ashram. Fisher wrote a book “*Seven Days With the Mahatma*.” In this famous book he has described the ashram life and Gandhi’s likes and dislikes in a very touching way. Louis Fisher has described the wonders of Gandhi’s personality in the book. (<http://www.mkgandhi.org/sevagram/louis.htm>)

based on logic and legalism. It was a highly emotional relationship. “For the Hindus,” says Fischer, “Gandhi was Mahatma, the Great Soul, a piece of God. Were they going to kill him?”<sup>157</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi acknowledges that “[the] fast undoubtedly put pressure on Ambedkar, who felt the weight of Gandhi’s all-India support ....”<sup>158</sup>

The crucial meeting between Gandhi and Ambedkar which was meant to lead to a successful resolution of the crisis, had taken place on the evening of the 23rd September 1932. According to Ravinder Kumar, the Untouchable leader (Ambedkar), though somewhat subdued, was in no mood to surrender.<sup>159</sup> At the very outset he told Gandhi: “Mahatmaji you have been very unfair to us.”<sup>160</sup> Referring to the system of primary and secondary elections, Ambedkar reiterated his stand. But, he seemed to have acquired a conciliatory frame of mind, when Gandhi told him that the principle of primary elections should apply to *all* the seats reserved for the Depressed Classes and not only to some seats.<sup>161</sup> What Ambedkar felt at the moment? Ambedkar said, “[no] man was placed in a greater and graver dilemma than I was then. It was a baffling situation. I had to make a choice between two different alternatives. There was before me the duty, which I owed as a part of common humanity, to save Gandhi from sure death. There was before me the problem of saving for the Untouchables the political rights which the Prime Minister had given them. I responded to the call of humanity and saved the life of Mr. Gandhi by agreeing to alter the Communal Award in a manner satisfactory to Mr. Gandhi.”<sup>162</sup> Ravinder Kumar thus opines that “Gandhi had thus achieved what” he strove for, “as a true *Satyagrahi*. 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.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Fischer, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 398.

<sup>158</sup> Gandhi, *Mohandas*, p. 373.

<sup>159</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 98.

<sup>160</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, p. 59. It may be noted that Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal kept extensive notes of various interviews and meetings which Gandhi held during the course of the fast. Pyarelal has drawn extensively from these notes in writing *The Epic Fast*.

<sup>161</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 98, (emphasis mine).

<sup>162</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 88.

<sup>163</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 118-21.

At long last the leaders reached an agreement known as the Poona Pact and the terms were reported to Gandhi. He signaled his approval. The Poona Pact was signed on 24th September 1932, by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, M. R. Jayakar, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Chunilal Mehta, B. R. Ambedkar, M. C. Rajah, Dr. Solanki, a lieutenant of Ambedkar, Rajaji, G. D. Birla and twenty others. The text was communicated to the Government at once and Ramsay MacDonald and his ministers also accepted it as an amendment to the Communal Award. On 26th September 1932, after the news of the changes done, reached Yeravda Jail, Gandhi broke his fast. According to Arundhati Roy and Gail Omvedt,<sup>164</sup> Gandhi contradicted his stand that he took at the Second Round Table Conference regarding the Untouchables (recall: “[Gandhi] claim ... to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables”) and willingly accepted Ambedkar’s signatures on the pact as the representative of the Untouchables.<sup>165</sup> During the Round Table talks in 1931, argues Ajay Skaria, “[Gandhi] presumes that his repentance [to the ‘Harijan’] has already made him a *Bhangi* ... or ‘Harijan’, and therefore more representative of the Untouchables than Ambedkar.”<sup>166</sup> Skaria holds “this presumption of a [complete] repentance,” which “[allowed] the penitent [Gandhi] to represent the offended [Untouchables], to achieve union with and even teach the offended [Untouchables],” as an act of violence.<sup>167</sup> As Anupama Rao points out: “Ambedkar noted that such penitential politics inflicted a violence of its own, and did so in two ways: First, by failing to recognise the Dalits’ quest for dignity and social recognition, and second, by redefining the Dalits – in their quest for political autonomy – as the perpetrators of social violence rather than its

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<sup>164</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And The Democratic Revolution*, p. 174.

<sup>165</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 128. Tanika Sarkar argues that Gandhi “insisted that [the] Untouchables did not need Ambedkar as they had the Congress to lead them.” She interprets Gandhi’s statement, “I, myself, in my own person, claim to speak for the whole of Untouchables,” as articulating Gandhi’s “core ideas about the valid remit of Untouchable politics.” T. Sarkar, ‘Gandhi And Social Relations’, in J. M. Brown & A. Parel, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion To Gandhi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 182.

<sup>166</sup> According to Gandhi, the caste-Hindu *durijan* who had been guilty of violence towards the Untouchables can stop being *durijan* and become ‘Harijan’, children/people of God, by atoning for the sin of untouchability through what Gandhi on occasion calls *prayaschitta* or “repentance.”

<sup>167</sup> Skaria, *Unconditional Equality*, p. 167.



historical victims.”<sup>168</sup> But Gandhi had never denied Ambedkar’s ability and commitment as a leader “for that particular part of the country where he comes from.”<sup>169</sup> Both Christophe Jaffrelot and Upendra Baxi have argued that according to Gandhi Ambedkar was a political liberal.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, Gandhi himself said that “the Congress will *share* the honour with Dr. Ambedkar in representing the interests of the Untouchables.”<sup>171</sup> Gandhi did not sign the pact because the Right-Wing Hindu Mahasabha leader Madan Mohan Malaviya was the negotiator.<sup>172</sup> Gandhi did not sign the pact, as he told P. N. Rajbhoj, an Untouchable leader, that though he was opposed to *statutory* reservation of seats for the Untouchables, he would not oppose reservations, if the Depressed Classes’ leaders demanded it, but, “you (Rajbhoj) will not expect me to bless any such scheme. Nor is my blessing essential to its acceptance by the Government.”<sup>173</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot argues that Gandhi did not sign the pact because he “professed to be above quarrelling interest groups.”<sup>174</sup>

By virtue of the Poona Pact the Depressed Classes were given 148 seats in the Legislatures as against the seventy-one which they had received under the Government’s Award. The more significant change was in the way the legislators belonging to the Depressed Classes were to be elected. The election was to be in two stages. In the first round, the Depressed Classes in the reserved constituency were to elect a panel of four candidates. In the second round, all voters of the constituency, irrespective of caste, were to elect the person they wanted to be their representative. This arrangement for electing a panel of four in the primary election was to come to an end after ten years “unless terminated sooner by mutual agreement.” The reservation of seats in the Provincial and Central Legislatures was to “continue until determined by mutual agreement between the communities (the caste-Hindus and the

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<sup>168</sup> A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits And The Politics Of Modern India*, Ranikhet, Permanent Clack, 2010, p. 165.

<sup>169</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 18.

<sup>170</sup> Baxi, ‘Emancipation As Justice’, p. 135.

<sup>171</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 34.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365.

<sup>173</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 51, pp. 111-12.

<sup>174</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 66.

Untouchables) concerned in this settlement.”<sup>175</sup> The agreement followed what Gandhi had maintained all along, namely, that he would give any concession whatsoever to thwart the maneuver of the British to divide the Hindu community permanently. However, the most significant gain was that the Poona Pact was arrived at by and among Indians themselves without the intervention of the British.

Eleanor Zelliot argues that one of the “outcome of the Poona Pact was to bring Ambedkar to the limelight again, adding to his fame and giving his leadership more of an all-India stature.”<sup>176</sup> The British were also making their projections. Sir Frederick Sykes, the Governor of Bombay, for example, noted that the effect of the settlement would probably be in the Bombay Presidency, where Ambedkar’s influence prevailed among the Depressed Classes, “to upset the balance of Legislature to the *detriment* of the Hindus,”<sup>177</sup> as by means of secondary election, Ambedkar “may be able to *ensure* that only candidates favourable to him stand for Depressed Classes seats ....”<sup>178</sup> Arundhati Roy is more succinct in her assessment. She argues that since the Untouchable candidates “would now have to be acceptable to their privileged-caste-dominated constituencies, they lost their teeth.”<sup>179</sup> Kashi Ram, too, in his small tract, *The Chamcha Age: The Era Of Sycophants*, writes: “Poona Pact made Dalits helpless. By rejecting separate electorate Dalits were deprived of their genuine representation in legislatures. Several and various kind of chamchas were born in the last fifty years.”<sup>180</sup> D. N. explains it in a much more explicit way. He writes that “the objective of Gandhi’s ‘epic’ Yeravada fast was to force the Dalits, under Ambedkar, to accept their position of being subordinated to the politically dominant sections of the Hindu community.”<sup>181</sup> While referring to the Poona Pact, Dhananjay Keer, in his biography of Ambedkar, writes: “So effective and crushing was the victory of Gandhi that he

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<sup>175</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan Or The Partition Of India*, Bombay, Thacker & Co., 1946, Appendix XIII, p. 374.

<sup>176</sup> Zelliot, ‘Learning The Use Of Political Means’, p. 46; Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit*, p. 105.

<sup>177</sup> *File No. 31/113/32-Poll. & Unprinted K.-W.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>179</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 127.

<sup>180</sup> Quoted in A. K. Dubey, ‘Anatomy Of A Dalit Power Player: A Study Of Kanshi Ram’, in G. Shah, (ed.), *Dalit Identity And Politics*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2001, p. 205.

<sup>181</sup> D. N., ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And Separate Electorates Issue’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 21 (May 25, 1991), p. 1328.

deprived Ambedkar of all the life-saving weapons and made him a powerless man as did Indira in the case of Karna.”<sup>182</sup> However, Gopal Guru emphasises that Ambedkar “did not get stuck with the historical truth of Poona Pact, 1932, as he knew that the consequences of electoral dynamism would produce a different, possibly bitter truth.” The realisation of this truth, asserts Guru, “is evident in observations made by some important leaders, according to whom, political representation, either through separate or joint electorates, is not going to necessarily throw up autonomous [Untouchable] representatives and leaders.”<sup>183</sup> Suhas Palshikar suggests that the issue of separate electorates should not be taken seriously while understanding Ambedkar because “‘separate electorates’ do not form the core of Ambedkar’s thought.”<sup>184</sup>

Even Ambedkar justified his demand for reserved seats in place of a separate electorate in the following words: “With separate electorates the [Untouchable] minority gets its own quota of representation and no more. The rest of the house owes no allegiance to it and is therefore not influenced by the desire to meet the wishes of the minority. The minority is thus thrown on its own resources and as no system of representation can convert a minority into majority, it is bound to be overwhelmed. On the other hand, under a system of joint electorates and reserved seats the minority not only gets its quota of representation but something more. For, every member of the majority who has partly succeeded on the strength of the voters of the minority if not a member of the minority will certainly be a member for the minority.”<sup>185</sup>

In Gandhi’s challenge to the Communal Award, the British Government as well as Gandhi’s critics see his unwillingness to endow “political empowerment” to the ‘Harijans’. However, nothing could be farther from the truth than this. Gandhi gave a reply to some critics on his issue, which was published in *Harijanbandhu* of 22nd October 1933. Gandhi wrote: “To say that the ‘Harijans’ will not be able to use their franchise properly and will not be able to understand the interests of the country is to lay the axe at the very root of the principles of democracy. It is like the

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<sup>182</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 216.

<sup>183</sup> G. Guru, ‘Ethics In Ambedkar’s Critique Of Gandhi’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 15, 15 Apr., 2017, p. 97.

<sup>184</sup> S. Palshikar, ‘Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface:...When Shall The Twain Meet?’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 31 (Aug. 3, 1996), p. 2070.

<sup>185</sup> Quoted in Jaffrelot, *Analyzing And Fighting Caste*, p. 55.

Imperialists telling us that we are not fit for democracy and will never learn the proper use of the franchise. Mistakes will always be made. We shall progress only through mistakes. But does it mean that we should not have the right to vote? Exercise of the right of voting will in itself be an education for the 'Harijans'. Nor would it be proper to say that they would not understand national interests. Their representatives would be persons elected with our own votes. For every 'Harijan' seat, the 'Harijans' would elect four persons, and from among these four we shall have to elect one. Would we not find even one person from among them who would understand the nation's interests? If we really do not find such a person, then the fault would be ours for having neglected them to that extent. The right way is to embrace them and win over their hearts by serving them. It won't help to distrust them."<sup>186</sup>

Ambedkar's opinion on the power, which adult suffrage must confer on the Untouchables if they could exercise it in a joint national electorate in common with other Hindus, is as emphatic as it is also unexceptionable. He deems its value as a political weapon as one "beyond reckoning." The voting strength of the Untouchables in each constituency, he says, is one to ten. With this voting strength, free to be used in the election of the caste-Hindu candidates, the Untouchables would have been in a position to determine, if not to dictate, the issue of the general election. No caste-Hindu candidate could have dared to neglect the Untouchables in his constituency or be hostile to their interest, if he was made dependent upon the votes of the Untouchable.<sup>187</sup> Now this was exactly what Gandhi and the Indian National Congress felt. Gandhi was eager to put the Untouchables in political power in the very manner and for the very purpose pointed out so eloquently by Ambedkar in the above passage.<sup>188</sup> Gandhi expected that the power so conferred would increase tremendously

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<sup>186</sup> *Harijanbandhu*, 22nd October 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 62, p. 62.

<sup>187</sup> Recall that at the time when Montagu-Chelmsford Report was to be implemented, Ambedkar had argued passionately, before the Southborough Committee on franchise, in favour of low-pitched franchise for the Dalits. He had argued that the exercise of vote was itself an education. Ambedkar appeared before the Simon Commission, where he linked acceptance of joint electorates with adult franchise. Gandhi, *Satyapath*, pp. 166-67.

<sup>188</sup> In fact, Gandhi was willing to put "every one of their [Untouchable] adults, male or female" on the voter's list "irrespective of education or property qualifications, even though the franchise test may be stricter for the others [caste-Hindus]." *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 112.

in the fullness of time, with growing knowledge and experience, and make Untouchables emancipation irresistible.

Gandhi had fasted for nobody and everybody. He was aware that his fasts exercised a moral pressure. Ambedkar himself acknowledged that “the conservative Hindus too saw it as pressure on them and resented the pact it produced. ... [The] Untouchables were sad” because of the concessions he (Gandhi) had made, but “[the] caste-Hindus very definitely disliked” the Poona Pact, “although they had not the courage to reject it.”<sup>189</sup> In a leader entitled “A Victory For The Untouchables,” the *Daily Telegraph* depicted Gandhi’s fast as “a success that may have historic consequences,” for “the device did not for a moment blind the Hindu community to the reality of the position .... [It] was to them that pressure was being applied.” Printed alongside a feature on “The Tragedy Of India’s 43,000,000 ‘Untouchables’,” detailing the “tragic conditions” forced upon them by the Hindu religious and social system, the *Daily Telegraph* thus celebrated an agreement that had dealt “a staggering blow” to untouchability.<sup>190</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot has argued that “the pressure exerted at [that] moment on Ambedkar,” should Ambedkar’s intransigence lead to Gandhi’s death and result in violent backlash against the Untouchables, “brought Ambedkar round,” and not Gandhi’s success in persuading Ambedkar as a “true Satyagrahi.”<sup>191</sup> Gail Omvedt adds that “a few words uttered in the socially obligatory atmosphere of conciliation that occurs after any negotiation, do not indicate a ‘change of heart’.”<sup>192</sup> According to Sudhir Chandra, “whatever limited success Gandhi’s 1932 fast achieved was not the success of non-violence. The fast, in terms of non-violence, was a failure.”<sup>193</sup> “The gist of it,” according to Arundhati Roy, “was that the caste-Hindus” represented by Gandhi “wanted the power to close the door on the Untouchables ....”<sup>194</sup> Critics of

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<sup>189</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, pp. 90-91. No wonder some *Sanatanists* tried to kill Gandhi in 1934. There were attempts on his life in Jasidih in Bihar and in Pune.

<sup>190</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 27th September 1932, cited in T. Pratt & J. Vernon, “‘Appeal From This Fiery Bed ...’: The Colonial Politics Of Gandhi’s Fasts And Their Metropolitan Reception”, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (January 2005), p. 101.

<sup>191</sup> Jaffrelot, *Analysing And Fighting Caste*, p. 66.

<sup>192</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 98, quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>193</sup> S. Chandra, ‘Gandhi’s Twin Fasts And The Possibility Of Non-Violence’, *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, Issue No. 23, 04 Jun., 2011, p. 41.

<sup>194</sup> Omvedt, *Dalits And Democratic Revolution*, p. 175.

Gandhi have written that “[there] was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act.”<sup>195</sup> However, Ambedkar saw the pact as a victory for himself. Ambedkar writes, “the fast failed and Mr. Gandhi was obliged to sign a pact – called the Poona Pact – which conceded the political demands of the Untouchables.”<sup>196</sup> Moreover, Dhananjay Keer informs us that *en route* to England for the Third Round Table Conference on 7th November 1932, while discussing the political problem with the other delegates on board the ship, “Ambedkar was *shocked* to know how the British officials and statesmen had planned to *deprive* the Depressed Classes of representation in the Central Assembly.”<sup>197</sup> They had hatched this plan on the plea that the problem of the Depressed Classes was the concern of the Provincial Governments, and so their quota of representation in the Central Assembly was to be lavished on the Muslims and Europeans. “Ambedkar *felt* a thrill of joy when he saw the designs of the British officials and statesmen *flouted* by the Poona Pact which gave them [eighteen] per cent of the Hindu seats in the Central Assembly.”<sup>198</sup>

Gandhi and Ambedkar shared vocal rivalry. The two could not be paired together. Those who would reconcile Gandhi and Ambedkar acknowledged their disagreements.<sup>199</sup> Yet Ambedkar reconciled on the issue of “caste-exclusion through separate electorates.” In the need to augment political arrangements, Gandhi followed the approach to respect conciliation. He did not expect his critics to react in the same way as his friends and co-workers. If his self-crucifixion could demonstrate his sincerity to the teeming millions of India with whom he had identified himself, the battle would be more than half-won. This would prove true later when Ambedkar would incorporate the terms of the Poona Pact in independent India’s constitution, in partnership with Gandhi along with Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhahi Patel.

## [7]

Gandhi stressed that the upper caste-Hindu and the Untouchable communities, spread out in each of the half a million villages, were tied through such intimate social

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<sup>195</sup> Roy, ‘The Doctor’, p. 126.

<sup>196</sup> *BAWS*, Vol. 9, p. 259.

<sup>197</sup> Keer, *Life And Mission*, p. 220, (emphasis mine).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

<sup>199</sup> *The Hindu*, 22nd February 2016.

and economic bonds that their severance would cause an upheaval of disastrous proportions. He also stressed the fact that no external agency, howsoever well intentioned it may be, could succeed in the liberation of the Untouchables. The solution had to come, so Gandhi believed, from within the Hindu community and the solution was tied (in Gandhian language) to a ‘change of heart’ among the caste-Hindus, who presided over a system of social exploitation that was centuries old. If Gandhi’s perception of Hindu community was valid, then his fears about the possible consequences of separate electorates were probably equally valid. The provision of such a system of representation for the Muslims had demonstrated that separate electorates created more problems than it solved. Besides, the position of the Untouchables was radically different from that of the Muslims. Unlike the latter, the Untouchables constituted an organic part of the Hindu community, howsoever lowly be the position which they occupied within it. To confer upon them the dubious privilege of separate electorates was to condemn them forever to the status of Untouchables. As Gandhi put it: “Should Untouchables be regarded as such for eternity?”

Ambedkar shared similar ideas and stated that larger social problems could not be solved by electoral systems alone. Social change, he said, required more than political arrangements and hope that, in the time to come, it would become possible to go beyond the political realm to devise ways and means for ensuring that the Depressed Classes occupied positions of equity and honour in the Hindu society. “I do *not* believe that joint electorates are going to be the final solution for the problem of *absorbing* the Depressed Classes in the Hindu community. *Any* electoral arrangement, I believe, *cannot* be a solution of the larger social problem. It requires more than any political arrangement, and I hope that it would be possible for you to go beyond this political arrangement that we are making today and devise ways and means whereby it would be possible for the Depressed Classes not only to be part and parcel of the Hindu community but also occupy an honourable position, a position of equality of status in the community.”<sup>200</sup> The fast of September 1932 and subsequent events, coupled with personal contact with Ambedkar, reinforced Gandhi’s commitment to the removal of untouchability. As a prisoner Gandhi started one of the largest social

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<sup>200</sup> Pyarelal, *Epic Fast*, pp. 190-91, (emphasis mine).

reform movements of the first half of the twentieth century to redeem the Untouchables from their lowly status.

Gandhi was aware that constitutional engineering contemplated by the British Government carried the risk of exposing millions of small communities of the Depressed Classes, located in remote rural settlements to harassment and worse, at the hands of the caste-Hindus. If the Communal Award had not been redrawn in the sections pertaining to the Depressed Classes, it was likely that a civil war would have erupted in the Hindu community. In every village and hamlet of the land, the caste-Hindus would have utilised their local power to break up the Depressed Classes as a separate political entity. To prevent the caste system from triggering off such a crisis, Gandhi stressed the need for a fundamental change in the social attitudes and the moral outlook of the upper castes – through persuasion and example – as an essential prerequisite for the liberation of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi was determined to save the Hindu community from caste warfare of the most monumental proportions and to save the Depressed Classes too from social annihilation. The results of the Poona Pact were, therefore, of the most profound significance for Hinduism. The agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar saved a community from turning into itself and committing collective suicide. Indeed, the Poona Pact was a victory won by Gandhi over the British policy of ‘divide and rule’.



## Conclusion

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*“Civic rights will certainly be protected by law if they are to be worth anything. There is no question of the ‘Harijans’ existing on the sufferance of anybody. But law is one thing, cultivation of public opinion wholly another. Society holds together on the strength not of law but of mutual goodwill, and unless the majority of the caste-Hindus are converted, there is not much use in the law protecting rights, which the majority is not prepared to recognise. The whole of the present campaign is directed towards cultivating and ascertaining the opinion of the caste-Hindus. The legal guarantees and all that they mean are bound to be there, but they will be an expression of the will of the majority and not a superimposition.”*<sup>1</sup> – M. K. Gandhi

### [1]

Untouchability was one of Gandhi’s central concerns in both words and actions. Gandhi is said to have “spoken and written more on untouchability than on any other subject.”<sup>2</sup> Despite being a caste-Hindu himself, Gandhi identified himself more with the Untouchables. He said, “as a *savarna* Hindu, when I see that there are some Hindus called *avarnas*, it offends my sense of justice and truth...” and “if I discover that Hindu *Shastras* really countenance untouchability as it is seen today, I will renounce and denounce Hinduism.”<sup>3</sup> Gandhi boldly described ‘untouchability’ as a blot on Hinduism and characterised it as an excrescence. He said, “if it were proved to me that this is an essential part of Hinduism, I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself.”<sup>4</sup> According to him, “there was nothing so bad” as the practice of untouchability in Hinduism “in all the world.” “This religion,” he said, “if it can be called such, stinks

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Letter To S. D. Nadkarni’, 27th January 1933, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 53, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry Of Information And Broadcasting, Government Of India, 1971, p. 164. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CWMG* followed by volume and page(s).

<sup>2</sup> E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable To Dalit: Essays On The Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1992, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Speech At Palluruthy’, 18th January 1934, *CWMG*, Vol. 57, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Speech By Gandhi’, 3rd May 1915, *CWMG*, Vol. 13, p. 69.

in my nostrils. This certainly cannot be the Hindu religion.”<sup>5</sup> These were strong words, but the passion behind them sprang from Gandhi’s agony. “And yet,” Gandhi wrote, “I cannot leave religion and therefore Hinduism. My life would be a burden to me, if Hinduism failed me.... Take it away and nothing remains for me.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, to live with untouchability was “like a cup of poison” to him.<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi’s beliefs were backed by the force of a lifetime of action. Gandhi from a very young age revolted against the practice of untouchability and in his whole life he did not practice untouchability and caste restrictions in any form. As a child he had disregarded his mother’s warning not to touch Uka, an Untouchable, who came to clean latrines in his house.<sup>8</sup> In South Africa, persons of all castes, communities, religions and races stayed in his house as members of his family.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi also ate with people of different faiths as well as castes including the Untouchables.<sup>10</sup> He did ‘unclean’ work himself and forced it on his family, and he accepted Untouchables in his social and domestic circles on equal terms. He made his family and associates break pollution taboos and engage in labour that was considered very profoundly polluted: Shoemaking, leatherwork, cleaning of toilets, etc. In fact, cleaning toilets – work profoundly polluting to caste-Hindus – persisted throughout his life.<sup>11</sup> When Kasturba showed reluctance to clean the urine pot of one such member of his “family” in South Africa, he had threatened to evict her from the house. While in India, when he accepted the first Untouchable family in the Kocharb Ashram and adopted Lakshmi, an Untouchable, as his daughter, the *Vaishnavs* of Ahmedabad stopped all monetary help to the *ashram*, following which he decided to move to the Untouchables’ quarters.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in R. Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A Portrait Of Gandhi*, New Delhi, Viking, 1995, p. 236.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Letter To Jawaharlal Nehru’, 2nd May 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 55, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> ‘To Gujaratis’, 12th March 1933, *CWMG*, Vol. 54, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Young India*, 27th April 1921 & 4th May 1921; ‘Speech At Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad’, 13th April 1921, *CWMG*, Vol. 19, pp. 569-75.

<sup>9</sup> T. Sarkar, ‘Gandhi And Social Relations’, in J. M. Brown & A. Parel, (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion To Gandhi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 178

<sup>10</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography Or The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Trust, 1927, (Reprint 2011), p. 96.

<sup>11</sup> Sarkar, ‘Social Relations’, p. 178.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 286

None of Gandhi's *ashrams* were built on the basic principles of caste system or *varnashram-dharma*. In fact, none of the caste restrictions were observed in his *ashram*. Every *ashramite*, irrespective of caste, religion, or gender had to do daily manual labour. Everyone had to perform every kind of work including cooking, gardening, cleaning, scavenging, shaving, and cutting hair on a rotational basis. Untouchability was not practised in any form in the *ashrams*.<sup>13</sup> Fellow residents in his *ashrams* were required to take a vow against it.<sup>14</sup> Many inter-caste marriages were also organised in the *ashrams*. It is worth noting that Gandhi not only allowed his son Ramadas to marry someone from a different sub-caste, but also allowed his son Devadas to marry a girl who was from another *varna* altogether. He also, by design, married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was Untouchable by birth, to a *Brahmin* boy in 1933.<sup>15</sup> Gandhi's experiments with simple living and community life were an effort to break not only community and religious arrogance but particularly caste inequality and discrimination.

Gandhi himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors' calling. He also let his children choose their own professions, and never pressed them to follow any pursuit prescribed for their caste. In addition, there are no references to hereditary occupations in his constructive programme while creating an ideal village. On the contrary, Gandhi urged the caste-Hindus to realise that just as the *Brahmins* had forsaken teaching and taken up other jobs, just as the *Kshatriyas* had willingly accepted slavery, just as the *Vaishyas* had given up their trade and entered other fields, similarly the Untouchables, too, had a right to give up their old occupations.<sup>16</sup> In fact, he helped many Untouchables to quit their hereditary callings, to acquire an academic education and to qualify themselves as doctors, engineers and teachers.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to accept that a man, who violated almost every caste restriction throughout his life, and, who built *ashrams* where no caste restriction was observed,

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<sup>13</sup> N. Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'? Reflections On His Practices', *Economic And Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, Issue No. 13, 01 Apr., 2017, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> T. Nath, *Politics Of The Depressed Classes*, Delhi, Deputy Publications, 1987, p. 237.

<sup>15</sup> Kolge, 'Was Gandhi A 'Champion Of The Caste System'?', pp. 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> "'Patidars' And Untouchables', 14th December 1924, *CWMMG*, Vol. 25, p. 429.

<sup>17</sup> H. S. L. Polak, H. N. Brailsford & Lord Pettick Lawrence, *Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Odhams Press, 1949, p. 204.

held the caste system or *varnashram-dharma* as an ideal form of organising human society. Nowhere in Gandhi's entire political career do we find him attempting to restore the *dharma* of the discredited *varnashrama*. Gandhi himself rejected such a possibility when he said: "I have gone no-where to defend *varnadharma*. I am the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of *khadi*, establishment of Hindu-Muslim unity, and removal of untouchability, the three pillars of *Swaraj*. *But I have never placed establishment of varnashram-dharma as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing a wrong emphasis on varnashram-dharma.*"<sup>18</sup>

It must be admitted that it was Gandhi who made untouchability one of the crucial questions of Indian politics.<sup>19</sup> He publicly put the "abolition" of untouchability as the essential prerequisite for India's true independence (*Swaraj*). Gandhi had pushed for the removal of untouchability to the forefront as early as 1920 at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress that adopted the non-cooperation resolution. For him, *Swaraj* was not only expulsion of the British from India but also the liberation of society from slavery. Attainment of political freedom was inadequate without social freedom for Gandhi.

Although Gandhi was radical from the beginning on the issues of caste prejudices, yet he was careful and gradual in what he demanded from the Hindu society. He was aware that in India the conservative but powerful section of Hindus was not yet ready for radical reforms. He understood that in his fight against untouchability, he needed to take the caste-Hindus into confidence and make them believe that his movement was not to destroy Hindu religion but to purify it. As his own political position steadily strengthened by the 1920s, Gandhi felt freer to ask for tougher reforms, as his resistance to caste prejudices and untouchability increased. Gandhi also faced, *both*, the problems of the colonial state *using* caste to weaken the national movement, and of not alienating the orthodox Hindus so that they do not break away from the nationalist platform. For example, after the launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920, orthodox Hindus had warned Gandhi that

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<sup>18</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 523, (emphasis mine).

<sup>19</sup> D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet And Other Essays: The Dalit Movement In India*, New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2014, p. 24.

unless Untouchables were excluded from the national schools, they would support the British Raj.

Initially, in order to make the Hindu masses understand and accept his anti-untouchability movement, Gandhi frequently insisted on being a *Sanatani* Hindu and even defended both caste and *varna* system. He also asserted that inter-caste dining or marriage did not necessarily deprive a person of his caste status, since a man's *varna* was inherited. He even emphasised some positive aspects of the system by appreciating restrictions on inter-caste dining and marriage.<sup>20</sup> Until the end of 1920, Gandhi tried *only* to destroy the notion that physical contact with Untouchables polluted a Hindu from a higher caste. However, as Gandhi rose to leadership within the Congress by 1920-21, he was in a position to wrest maximum advantage politically for his beliefs. From 1920-27, he began to demand entry of Untouchable children into schools (a less contentious issue).<sup>21</sup>

As the Indian National Movement moved into the Civil Disobedience phase (1930-34), Gandhi's public reputation enabled him to demand more sacrifices from caste-Hindus. The years from 1927 to 1932 saw Gandhi demanding that Untouchables must have the same right of temple-entry (a highly contentious issue) as other caste-Hindus. Even though Gandhi was writing in favour of the hereditary fourfold division of the Hindu society at the time, he was making vigorous attempts to disassociate *varna* from caste, and thus, began to advocate inter-marriage among the sub-castes.<sup>22</sup>

Between 1932 and 1948, when Gandhi was at the peak of his influence, he could make statements that were blasphemy to Hindu orthodoxy. He now admonished the caste system itself and clearly demarcated that "caste had to go," as it only served to stunt the Hindu society. Gandhi's views, culminated in the announcement in 1946 that in his Sewagram Ashram, couples could marry *only* on the condition that one party was an Untouchable. His insistence on inter-caste marriage may be seen as cutting at the roots of the caste system. A year earlier in 1945, the notion of repudiating one's *varna* had already entered Gandhi's mind. Gandhi wrote that since everyone felt free to follow any calling, there prevailed only one *varna*, that is, of the

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<sup>20</sup> Nishikant Kolge, *Gandhi Against Caste*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 102-15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132-45.

*Shudras*. Once everyone was a *Shudra* then there would be no question of superiority or inferiority, inequality or discrimination.<sup>23</sup> Gandhi's approach and method were well understood by the famous atheist, G. Ramachandra Rao, 'Gora'. Gora has written: "A mere intellectual might read inconsistency in [Gandhi's] tolerance of caste earlier and his denunciation of it later. But to a practical man of non-violent creed these are stages of progress and not principles of contradiction."<sup>24</sup>

## [2]

The British followed the strategic policy of dividing Indians on communal lines, and giving support to communalists, from the end of the nineteenth century. 'Divide and rule' proved to be an important instrument of colonial policy in an effort to thwart the rising tide of the Indian National Movement ever since the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. A key device for this strategy that was most capable of breaking the people were 'separate electorates', promulgated in 1909, a benefit, which a group could avail only by asserting its separateness on religious grounds. The Act of 1919 extended that privilege to other religious minorities but also gave *official recognition* to the Depressed Classes with representation in Central and Provincial Legislatures. Their representatives were the *nominees* of the Government. The British thus recognised the Untouchables as a specific social category.<sup>25</sup>

The British interest in the Depressed Classes became rooted as the nationalist pressure grew with the advent of Gandhi in the movement. The Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement (1919-21) conclusively proved that the Hindus and Muslims were not irreconcilably inimical. In pursuance of their common pursuit they could again come together and fight under a common banner.<sup>26</sup> The British had a lurking fear that it was unsafe to rely on Hindu-Muslim dissensions for keeping the growing nationalist sentiment under control. This realisation was to have a lasting effect on the evolution of their policy towards the Depressed Classes. The traditional division of the Hindu community into caste-Hindus and the Untouchables was, perhaps, the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-206.

<sup>24</sup> G. R. Rao (Gora), *An Atheist With Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1951, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> C. Jaffrelot, 'Caste And Politics', *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Autumn 2010), p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> S. Sinha, *Indian Independence In Perspective*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 200.

strongest.<sup>27</sup> They were next only to Muslims in number. Not only that, the educated among them had all along been anti-Congress.<sup>28</sup> Relations between these two components – the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables – of the Hindu community came to a head during the constitutional deliberations of 1930-31, prefaced and introduced by the British. This got accentuated when the British announced the Communal Award on 16th August 1932. It took a “fast unto death” by Gandhi to stop a potential breach of the Hindu society pregnant with the most disastrous possibilities for India.

From 1919 onwards, many Untouchable leaders including Ambedkar had been time and again demanding either reservation of seats in joint electorates or separate electorates for the Untouchables. Finally, the Simon Commission (1928) in its report suggested that the Depressed Classes must be granted reserved seats. However, its recommendations could not be implemented as no Indian representative had taken part in its drafting. To resolve the problem, the British Government announced the Round Table Conferences that were to be held in London. Representatives of the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christians, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Untouchables, along with many other participants, attended the First Round Table Conference in 1930. This conference could not produce any results as the Congress had boycotted it. However, in 1931, Gandhi participated as the sole representative of the Congress in the Second Round Table Conference organised by the British Government to discuss constitutional reforms for India. At the conference, Ambedkar supported separate electorates for the Untouchables, while Gandhi vehemently opposed it. The two leaders failed to find any common ground and this conference, too, ended inconclusively. Gandhi returned empty-handed from the conference and was arrested soon after his arrival in India as he decided to resume the Civil Disobedience Movement. On 16th August 1932, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, announced the Communal Award, which provided for separate communal electorates for the Untouchables along with Muslims, Europeans, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Indian-based Christians.

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<sup>27</sup> S. C. Bose, *The Indian Struggle: 1920-1942*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1964, p. 319, (emphasis mine).

<sup>28</sup> Nath, *Depressed Classes*, p. 80.

Gandhi was aware that the strategy of awarding “separate electorates” whether to the Sikhs, Muslims or any other religious community within India was not a fair, equitable, and impartial policy. He was assiduously convinced that separate electorates for the Untouchables would further help the British to ‘divide and rule’, and balkanise India and thus retard its progress. Gandhi had a strong case, as “distinct electorates for Muslims had undoubtedly been divisive, creating as they did a class of politicians whose basis was that of separatist politics.”<sup>29</sup> It was for this reason that Gandhi opposed separate electorates for the Untouchables, contrary to the perception of the critics of Gandhi, who would have us believe, that upper-caste Hindus represented by Gandhi refused to accommodate the interests of the Untouchables.

The demand for separate electorates for the Untouchables, as enshrined in the Communal Award, was “manufactured” by the British Government. A review of the confidential correspondence among the British officials shows that there was no widespread yearning among the Untouchables, not even elementary awareness, for seeking separate electorates through the Award. In fact, majority of them scarcely knew that an Award had been announced ostensibly for their “emancipation.” The British put on the pretense of “supporting” the Untouchables while their clearly stated objective was to use them to create yet another fissure among the Indian people in order to thwart the rising tide of the Indian National Movement. Separate electorates was a key device to make the Untouchables assert their separateness, a device the British had used successfully to divide the Hindus and the Muslims.<sup>30</sup> Its repercussions were felt in India.

With the announcement of the Communal Award, the Depressed Classes got divided into two groups: One for separate electorates as professed by Ambedkar and the other for joint electorates as professed by Gandhi. On this issue, the leaders of the Depressed Classes who chose Ambedkar’s line in Poona and Madras regarded the prospect of negotiations with what they regarded as caste-Hindu leaders under intense moral pressure. They found it distasteful that Gandhi undertook a “fast unto death” in

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<sup>29</sup> D. Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time And Ours*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2003, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> Since the late nineteenth century when the British introduced very minimally the principle of elected representation in local self-Governments, they simultaneously introduced the idea of separate electorates. In 1909, the principle was formalised in the Government of India Act 1909, commonly known as the Morley-Minto Reforms.



this scenario. However, some Depressed Classes' spokesmen voiced their confidence in the leadership of Gandhi at public meetings of the Untouchables held in Nagpur, or Karachi, or Lucknow, or Lahore.<sup>31</sup> A sizeable number of them led by M. C. Rajah were more and more veering towards the view that joint electorates with reservation of seats for the Untouchables were better than separate electorates.<sup>32</sup> Questions and doubts began to be raised about the community's leadership also. For example, M. C. Rajah and P. N. Rajbhoj, an Untouchable leader from Maharashtra, asserted in a letter to the Viceroy of India's Private Secretary that the Depressed Classes in general, and the *Chambhar* and the *Mang* communities in particular, did not recognise Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan (a popular Untouchable leader and a rival of Rajah in South India) as their spokesmen. Rajbhoj added that the Untouchable communities other than the Mahars had never expressed allegiance to Ambedkar and "are more ill at ease when in the company of his community than in that of the higher classes." Ambedkar, Rajbhoj alleged, did "not even deign to look to the proposals sought to be placed before him by the representatives of smaller depressed communities." They feared for their interests under him.<sup>33</sup>

The British Government had a single point agenda – to strike down forces of nationalism and to create parochial and partisan loyalties. The elections based on separate electorates were a powerful means to start a policy of appeasement and reservations. The British Government itself was actively involved in manipulating the Untouchable leaders for their ultimate objective of introducing separatist trends among the Hindus. M. C. Rajah's letter to Gandhi reveals how the British Government actively intervened. Rajah wrote, "perhaps not all of them know how much pressure was brought to bear upon me by high Government authorities including the Viceroy, the House Member, and the Indian Law Member at the time of [Gandhi's] fast to prevent me from advocating and including my people to accept to joint electorates upon which your heart was set and without which life was not worth

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<sup>31</sup> Kumar, 'The Poona Pact', p. 96.

<sup>32</sup> S. K. Gupta, *The Scheduled Castes In Modern Indian Politics: Their Emergence As A Political Power*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985, pp. 280-81.

<sup>33</sup> Government of India, Reforms Office, Reforms, *File No. 111/32-R*, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi, India, 1932.

living for you.”<sup>34</sup> The British Government was evidently set against the Untouchable and the caste-Hindu representatives in order to fragment the Hindu community. Gandhi was aware of this, as several years later in a letter written to Amrit Kaur he was to describe the Communal Award as a “wicked conspiracy against Indian nationalism.” He added that the Award created “a division amongst Hindus themselves.” Gandhi insisted that the Depressed Classes be elected through joint, and if possible a wider electorate, through universal adult franchise. There were reasons for this belief, as separate electorates would ensure that the Untouchables remained “Untouchables in perpetuity.”<sup>35</sup> What was required was root and branch eradication of untouchability. The Communal Award was conspicuously silent on this.

Gandhi had never objected to the representation of the Depressed Classes in the Legislatures or even to their over-representation. On the contrary, he was anxious to secure their adequate representation. He even expressed his readiness, under certain conditions, to guarantee by statute, a specified number of seats to be filled by them.<sup>36</sup> On 20th September 1932, Gandhi reiterated his position. Gandhi again told the press representatives that his fast was “only against separate [“Untouchable”] electorates, and not against statutory reservation of seats.”<sup>37</sup> He would not oppose reservation of seats for the “Untouchables” if they so desired. He was ready to comply with an arrangement reached between the Hindu leaders and the representatives of the “Untouchables,” but it should be based on joint electorates.<sup>38</sup> Gandhi had written to P. N. Rajbhoj, a Depressed Classes leader from Maharashtra, that he was “aiming at a heart understanding between the caste Hindus and the Untouchables and the greatest opportunity of repentance and reparation on the part of the caste Hindus. If however, the representatives of the Depressed Classes will not look at my idea, they are at

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<sup>34</sup> M. C. Rajah’s Letter To Gandhi, 12th March 1937, *M. C. Rajah Papers*, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library (NMML), New Delhi, India.

<sup>35</sup> R. Kumar, ‘Gandhi, Ambedkar And The Poona Pact, 1932’, in J. Masselos, (ed.), *Struggling And Ruling: The Indian National Congress, 1885-1985*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1987, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Pyarelal, *The Epic Fast*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1932, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-21.

liberty to have statutory reservation of seats.” A day before 20th September 1932, Gandhi reiterated his stand before the Hindu leaders who had called upon him.<sup>39</sup>

Gandhi’s “epic fast” was successful in preventing the emergence of a ‘fatal’ divide amongst the Hindus. He performed brilliantly and succeeded to defeat the very purpose of the British policy in augmenting divisions within the Hindu community by taking recourse to constitutional provisions. The breach was mended with the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar. By virtue of the Poona Pact the Untouchables were given 148 seats in the Legislatures as against the seventy-one, which they had received under the Government’s Communal Award. The agreement followed what Gandhi had maintained all along, namely, that he would give any concession whatsoever to thwart the maneuver of the British to divide the Hindu community permanently. However, the most significant gain was that the Poona Pact was arrived at by and among Indians themselves without the intervention of the British.

In sum, Gandhi’s “fast unto death” against the Communal Award that granted separate electorates to the Untouchables was not “antagonistic” to their “interests” and “political rights.” The demand for separate electorates for the “Untouchables,” as enshrined in the Communal Award, was “manufactured” by the British Government. The British put on the pretense of “supporting” the Untouchables, while their clearly stated objective was to use them through the mechanism of separate electorates to create yet another fissure among the Indian people in order to thwart the rising tide of the Indian National Movement. It was for this reason that Gandhi opposed separate electorates for the Untouchables. Also, he believed that separate electorates would ensure that the Untouchables remained “*Untouchables in perpetuity*,”<sup>40</sup> while what was needed was “root and branch eradication of untouchability.”

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<sup>39</sup> Kumar, ‘The Poona Pact’, p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94, (emphasis mine).

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