# Chapter I

## Questions of Caste: Gandhi and Ambedkar

India, in its pursuit of modernity, has negotiated with traditions. As it seems, it finds it hard and rather unnecessary to do away with its social traditions related to the caste system. It allows caste to exist as a significant category while dealing with modern political and economic forms. Its negotiations with social traditions are quite limited, visible in the economic sphere rather than in the social and religious arenas. Modern means of production demand equality in treatment and physical co-existence of workers. Caste is negotiated with, though offers resistance by maintaining an occupational hierarchical space.[1] For instance, the work in mills of Gujarat was divided according to its status of purity. Dalits were generally not allowed in weaving sections, and upper castes refrained from working in the spinning sections, but the physical co-existence at a workplace has a negotiation value.

In Gramsci's terms it can be identified as a "passive revolution" where the state or reformers do not take a revolutionary position but they seek satisfaction in "small doses, legally in reformist manner—in such a way that it was possible to preserve the political and economic position of the old feudal classes…" (Chatterjee 1997: 30). Gandhi's 'ideal bhangi',[2] for instance, may have scientific knowledge and authority on the subject of "disposal of night-soil" but his liberty to negate the very occupation is limited. By providing the mask of modernity, the inherent inhumanity can be continued for a long time. So, for Gandhi caste can become, as Vivek

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[1] G.K.Kamath, a sociologist considers that the fall or weakening of the quasi-judicial institutions like caste Panchayata or caste council has given space to the members of a particular caste to engage in occupations other than their hereditary occupations. (See Kamatha, G. K. "Caste in Contemporary Rural India". Ed. M. N. Srinivas. *Caste*: *Its Twentieth Century Avatar.*New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996. p89.
[2] See M.K.Gandhi. "The Ideal Bhangi" *Harijan*, November 28, 1936.

Dhareshwar observes, an objective reality, while for the lower castes, they experience caste as a subjective reality, as in the case of Dr. Ambedkar. [3] This double semiotics of caste goes hand to hand in the debate of the caste system. The relentless attempts by Ambedkar to change the terms of the caste system arises from a subjective reality while Gandhi's attempts to justify the old tradition removing its "weed" indeed comes from an understanding of caste as an objective reality.

Caste has changed its structures and undergone multiple revisions in its character since colonialism. Colonial modernity has also pushed for certain adjustments that arrived with industrialization and which were incorporated by the post-independence Indian state. The beginning of capitalism has compelled the upper castes to try new formations, particularly within the three upper *varna*-castes. The solidarity which emerged among these castes made them blur the demarcation as far as economic relations and co-habitation was concerned. In addition, the authority of scriptures has weakened in urban spaces. As a result a non-ritualistic identity has emerged. The globalization phase and constitutional measures have softened the ritualistic relations in terms of physical contact, inter-dining, intermarriages etc. But the interaction between the Dalits and the caste Hindus has hardly been altered sufficiently by the new developments except in the upper three *varna*-castes. Teltumbde (2010) notes: "As ritual identities shifted, some of the differences between the *dwija* and Shudra caste have virtually been dissolved though this collapse has not happened in the same degree when it comes to Dalits"(44). It seems to me that to understand caste system in its modern form, it is necessary to understand the pre-modern institutions called *Varnavyavastha*.

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[3] See Vivek Dhareshear. "Caste and the Secular Self." 1993. p115-126

*Varnavyavstha* is a very complex social institution. It means, in simple terms, the divisions of Hindu society into four orders—Brahmana, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The first three Varnas are known as 'twice born' and men of these castes are entitled to put on the sacred thread while the Shudras are not. The Ati-Shudras or untouchables are outside the *Varnavyavstha*.

'*Varna*' means colour. Originally, the term was used to distinguish between the Aryan and the *Dasa varna*. This distinction between *Arya* and *Dasa* later transformed into a distinction between *Arya* and Shudra. The hymns of the *Rig-Veda* clearly specify the divine origin of four *varnas*, as it says:

> When they divided *Purusha* (a cosmic being)…His mouth became the *Brahmin*, his two arms were made into the *Rajanya*; his two thighs, the *Vaishyas*, from his two feet the *Sudras* was born. (Fernandes *et al* 1999:12)

The hymn reinforces this hierarchy by placing one class above another anatomically; the Brahmins emerge from the mouth, and the Shudras emerge from the feet so the *Varnas* hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the *Varnas* were created. Each *Varna* has its own distinctive set of duties and functions to be performed and also carried out within society.

Thus, it is very clear that the Hindu society was divided into four *varnas* since the Vedic period. Moreover, Manu also contributed to the detailed stratification and functions of the four *varnas* in his 'infamous' work, *Manusmriti*. However, *Varna* is wider and vaguer than caste. It is from the *Varnas* that the castes have developed. Each *Varna* comprises of numerous castes and each caste has many sub-castes.

It is a difficult task to give a concise definition of caste. J. H. Hutton rightly says regarding this: "The truth is that while a caste is a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society and throughout India consistent enough to be immediately identifiable, the nature of the unit is variable enough to make a concise definition difficult" (Shah 2008). G. H. Ghurye also shared the same opinion in different words. He observes: "It appears to me that any attempt at definition (of caste) is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon." He indicates some important features as follows:

> Castes were groups with well-developed life of their own, the membership whereof, unlike that of voluntary associations and of classes, was determined not by selection but by birth. The status of a person depended not on his wealth as in the classes of modern Europe, but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he had the luck of being born (2000: 02).

However, Hutton and many others tried to define the term from the handy data they had. While defining the caste system Hutton drew on Risley's book, *The People of India* (1908) to help fashion his famous book *Caste in India* (1946). He says:

> ... a caste system is one whereby a society is divided into a number of self-contained and completely segregated units (castes), the mutual relation between which are ritually determined in a graded scale. (Hutton 50)

He further observes:

> '... a caste is an organism of lower type; it grows by fission and each step in its growth detracts from its power to advance or to preserve the art which it professes to practise' (51).

Later, caste was defined by M.N. Srinivas in the following way:

> '...a hereditary, endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local hierarchy of caste. Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs within the caste' (Srinivas 1962: 03).

The following features become evident from these definitions. The membership of a caste is determined by birth. A caste is an endogamous group of people. A caste preserves its art, means a caste adheres to its traditional occupation. The relations among different castes operate under the concepts of 'pollution and purity'. Thus, caste determines occupation and its hierarchy in the context of other castes.

Occupational theory considers the division of labour as the root cause of the caste system. Gradual progress in social and living conditions introduced the division of labour in primitive society. The division of labour was created primarily through an integrated process of different endogamous castes, each taking a particular occupation and using the barter system for their daily transactions within the caste and with other castes. A person's caste was determined by a person's occupation and not by birth. Each caste was a small social unit and its members were engaged in the same kind of business or service. They had their distinctive rites and rituals and common cultural background. Initially, it is believed, that this division of labour was not rigid and mobility was possible. As the society progressed the division of labour became more complex and consequently the number of castes increased. Gradually this division of labour became rigid and closed so mobility from one occupation to another and from one caste to another was first hampered and became quite impossible later. The division of labour is known all over the world but only in, what is today called the Hindu religion it is accompanied by caste organization. Occupational theory is used to claim a rational basis of the caste system yet it can't give convincing reasons for the inconsistencies between caste and occupation.

Occupations have played major role in the formation of the caste system. In the early Vedic age the members of a *Varna* were not compelled to follow only their own occupations. According to *Karma* norms, anyone could change one's *Varna*. A Brahmin could become a

Kshatriya, a Vaisya or a Shudra. In a similar way, a Shudra could also become a Brahmin, a

Kshatriya or a Vaisya but when *Varna* gradually began to assume the form of caste their basis

was made 'birth' instead of *Karma*. Hutton's views endorse this assumption. He says:

> The probability seems to be that in vedic times the *varna* were classes rather than castes, and that post-
> vedic scholars, looking for authority for the caste system in the earliest Vedas, have interpreted the nature
> of the *varnas* in terms of the caste system as they knew it (66).

Sunder Lal Sagar indicates 'birth' as a main feature of caste. He writes:

> The entire caste structure is based on birth. The membership of a caste means life-long membership. A
> man belongs only to that caste in which he is born. A man cannot change his caste from birth to death
> even if he has the good qualities of other caste. (1975: 46)

The moment limitations were imposed on occupational choice, *Varna* assumed the form of caste

and since then these continued increasing the number of castes. Inter caste marriages, both

*Anulom* and *Pratilom,*[4] are also one of the reasons for the formation of numerous castes. Thus, in

the modern Hindu society, the Varna refers "only to the broad categories and not to its real and

effective units" (Srinivas, in Khare 2009: 95).

The modern form of caste system is that of a complex social structure. It hardly fits in the

Varna frame.  Nowadays caste status is determined by its political and economic power. Castes

often compete among one another for acquiring such power. Each caste always tries to acquire

high ritual status also. The caste system now is more or less a rigid structure. It divides society

into closed, hereditary groups ranked by ritual status (Shah *et al* 2006). The caste system

provides its member a fixed social milieu from which "neither wealth nor poverty, success nor

disaster can remove him" (Hutton 111). It is unfortunate that the movement of caste has not

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[4] *Pratilom* marriage was marriage between a woman of a higher *Varna* and a man of a lower *Varna*. That was
considered as a step in the direction of anti-social spirit regarding the norms of *Varnavyavstha*. *Anulom* marriage
was marriage between a male of a higher *Varna* and a female of a lower *Varna*. This was seen as somewhat more
acceptable.

always been possible except in few cases. A member of a caste may be ostracised from his caste when he violates the standards of behaviour laid down by his own caste. The mobility of a caste is often considered in terms of *Varna* rather than in terms of caste. Many castes which earlier fell into the Shudra category now have acquired the position of Vaisya or Kshatriya.

In the modern times, the meaning of caste is not uniform and consistent. It varies as the political or economic or social purpose changes, though it has 'a specific social meaning, identifying person's place for everyday interaction' in the Hindu social order. Moreover, all Indians including Muslims, Christians and Sikhs have caste by birth as "an identity for social interaction". But the meaning of caste is not the same among Hindus and non-Hindus as in Islam, Christianity and Sikhism caste does not have a scriptural sanction (Shah 2008: 05).

The idea of hierarchy is omnipresent in the Hindu caste system. The concept of pure and impure determines the status in the caste hierarchy. The higher castes are considered pure. They maintain their purity by keeping them away from the lower castes in each and every social and religious ceremony. The lower castes are engaged in doing essential but impure jobs for the higher castes. The same concept, pure and impure, determines the ritual status of a caste also. Thus the distinction between pure and impure is the fundamental bases of the caste system. Louis Dumont argues:

> The principle of the opposition of the pure and impure underlines hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure; underlines separation because of the pure and impure must be kept separate; and underlines the division of labour because pure and impure occupation must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites. (Shah 2008: 07)

Dumont identifies three major features of the caste system—hierarchy, separation and interdependence. He goes further and subsumes all three features in one criterion— hierarchy.

Dumont argues that social life in India is dominantly governed by religious principles. The political and economic domains of life are dictated to by religious doctrine and the Brahmins represent the highest authority in interpreting them. They are articulated in the language of purity and impurity as said above. Brahmins are the highest in the scale while Shudras (the untouchables) represents the lowest. The other communities reside in between the two poles. This hierarchical structure is defined as the caste system. The Brahmins enjoy their supremacy over other communities by the sanction granted by the religious scriptures and the Shudras are subordinated on the basis of the same scriptural doctrines. The spiritual authority is considered to be higher than the political and the economic, so even the poor and culturally impoverished Brahmin enjoys the power of authority. The King, the political head of the region, is considered inferior to the Brahmin as far as spiritual or religious/social authority is concerned.

By contesting Dumont's conclusion, Nicholas B. Dirks (2014) argues that "Dumont's position in many ways caricatures the Orientalist assumption that India is the Spiritual East, devoid of history, untouched by the politics of Oriental despotisms"(25). Dirks, relying on his fieldwork, draws his arguments without separating religion and politics. He argues that the religious and political domains are not ontologically separated; the fundamental features of religious activities are related with the political system. He further argues that Kings, the political heads 'derive power from worship'. The King and the Brahmin derive power from the same ontological sources, religion. By giving the example of the relationship of Killar, the royal caste, and the Brahmins, Dirks discards Dumont's view on 'purity and pollution' and writes "purity and pollution are not the primary relational coordinates which endow hierarchy with its meaning and substance" (26). According to him, the forms and relations of power obliterate distinction between "materialist etics from culturist emics" (27).

Susan Bayly on the other hand argues that during the colonial period, the ruling castes got tremendous set back in their articulation of the caste norms. The British intervention altered the politics from the society and "created a contradictory form of civil society—with caste as its fundamental institution" (Dirks 27). The British regime became conscious of caste and systematically attempted to exploit the Hindu caste system to tighten its hold on the colonial subjects mainly after the 1857 mutiny (Bayly 2014: 68). Caste was generally seen as a preamble to the political influence. The British regime hardly attempted to establish an equal society. By ruling discretely, they preserved the caste practices prevalent in the society and did not intervene to disrupt it. However, the British judiciary did not give importance to the caste hierarchy. The Brahmins did not seem to have any major role to play in the day to day politics of the state but they did maintain their place at the head of the village-based system of exchange. The structures of power, according to Dirks, played a major role in "the process of hierarchization and in the formation of units of identity" (40). Thus, Dirks did not rule out the role of politics in the formation of caste hierarchy whereas Dumont considered the concept of purity and impurity as the key responsible factor for socio-political tendencies. It is believed that ancient Indian society had an idea of pollution, but it was not based on narrow criteria of birth. It was an individual affair. It might not be as eternal as the feeling of untouchability which is found in the Hindu society. At present, in many cases, Shudras may change their 'impure occupations' but they cannot keep themselves altogether away from the caste stigma.

Interestingly there are two diverse positions which prevail among the sociologists regarding the significance of caste. For instance, Henry Summer Maine, one of the founding fathers of the comparative sociology, condemned the caste system as "the most disastrous and

blighting of all human institutions"[5] On the other hand; Dumont defends the caste system and considers it worthy of serious study.

Moreover, the question of caste assumed considerable importance during the Indian freedom movement. Caste has a chequered history in the first half of the twentieth century in India. Its place in the independence movement was decided and assigned variously by people of different political persuasions. It was seen as a stumbling block in the major goal of achieving the independence (as in the case of Nehru). Others saw it as one of the many important issues to be grappled with in the course of the independence movement (as in the case of Gandhi). Still, others saw it as a central concept in the political and social life of the country, which was more important than even the independence of the country (as in the case of Ambedkar). The rest of the chapter considers the issue of caste as dealt with and interrogated by two of the most important political and social figures of the twentieth century India: Gandhi and Ambedkar.

**Gandhi and Caste:**

After returning from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram[6] near the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad from where he spread the message of Satyagraha and provided the leadership for the freedom movement. He attempted to minimize the barriers of caste by inviting a family of untouchables to live with the inhabitants of the Ashram who were mostly upper caste Hindus. Gandhi led his first anti-untouchability struggle in a very different manner in 1924. The untouchables of Vaikkom (also called Vaikham) in the province of Travancore were agitating for temple entry and for the use of the road next to the temple. Gandhi

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[5]  See T. N  Madan. " Louis Dumont and the Study of Society in India". Ed. R. S. Kahre. *Caste, Hierarchy and Individualism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.p47.
[6] Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram on May 25, 1915 in Ahmedabad at Kochrab, when he returned from South Africa, with 25 inmates. The Ashram was shifted on the bank of river Sabarmati in July 1917.

supported the movement and went to Vaikkom. He had to deal with the orthodox Brahmins and he experienced the intensity of their rigidity. Gandhi failed to make them realize that their belief had no bases. The agitation became the litmus test for Gandhi to decide how to deal with the problem of untouchability. He went there on 10 March 1925, debated with and confronted the Nambudri Brahmins. The rigid and staunch traditionalist Brahmins fiercely and shamelessly defended their ways of dealing with the untouchables. The Brahmins were not ready to compromise with the scriptural codes. Gandhi urged them to apply reason.

> Nambiatri: According to faith, according to Acharyas, we believe that they (the Untouchables) are born in the unapproachable caste by their bad *karma* in their previous birth. We have been enjoined by our Kerala Acharya to treat them in this manner…

> Gandhi: …… do not tie yourself down to some authority or some book which cannot be defended by reason. I ask you therefore to adduce reason and do not appeal to authority or custom. (*CWMG* Vol.26: 261-3)

The long debate between the Brahmins and Gandhi couldn't bring expected results but it did succeed in establishing Gandhi as a strong advocate for the cause of untouchables. His approach was even appreciated and acknowledged by Ambedkar as "Before Mahatma Gandhi, no politician in this country maintained that it is necessary to remove social injustice here in order to do away with tension and conflict, and that every Indian should consider it his sacred duty to do so…..even the sympathy shown by Mahatma Gandhi is of no little importance."[7]

Gandhi, as Bhiku Parekh observes, "seems to have thought that if he was to win them [upper caste Hindus] over, he had to earn their confidence and reassure that he was as much concerned to preserve Hinduism as the most orthodox among them" (Jaffrelot 2005: 17) Later in

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[7] See Eleanor Zelliot. *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*. New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Private Limited, 2013, p77. Print.

various public meetings and in writings Gandhi declared himself a *Sanatani* Hindu. He carried on his battle against untouchability "but did so in a manner so as not to offend the high castes" (Jaffrelot 2005: 17). C.F Andrews, a lifelong friend and dear companion of Gandhi observes that "the word *Sanatani*, with which he begins, means literally eternal or unchanging. It may be used to describe the Hindu orthodox position. Mr. Gandhi does not belong to any of the reforming sects of Hinduism. He is a conservative in religion" (Andrews 34). Gandhi's position, as far as the concept of the *Varnasharm Dharma* is concerned, was conservative and rather morally religious and strict. Gandhi put forward an 'innocent' and quite unconvincing argument in support of his belief in *Varnasharma Dharma*. He says:

> I believe that every man is born in the world with certain natural tendencies. Every person is born with certain definite limitations which he cannot overcome. From careful observation of those limitations the law of Varna was deduced. It establishes certain spheres of action for certain people with certain tendencies (2008: 249).

Here his argument seems obscure and does not find any solid ground of reason and morality. He justifies the hereditary character of the *Varna* system purely on the ground of unverified assumptions. The *Varna* of a person is predetermined before his/her birth even without noticing his or her 'tendencies' or 'limitations'. A person is allocated his/her parents' *Varna*. The question 'how one can know 'tendencies' and 'limitations' of an unborn baby?' creates scepticism. So the basic difficulty is that Gandhi, as it seems, attempted to hold a traditionalist position within a modern framework where he perhaps had to confront his traditional self and modern self quite often. He seems traditional while defining himself as a *Sanatani* Hindu, but he appears liberal in its interpretations.

While defining his own Hindu faith he says:

> I call myself a Sanatani Hindu because-

1. I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in Avataras (divine incarnation) and rebirth.

2. I believe in Varnashrama Dharma in a sense strictly Vedic, but not in its present popular and crude sense (Andrews 1988: 35).

He believed in *Varnashrma Dharma* and seemed to advocate it with certain liberal versions. He further says:

> The four divisions, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, define a man calling; they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse. The division defines duties; they confer no privileges. It is, I hold, against the genius of Hinduism to arrogate to oneself a higher status, or assign to another a lower status. All are born to serve God's creation— a Brahmin with his knowledge, a Kshatriya with his power of protection, a Vaishya with his commercial ability, and a Shudra with his bodily labour (Andrews 36).

However, Gandhi does not believe in the watertight compartments of the *Varnas*. He suggests that a Brahmin should not be "absolved from bodily labour" and a *Shudra* from acquiring knowledge. But many disagree with Gandhi when he says; "only he (Shudra) will best serve with his body, and need not envy others special quality for service" (Andrews 37). By his emphasising on following the codes of scripture, he conflates his liberal democratic position and traditional beliefs.

Gandhi was against the untouchability but not against the *Varnasharma Dharma*. He considers untouchability as an evil. He writes;

> It is a wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or of a crop because of the weeds. The outcasteness, in the sense we understand it, has therefore to be destroyed altogether. It is an excess to be removed, if the whole system is not to perish. Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is thus an attack upon this 'high-

and-low'-ness. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true Varnadharma, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each as necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other (2008: 250).

He was against the modern form of caste but not *Varna*. He believed that *Varna* "defines man's mission on this earth" (*CWMG* Vol.40: 275) (*Young India*, 27 Oct. 1927). He wanted to reform the prevailing social system and was interested in establishing *Varnashram Dharma* in its purest form as he understood it. For him, *Varnas* are "fundamental, natural, and essential" (*Young India*, 8 Dec.,'1920) (*CWMG* Vol.19: 83). What was 'natural' for Gandhi, as it seems, was not natural for many in any sense. On what basis were the *Varnas* established? The question is rarely answered satisfactorily. How can the *Vedas* preach inequality on the basis of birth? Moreover, in the modern democratic world, would *Varnashram* have a place? Would inequalities on the basis of religious scripture be accepted or tolerated?  For Gandhi, *Varnashram* was "the best remedy against pauperism" but at what cost, keeping a wide swathe of humanity at a stake and restricting them from natural progress by so called "fundamental, natural, and essential" codes. Gandhi didn't believe in inequalities but they were there mostly due to the unjust caste system. His position, as it seems, is contradictory.  At one level he preaches equality of all human beings and at another level he advocates Varna system which is responsible for many inequalities in the Hindu social structure. As he writes;

Assumption of superiority by any person over the other is a sin against God and man. Thus, caste, it so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil. I do, however, believe in *Varna* which is based on hereditary occupations. (*Young India*: 4 June, '31). (*CWMG* Vol.51: 256)

It should not be forgotten that *Varna* not only connotes but clearly indicates inequality in status of human beings also. The ritual and social status which is sanctioned by the *Varna* system

to the upper castes is a root cause of discrimination and segregation of the Shudras. When one justifies *Varnashram Dharma* and its occupational theory, he automatically supports the inequalities which have adhered to it and "leave little place for social mobility" (Jaffrelot 2005: 19). Since the Vedic period, we haven't witnessed *Varnashram Dharma* without its discriminatory codes. In the Vedas and also in the *Smritis*, the norms of discrimination had rigid and violent implications. It seems that *Varnashram Dharma* had never encouraged equality among the *Varnas*; it preaches hierarchy, the superiority of one *Varna* over the other.

Against his family norms of those days, as he often said, Gandhi believed in equality from his early childhood. He had to perhaps confront prevailing social and religious rigidity from his early life till his death. On various occasions he was tested, his integrity was put at stake but he proved himself a humanist Hindu by and large. His '*Sanataniness'* had ample scope of flexibility which he often exhibited in his actions and speeches. His ideas about caste evolved throughout his life. In the early1920s, he glorified the caste system. He said:

> I believe that the Caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institutions it has suffered excrescences… The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion, the better… (*CWMG* Vol.19: 83-84)

His focus was on abolition of the sub-castes not the caste system itself. He finds the caste system a force that helped Hindu society to remain an integrated society. He also praised the caste system on the basis of its indifferences towards economic criteria. He says, "The beauty of the caste system is that it does not base itself upon distinctions of wealth-possessed. Money, as history proved, is the greatest disruptive force in the world…" (*CWMG* Vol.19: 174). The ascriptive identity and hereditary occupation that a Hindu gets from his birth cannot be changed and for Gandhi this is the unique strength of Hindu social organization. There is absolutely no

scope of any caste mobility in Gandhi's scheme of thought. Gandhi is terribly blind towards the inherent inequality of castes which gives rise to unequal social order.

Going by Gandhi's logic, even the nation state could not intervene to reduce social inequalities of caste for the reason that the caste system borrows its legitimacy from religious doctrine. Gandhi has clearly marked the industrial revolution as it was developed in post-enlightenment period as symptomatic of the entire western civilisation. He criticizes the economic inequality unleashed by the industrial revolution which created different economic classes in Europe. He poses caste as a better organizing principle of society than that of class system based on economic inequality. Clearly, Gandhi is taking an anti-colonial stand here and is trying to prove that Indian principle of social organization is better than the European one. This has remained Gandhi's line of argument right from 1909 when he published *Hind Swaraj*. The problem with this kind of argument is that it just forecloses any kind of self-critique. Gandhi sees no problem in the caste system except untouchability. Moreover, he just does not concede that fact that caste system is inherently unequal and it creates unequal and hierarchical relationship within the society.

Gandhi used *Varna* and Caste in an overlapping manner. He did not elaborate the origin of caste and simply said "Whose origin I do not know". As a matter of fact, the caste is undoubtedly an extension of the Varna system. But the problem is that he finds many good things in the caste system so he wants to reform it but is not ready to abolish it. He says:

> I believe that if Hindu society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system... A community which can create the caste system must be said to possess unique power of organization... To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system... [The] hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder.... (*BAWS* Vol.9: 276)

He feared that if the caste system would be abolished, Hinduism would struggle to survive. He finds the caste system as a unifying force. Gandhi's adherence to the hereditary principle and calling it 'eternal' and 'soul' of the caste system seems to expose his inflexible position. It seems to me that to provide ample freedom to the people to follow whatever occupation they like does not create disorder but certainly offers liberty and freedom from 'impure' occupations. Gandhi might have glorified the 'impure' occupations like sweeping or scavenging but these occupations acquired the reputation of being 'filthy' among the general public. Thus, it was not possible to establish these menial jobs as a social value. It seems that Gandhi was not testing the principle of the caste system on reason and moral grounds but valued its antiquity in relation to Hinduism. Thus, he reveals his religious bias and does not allow psycho-social values of 'liberty and freedom' to enter at the cost of tradition. Moreover, by juxtaposing the Western European social system with the Hindu social order, he, as it seems, resists colonialism in the Hindu social sphere. To me it seems that by invoking the tradition of hereditary occupations, he attempts to protect the sanctity of the Hindu social order.  He said in 1925:

> There is no harm if a person belonging to one varna acquires the knowledge or science and art specialized 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.  The object of the varna system is to prevent competition and class struggle and class war. (*BAWS* Vol. 9: 277)

 People generally do not acquire knowledge which they do not put in to practice. Imagine if a Shudra learns rocket science and acquired competence in it and later he is forced to engage himself sweeping in the street as an occupation for his livelihood because it is his hereditary occupation, how absurd it appears! Gandhi's idea of the caste system does not offer any freedom

of occupation and does not provide any scope of liberation from the occupations which the untouchables do not like or do not want to follow.

However, in 1931 he changed his position, most probably after meeting Ambedkar. He said:

> I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress. Nor do I believe in inequalities between human beings. We are all absolutely equal. But equality is of souls and not bodies.... We have to realize equality in the midst of this apparent inequality. Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, in so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil. (*CWMG* Vol.46: 302)

It was the time he began to look at the caste system with utmost scrutiny. The evil sides of the caste system apart from untouchability are found their consideration in Gandhi's writings and speeches. Equality before God or equality of souls was nothing new to the Hindu religion; it had been in discussion since the commencement of the Bhakti movement. Many bhakti saint-poets preached equality of man before God. Equality before man was yet to be achieved, and the caste system was considered by many a major hindrance to it. Gandhi invokes equality before man but within the frame work of the *Varnavyavastha*.

Though his position on Varna was a matter of debate, his commitment to fight against untouchability was beyond any doubt. He was a committed warrior and fought bravely against untouchability. Once he wrote while emphasising his concern and suggesting his basic instinct against untouchability;

> Love of the people brought the problem of untouchability early into my life. My mother said. 'You must not touch this boy, he is an untouchable.' 'Why not?' I questioned back, and from that day my revolt began. (*CWMG* Vol. 68: 201)

He had to face certain problems while working with and for the untouchables but he successfully rose above such problems. He mentioned such an issue in *Young India:*

> I was wedded to the work for the extinction of 'untouchability' long before I was wedded to my wife. There were two occasions in our joint life when there was choice between working for the untouchables and remaining with my wife and I would have preferred the first. But thanks to my good wife, the crisis was averted. In my Ashram, which is my family, I have several untouchables and a sweet but naughty girl living as my own daughter. (*CWMG* Vol. 54: 47)

When he gave admission to an untouchable family in the Sabarmati Ashram he had to go through some difficulties from his mentors and friends. The stopping of monetary help from his mentors did not move him away, even for a moment, from his decision of allowing an untouchable family into the Ashram. He writes:

> We were prepared for all this. I had told my companions that, if we were boycotted and denied the usual facilities, we would not leave Ahmedabad. We would rather go and stay in the untouchable quarter and live on whatever we could get by manual labour. (2000: 365)

Gandhi, along with his traditional ideas of *Varnashram Dharma*, worked for and with untouchables wholeheartedly. For that he had to often face 'such trials'. Though he declared his faith in *Varnashram Dahrma*, he did not believe in rigid theory of 'purity and pollution'. His thoughts were somewhat radical. He believed that "removal of Untouchability does mean root-and-branch destruction of the idea of superiority and inferiority" (*CWMG* Vol.51: 199). He wrote:

> In this conception of the law of *varna* no one is superior to any other. All occupations are equal; and honourable in so far as they are not in conflict with the morals, private and public. A scavenger has the same status as a Brahmin. (2005: 58)

He challenged the concept of purity which was laid down by the caste system. He preached the equal status of all occupations. He dared to allow a *harijan* family live in the Sabarmati Ashram. As a consequence, he had to face strong oppositions from some of his fellow workers and his patrons. He believed that "the practice of untouchability is an excrescence on Hinduism" (2005: 93). Gradually he put forward his programmes to abolish untouchability.

Gandhi at a meeting in the Vidhyapith in Ahmedabad, urged the caste Hindus to apply their reason while practicing untouchability, he tried to persuade:

> I realize that it is difficult to overcome old prejudices. Those who see the practice of untouchability in the light of a prejudice and cannot get rid of it all at once have my sympathy. But I merely pity those who keep it alive because they think it is *dharma*. [...] It is dangerous to give credence to everything which may be said in the name of Hinduism or the *shastras*. (2005: 91)

When the whole society was obsessed with the concept of ritual purity and pollution, Gandhi broke this ritual law by doing those works which were considered low and polluting; cleaning latrines and weaving cloth. He made these pieces of work compulsory for all the members of the ashram. Thus, Gandhi "tried to bring honour and dignity to the menial occupation" (Fernandes *et al* 63). He tried hard to abolish the hierarchical status of division between mental and physical work. Gandhi's endeavour is considered symbolic behaviour. It seems that Gandhi had full confidence in his symbolic programmes to win the expected result. He challenged the mighty British Empire mostly through his symbolic programmes. His sitting at the Charkha, a fist of salt at Dandi and the burning of foreign goods had symbolic value; fortunately these programmes brought change. However, after Independence and in the growing capitalism, the rigid norms of occupation have lost their grip but the ritual status has remained unchanging. It generally does not consider any economic or social upward mobility as its entry point. It is uncomfortable to note that whatever an untouchable achieves through modern trade, the economic system or

through the education system he/she cannot move a step forward in the direction of his/her ritual status. It seems that Gandhi missed this point while discussing and implementing 'shudra work' in his Ashram and in his nationwide programmes. The point can be elucidated. A Brahmin boy who cleans the latrine in the Ashram does not have to face any problem in observing his ritual duty but an untouchable does whether he scavenges or teaches.

Gandhi felt that 'untouchability' was 'a rule of sanitation' and he was so simple in saying:

> In the inception, untouchability was a rule of sanitation and still is in all parts of the world outside India. That is to say, an unclean person or thing is untouchable but immediately his or its uncleanliness is shed, he or it is no longer untouchable. Therefore, a person who are to attend to scavenging, whether a paid *bhangi* or an unpaid mother, they are unclean until they have washed themselves clean of their choice unclean work. (*Harijan*, 11 Feb., 1933)

It was not possible for a *bhangi* to become acceptable even after washing himself thousand times. He cannot switch over to his ritual duty as a Brahman can after a tiny bath. Here lies the gulf of discrimination, a scavenger is a scavenger, and his profession is not of his choice or he does not enjoy any freedom but it was rather imposed by society with the support of scriptures. On the other hand, a Brahmin boy who attends scavenging work at an ashram has his freedom in accepting the duty of scavenging. He does 'unclean work' by choice, he may leave it but for an untouchable it is compulsion, he cannot escape.

Many Dalit leaders and activists often criticise Gandhi and his programmes of removing untouchability with hostility. They argue that he may have lived with untouchables but 'his shafts were directed' at the upper caste Hindus (Fernandes *et al* 63). They ridicule his political agenda and see malice in his Poona fast episode. However, his emphasis on the social unity of Hindus shows his concern for the larger cause, to present India as one nation before the British.

For Gandhi, the integrity of the Hindu society was "a central and emotional question" (Omvedt 2008b: 44). Gandhi's Poona fast was responsible for a spontaneous upsurge of feeling towards the untouchables. At many a place, temples, wells and public places were thrown open to the untouchables. It was an "emotional catharsis" through which the caste Hindu people went. The fast was intended by Gandhi "to sting the conscience of the Hindu community into right religious action" (*CWMG* Vol.51: 62).

> Jaffrelot rightly observed in his famous book, *India's Silent Revolution* (2005):
>
>> Gandhi's concern to avoid conflicts within Indian society basically reflects his organic vision of the caste system. This social model, idealised reference to the *varna* system, underlines his constant search for (re) conciliation. His concern for unity of society and of the nation finds its expression in his opposition to separate electorates for the untouchables, as Ambedkar had demanded. (30-31)

Under Gandhi's inspiration, Harijan Sevak Sangh was founded to eradicate untouchability, and a new weekly paper, *Harijan*, was started. Gandhi, on November 7, 1933, started his a nationwide campaign against untouchability. He travelled extensively for nine months for the cause and evoked great enthusiasm among the workers to abolish the curse of untouchability. His drive provoked the orthodox Hindu and a bomb was thrown at his party in Poona, but he was unhurt. He successfully transformed the political movement into the social movement.

**Ambedkar and Caste:**

S.V. Ketkar (1884-1937), a Maharashtrian Chitpawan Brahmin went to Cornell in America for a Ph.D. in political science. He published his *History of Caste in India* in 1909. Ketkar understood caste as based on *Varna* system and hails the authority of the *Shashtras* in

defining social relations. Moreover, he appreciates the Brahmins' effort in maintaining the caste system. He wrote regarding the sacred authority of Brahmins:

> The thankless task of guiding the people and preventing them from doing wrong fell, to a large extent, on spiritual authority… But with such a huge task before the Brahmans what power did they have? All that they had to rely on was their knowledge of the sacred literature, for which all people had high respect. (see in Dirks 2003: 244-245)

Ketkar also explains the gradations of social status and seems strongly committed to "a belief in the centrality of social precedence" on the basis of purity and pollution. In a way, he justifies the distinction based on pollution such as in the matter of acceptance of water, ceremonial purity etc. His defence of Brahmanism, as it seems, has its roots in offering resistance to the politicization of caste during the colonial period. In his defence, he hardly gives importance to empirical data regarding the lower strata of society. He argues against the empirical conclusions and blames the 'foreign power' for generating adverse opinions regarding the *Varnavyavastha*. He says: "The country is now fallen into the hands of 'casteless barbarians' and only formal precedence has remained" (Dirks 203: 245). His analysis of the caste system is from an upper caste position, particularly from a Brahmin position.

Later in 1916, B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), an Untouchable Maharashtrian went to America for his study and he also pondered on the issue of the caste system from a different perspective. Upendra Baxi calls Ambedkar an authentic Dalit on the basis of his 'lived experiences' that he underwent in his life. Baxi writes:

> The first Ambedkar that we may recall is the young student who bore the full brunt of the practices of untouchability- a young boy, who with his brother was denied on his way home in a bullock-cart a drop of water from evening till night; a young boy who was made to know that the razor of the barber would be defiled by contact with his hair while it could be used without fear of pollution in shaving buffaloes; a young schoolboy whose teachers would not touch his notebooks; a foreign returned Ambedkar required to

serve Baroda State for ten years, being denied any accommodation in Baroda, and denied minimum dignity even from peons in the office who thought it morally wrong to hand over files to him, which they simply flung at him! This is the Ambedkar who understood existentially what it meant to be an untouchable in India (1992:15).

Ambedkar during his life time played three major roles: as a leader of Mahars of Maharashtra, a spokesman of the Untouchable and a national statesman. In the first role, he guided Mahars and took certain decisions for them. In December, 1927, he addressed the Mahad Conference and demanded equality and abolition of caste. The denouncement of the *Manusmriti* and the agitation of the Chowdar Tank opened up the discourse of equality and emphatically challenged the hegemony of the caste Hindus. The historic importance of these events established Ambedkar as an undisputed leader of the untouchables. In the second role, he fought the case of the untouchables of India to influence the policies of the Indian National Congress and the British Government. He emerged as a leader of the untouchables and his voice had to be considered at various forums. In this role, he denounces Gandhi as an adversary of the untouchables. In the third role, he worked with a larger perspective. He engaged himself in policy making, drafting of the Constitution, and in working on the problems of labour and law. In his third role, he had to compromise with his own theories to come up with viable solutions of some issues; and Constitution drafting was one of them (Zelliot 2010: 53). In all three roles and quite before that when he was a student in America,[8] he dealt with the issue of caste and spoke and wrote on it elaborately.

Ambedkar's paper "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" expresses his initial thoughts on the issue of the caste system. At the outset he tries to locate the

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[8] Ambedkar read a paper on "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" before the Anthropology seminar of Dr. Goldenweiser in May 1916. ( Keer 29)

caste system in the context of the primitive versus the modern debate. He defines caste as one of the problems which has been "unexplained and un-understood". The problem, as he argues, is vast because of its theoretical and practical implications. Talking about its practical implications he highlights its "tremendous consequences" and expresses his concern that "if Hindus migrate to other regions on the earth, Indian caste would become a world problem" (Ambedkar 2009: 06). He concentrated on definitions of caste and on the issue of intermarriage—endogamy in the caste structure in the initial pages of his paper. He argued that "the superimposition of the endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste" (12). He suggested a repair in the disparity of marriageable units to resolve the problem of caste. Later in the paper, while discussing the development of caste, he argued that the priestly class— the Brahmins are largely responsible for the strict observance of many customs of the caste system and they were "originators of this 'unnatural institution' founded and maintained though these unnatural means" (21). He further argued that "They [Brahmins] may have helped the process by their glib philosophy, but they certainly could not have pushed their scheme beyond their own conditions" (23). He expresses his concerns towards the institution which provided the sanctity to the caste system. In analyzing the process of justification, keeping in mind the codes given by *Manusmriti*, he questions the motives of Manu, the law-giver of Hindu religion. He uses some severe adjectives for him like "an audacious person", "a dare-devil fellow", "a tyrant", "and a disembodied spirit". He also blames the humanity which accepted Manu's laws saying "the humanity that accepted his dispensation must be a humanity of quite different from the one we are acquainted with" (22). He considers Manu as an upholder and codifier of the existing reality. For Ambedkar, "Manu is not a matter of past. It is even more than a past of the present. It is a 'living past' and therefore as really present as any present can be" (*BAWS* Vol. 12: 718).

He believes that Manu philosophized the caste system but it was not possible to spread the caste system by "the power or cunning of an individual or a class". He argues that the spread of the caste system among the non-brahmin groups occurred through imitation. The non-brahmin groups, as he believes, must have imitated the Brahmins to "enjoy prestige" or due to "numerous and daily relations" (2009:28). By analyzing on the ground of imitation theory he arrives at a conclusion that "the whole process of caste-formation in India is a process of imitation of the higher by the lower" (28).

So the customs of the caste system percolated among the non-brahmin castes as "derivatives" and being a theocratic society, he argues, the society accepted the customs because they were justified and designed by the *Shastras*. He says:

> There is a strong belief in the mind of orthodox Hindus that the Hindu society was somehow moulded into the framework of the Caste System and that is an organization consciously created by the *Shastras*. Not only does this belief exist, but it is being justified on the ground that it cannot but be good because it is ordained by the *Shastras* and the *Shastras* cannot be wrong. I have urged so much on the adverse side of this attitude, not because the religious sanctity is grounded on scientific basis, nor to help those reformers who are preaching against it. Preaching did not make the caste system neither will it unmake it. My aim is to show the falsity of the attitude that has exalted religious sanction to the position of a scientific explanation. (2009: 23)

Ambedkar here questions the capacity of the Hindu society to reason. He feels that the Hindu society has accepted the religious sanctions regarding the caste system without questioning their unscientific values. He criticizes the attitude that surrenders to the *Shastra* without applying any faculty of reason. Moreover, he expresses his doubt over the act of preaching that was in practice by some reformers. He opines that preaching cannot 'unmake the caste system'. Later, in the

1930s, he extends his argument and hammers the immoral codes of the *Shastras* and eventually he suggests that they be burnt and destroyed.

His paper does not address the issue of the Depressed Classes directly neither it deals with the evil of untouchability. But the paper certainly questions the validity of the caste system in the modern society. He does not find any goodness in the observance of it. Unlike Gandhi, he neither sees it as a "unifying force" nor considers its organizational quality. Moreover, the paper intimates his further line of argument that he took in his dealing with Gandhi and in the *Annihilation of Caste*.

Ambedkar was influenced by three personalities— Buddha, Kabir and Phule. Dhananjay Keer writes, "…the life of Buddha, the teachings of Kabir and the struggle of Phooley contributed tremendously to the building of his personality" (2013: 475). His radicalism regarding social order has its roots in the teachings of these three figures. Ambedkar's family belonged to the devotional Kabir Panth which was a school of thought against the rigidity of the caste system. Keer notes that "To the followers of Kabir anybody who worshipped God belong to God irrespective of caste and birth" (9). Ambedkar's father, Ramji Sakpal was a friend and admirer of Jotirao Phule. He used to take interest in his activities. Ambedkar dedicated his book, *Who Were the Shudras?* to Jotirao Phule. Though he expresses his disagreement with Phule as far as his theory of the origin of the caste system is concerned, he shares his views that knowledge, education and science can be the weapons for the marginalized masses. Ambedkar's thesis indicates that the Shudras were Kshatriyas but because of conflict with the Brahmins they were debarred from performing the thread ceremony and eventually degraded to the Shudra *Varna*.

Returning to India after getting a degree in law from America, he joined the Sydenham College in Bombay as a professor and associated with Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. At the first Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur in 1920, he attacked the nationalist spokesman and declared his skill and presence of mind as a debater and a prospective leader. He started *Mook Nayak* in 1920 and frequently expressed his thoughts regarding Hindu society in it. He criticized the philosophy that allowed the animals and inanimate objects to be worshipped but did not allow the fellow Hindus (the untouchables) dignified treatment. In the pages of *Mook Nayak*, he criticizes the caste system by calling it a tower "Which had several storeys without a ladder or an entrance" in which one "was to die in the storey in which one was born" (Keer 41). In *Mook Nayak*, he also asserted his demand for equal treatment to the Depressed Classes in social, political, religious and economic matters. Keer writes:

> …it was not enough for India to be an Independent country. She must rise as a good State guaranteeing equal status in matters of religious, social, economic and political, to all classes, offering every man an opportunity to rise in the scale of life and creating conditions favourable to his advancement. (41)

Ambedkar's take on the caste system is well elaborated in his printed lecture *Annihilation of Caste*. This lecture which he was supposed to deliver at a gathering of the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal at Lahore in 1936 was cancelled due to the disagreement regarding its content. At this lecture, Ambedkar advocates inter-marriage and inter-dining. He writes:

> Caste System does not demarcate racial division. Caste System is a social division of people of the same race… What harm could there be if a mixture of races and of blood was permitted to take place in India by inter-marriages between different Castes? ... Inter-dining cannot infect blood and therefore cannot be the cause of either of the improvement or of deterioration of race. (Ambedkar 2008:18-19)

By advocating inter-marriage and inter-dining, Ambedkar attempts to weaken the caste customs and wants to blur the demarcation line among castes. Without social assimilation and interpersonal relations, it was not possible to create equality in the social status. Inter-caste marriages may play a significant role in it and inter-dining may erase the adherence of 'purity and pollution' in maintaining the caste's enclosed structure. Ambedkar, thus, demolished the so-called eugenic basis of the caste system. He says:

> …the Caste System does not embody the Eugenics of modern scientists. It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set in fashion and who had authority to force it on their inferiors. Caste does not result in economic efficiency. Caste cannot and has not improved the race. Caste has however done one thing. It has completely disorganized and demoralized the Hindus (2008: 20).

I think it is important to notice that Ambedkar, unlike Gandhi, considers the caste system, not a unifying force but a disorganizing force. He indicates that the caste system generates the hegemony of the few and eventually they become the dominant force in setting codes and imposing them on the lower classes. He also marks the caste system as an inefficient structure for material progress.

He devalued the caste system by testing it against the doctrine of the French Revolution. For him, the re-structuring of Hindu society was the demand of time. But Gandhi looked at this re-structuring as a colonial intrusion and refutes it by calling it the 'Western European social order'. By conflating the Western social order with the economic criteria, Gandhi presents a weak argument but it sets up an anti-colonial position. Gandhi wished to re-structure the caste system on the basis of *Varna Vyavastha*, but Ambedkar also found faults with it. He called

*Varna Vyavstha* "a leaking pot" or "a man running at the nose" that cannot sustain itself because "it has an inherent tendency to degenerate into a caste system" (Ambedkar 2008: 74).

For re-structuring, Ambedkar suggests that "the Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognize the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (74). So, to re-structure it is necessary to discard the authority of religious scripture because "the Hindus hold to the sacredness of the social order" and therefore to "destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested" it is inevitable to "destroy the authority of the *Shastras* and the *Vedas"* (2008: 49). It can be argued that Ambedkar's position here is extreme, and quite radical in the context of the contemporary social and religious structure. He himself feels it as "a stupendous task, well-nigh impossible". But he believes that the masses do not know what the *Shastras* are. They believe what they are told.  So, what the *Shastras* say and what they do not say is not much significant to the masses but what is prevailed upon by social traditions becomes a matter of observance for them. Ambedkar clears his position in the matter of destroying the *Shastras*. By destroying *Shastras*, he does not mean destroying the religion. He says:

> While I condemn a Religion of Rules, I must not be understood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion… when I urge that these ancient rules of life be annulled, I am anxious that its place shall be taken by a Religion of Principles, which alone can lay claim to being a true Religion (2008: 57).

Ambedkar argues that the business of a religion is to provide principles not rules. Rules limit the freedom whereas principles provide freedom to decide rules on the basis of principles. He says "Doing what is said to be, good by virtue of a rule and doing good in the light of a principle are two different things". Thus, in discarding the *Shastras*, Ambedkar wants to abolish the Hindu religious codes which create inequality and hierarchy in the social sphere. He emphasises on the

annihilation of caste through assaulting on Hinduism and its scriptural foundation. Moreover, his assertion of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' has religious base not political one but not in Hinduism but in Buddhism. Later in 1954, during a radio broadcast he says "Let no one however say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not…I have derived them from the teaching of my master, the Buddha" (Jaffrelot 2009:133).

Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar considers the Hindu religion at the root of the caste system. He says:

> People are not wrong in observing Caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of Caste, if this is correct, then obviously the enemy you must grapple with, is not the people who observe Caste, but the Shastras which teach them this religion of caste… The real remedy is to destroy the belief in sanctity of the Shastras (2008:47).

Along with scriptures he also attacks Brahminism. He notes that "Brahminism is the poison which has spoiled Hinduism. He says, "You will succeed in saving Hinduism if you will [sic] kill Brahminism" (61). Ambedkar's rejection of scriptures or Brahminism, the texts and their interpretations, comes from his understanding that legitimacy of the caste system comes from the scriptures themselves. The scriptures' adherence has made a segmented society and they do not allow other authority to prevail in the social sphere for any good cause that is removing untouchability. But Gandhi considers adherence to the scripture a basic conditions to be remained as a Hindu. Gandhi says:

> How can a Muslim remain one if he rejects the Quran or a Christian remain Christian if he rejects the Bible? If caste and *varna* are convertible terms and if *varna* is an integral part of the shastras which define Hinduism. I do not know a person who rejects caste i.e. *varna* can call himself a Hindu. (Ambedkar, Appendix I. *A Vindication of Caste*. 2008:72)

Moreover, the adherence to the scripture has limited the freedom of choosing occupation suitable to oneself. An ancestral calling, based on the caste system sometimes leads to poverty and starvation, or even it 'does not suit his capacities' but the scriptures do not allow the caste or a member to practice another calling. He says:

> If a Hindu is seen to starve rather than take to new occupations not assigned to his caste, the reason is to be found in the Caste System. By not permitting readjustment of occupations, caste becomes a direct cause of much of the unemployment we see in the country (2008:17).

Ambedkar strongly rejects the idea of adhering to an ancestral calling. He says that "To me his [Gandhi's] ideal of following one's ancestral calling is not only impossible and impractical ideal, but it is also morally an indefensible ideal" (2008: 80) and he adds that "Hindu society seems to me to stand in need of a moral regeneration which it is dangerous to postpone"(2008: 86). Gandhi overlooks social dimensions and attempts to apply metaphysic by saying that "God recognises all service as equally meritorious". But Ambedkar does not consider equality before God as a valid justification for the inequality in society.

Ambedkar looks at reforms from the perspective of individual freedom. For him the individual is more important than the social group. A person must be free to follow what he thinks right in the context of reason and morality. Religion often overshadows reason, and does not allow an individual to follow his/her own moral codes but creates an impasse for him/her by the codes which are rather irrelevant and immoral in the present context. He says:

> The assertion by the individual of his own opinions and beliefs, his own independence and interests as over against group standards, group authority and group interests is the beginning of all reforms… No wonder individual Hindus have not had the courage to assert their independence by breaking the barriers of caste. It

is true that man cannot get on with his fellows. But it is also true that man cannot do without them (2008:29).

Ambedkar's assertion of individuality, later leads him, while drafting the constitution, to define an individual as the smallest unit of the nation. Here, he defines the role of an individual within the group. He accepts the existence of a group or collective living but values more the individual rights, rights to assert opinions and beliefs. A member of a group can make changes in the group only when he asserts his interest over authority and standards of the group. Moreover, reform is not possible unless it is asserted by an individual at personal level. So, for reform, liberty or freedom within the group provides courage to an individual to break the barriers.

Gandhi considers Ambedkar the "most uncompromising exponent [of the anti-caste movement] and one of the ablest among them. He is certainly the most irreconcilable among them". He also confesses that "what he [Ambedkar] says is voiced with more or less vehemence by many leaders belonging to the depressed classes" (Ambedkar 2008:67). However, looking at India and her social, religious, political and economic spheres from Ambedkar's perspective would give a perspective from below. This is quite different from Gandhi or Ketkar's perspective which seems to me comes from a position above.

Moreover, the contemporary critique of caste, by and large following Ambedkar, accepts caste as a reality and tries to devalue and destabilize its hegemony on everyday human affairs. Gopal Guru says that "the liberal spirit of inquiry and self-doubt motivates people to question their location in the hierarchical spaces…"[9] Guru looks towards modernity, rather with hope, and specifically its faculty of reason, to offer certain points of negotiations with the caste system.

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[9] Gopal Guru. "Experience, Space and Justice." *The Cracked Mirror*. Gopal Guru and Sundar Surukai. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. p79.

Guru is important in the theorizing of caste today and his theorizations have a trajectory over a period of time. From giving primacy to reason over emotion for Dalit theorization, he has come to balance reason with emotion. Recognizing the pitfalls of the untrammelled march of modern rationality, he advocates a more productive synthesis of reason and emotion in order to propose a more informed theorization of Dalit politics.

D. R. Nagaraj too proposes an approach of synthesis while looking the caste system. He reveals the inherent paradox in Indian philosophy to mark the apparent injustice in the religious sanction of the caste system. He says: "The religious imagination of the Indian is so fertile that it responds even to the oceans beneath the earth. But when it comes to the concrete situation of social segregation such as the caste system, apathy is the response"[10]. Nagaraj juxtaposes the Hindu concept of cosmic love and the caste based social segregation; and appeals to wipe out the inherent difference that causes injustice and limits the human liberty.

Gail Omvedt develops her own perspective to counter the evils of the caste system. She seeks the unity of the Shudras and the Ati-Shudras to overcome 'self-debilitating conditions' and to create independent movement. She also perceives Hinduism as a Brahminical construct and considers Brahmanism responsible for imposition and continuation of the caste system.[11] Kancha Ilaiah redefines the caste system in a binary of productive and non-productive castes, and locates the Shudra castes in the productive category. By categorizing the upper caste- Brahmins, Baniyas and Kshatriyas as non-productive castes, Ilaiah does two things: firstly, he deconstructs the very base of the hegemonic position of caste Hindus by assigning them a non-productive status in

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[10] D. R. Nagaraj. *Listening to the Looms*. Ed. Prithvi Datta Chabdra Shobhi. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012. p317. Print.
[11] Gail Omvedt. *Dalit Visions.* New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2008. Print.

society.[12] Secondly, he seeks to subvert the hegemony of the upper caste by giving primacy to the category of productive over the non-productive, that is, Shudras over the three caste Hindus. The contemporary critique along with Gandhi and Ambedkar's views, perhaps will offer an understanding of Dalit literature

When we attempt to understand the Dalit Movement and Dalit literature, it becomes inevitable to invoke Gandhi and Ambedkar—their ideology, their politics and their priorities, along with modern critiques on caste because, as Thomas Pantham puts it: "Despite basic difference between, and serious conflicts over, their practical-political strategies, both shares a genuine and deep commitment to the eradication of untouchability" (2011: 179). Dalit literature, all over India and in Gujarat particularly, often thematizes and borrows from Gandhi and Ambedkar's ideological differences and political standpoints. Gujarati Dalit poetry follows the arguments presented by both Gandhi and Ambedkar in both implicit and explicit ways. Thus, Gujarati Dalit poetry enlivens the past in the contemporary social and political context.

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the major issues regarding caste from different perspectives. Gandhi and Ambedkar seem to be the most prominent. However, there are other thinkers who are more contemporary whom I have considered such as D. R. Nagaraj, Gail Omvedt, Gopal Guru and Kancha Ilaiah etc. I hope that by engaging with these thinkers on caste; a necessary and sufficient framework for studying Gujarati Dalit poetry is in place.

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[12]  Kancha Ilaiah. "Caste and Contradictions." *Economic & Political Weekly* vol. 29  No.43, 22 Oct. 1994, 2835-2836. Print