



B.R Ambedkar's view on Untouchability: A Comparative Discussion With Special Reference to Mahatma Gandhi

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Abstract: There is no question of doubt that humans are the superior agents in the globe by virtue of possessing humanity and rationality. Humans have the ability to judge what is good or bad, what is right or wrong and what one ought to do and not ought to do. Humans are autonomous and their autonomy is guided by their rationality. Since humans are rational, self-realization is the key of humans. But when we come to know that there underlies some discrepancies or inequalities in the society. Having no rational and scientific basis, then surely humans' rational position puts under scrutiny. So, the object of my paper is to explain and examine why the so-called untouchability is the root cause for breaking Human Rights in India from eighteenth century and till today. Untouchability was prevailing in barbaric fashion during eighteenth century onwards and it is prevailing till today in our society in many ways. The intellectual class of the present Indian society actually plays dual roles. In public places they are used to state that the concept of untouchability has no rational basis and it should be eradicated in its all forms from the society. However, they play different role in their practical life. There is no scientific, rational or constitutional basis of untouchability. The so-called untouchability that we witness in India is a social issue based on prejudices. It is true that, everyone has its own choice and there is nothing wrong in it. But why is individual choice voiced not in terms of individual's quality but in terms of caste and religion? If everything is determined in terms of the *Varna* and *caste* systems irrespective of the quality of individuals, then it would be the greatest blunder of the present society where we are going to establish Human Rights.

Keywords: Untouchability, B.R Ambedkar, Human Rights, Mahatma Gandhi, Religion, Hinduism, Rationality.

Introduction: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was indeed a great man in the real sense of the world. A visionary statesman, a creative thinker, an incisive analyst, and an extraordinary student of history, economics, sociology, philosophy and politics, he conducted relentless struggle against the denial of social justice, economic opportunities and human dignity to the submerged humanity throughout India. He struggles, all through his life to establish a new social order based on principles of liberty, equality and universal brotherhood. For a proper understanding of modern India, and our present day problems, it is essential to look at our surrounding whether there is anybody who is unjustifiably and inhumanly humiliated by anybody. Unfortunately some castes belonging to Hindu society were considered untouchables and this practice is completely irreligious, inhuman, and irrelevant and not unsupported by the Hindu Scriptures. It is well known to all of us that, untouchability was prevailing in barbaric fashion during eighteenth century onwards and it is

prevailing till today in our society in many ways. The intellectual class of the present Indian society actually plays dual roles. In public places they are used to state that the concept of untouchability has no rational basis and it should be eradicated in its all forms from the society. But they play different role in their practical life. Thus, untouchability is not something manifested in outer gesture, it is something lies within. They feel that untouchability is a social evil and no one can support it. There is no scientific or rational basis of untouchability. Untouchability has no constitutional basis. The so-called untouchability that we witness in India is a social issue based on prejudices. In fact everyone has its own choice and there is nothing wrong in it. But why is individual choice voiced not in terms of individual's quality but in terms of individual's caste and religion? There is no question of doubt that no community or society or country can develop without mutual understanding and interpersonal communication. In this regard, relations hold the key, an important key of uplifting the society. If everything is determined in terms of the *Varna* systems irrespective of the quality of individuals then it would be the greatest blunder of the present society. It would really be a disgrace to the Indian society when we come to know even today that a section of people is being deprived from their basic needs simply because they are belonging to particular castes.

What is the basis of untouchability? Does it make sense to say that state is responsible for this? In fact one should not blame the state. The concept of untouchability is not a legal concept nor even be a concept that can be solved legally. It is rather a social concept that cannot be solved politically. On the contrary, the concept of caste system has been politicized. Thus, instead of solving this problem the political system of India actually lingers it. This was so happened in the past and it continues at present as well. Who can ignore the tussle between Ambedkar and Gandhi regarding the perception of untouchability? Ambedkar approaches a scientific analysis of religion and criticizes the spiritualistic form of religion. In this regard, he rejected Hinduism. For Ambedkar so long Hinduism as a religion stands, untouchability will prevail in the society. Contrary to Ambedkar, Gandhi favours Hinduism and also the caste system of Hinduism. Accordingly, Gandhi did not agree with Ambedkar as far as the concept of untouchability is concerned. Now the question is what is the basis of untouchability? Is it something that runs with scientific justification? Why it is still persisted in society? Is it something that can be legalized? These are the questions amongst many others need to be addressed here. In fact untouchability is a social and religion sanction runs with the name of religious verdict. Religion is the foothold in every society. In Hindu religion there are some rigorous strictures which support the *Varna* system. In fact, the *Varna* system as authenticated in ancient India subsequently functioned as the larger framework within which the caste society was formed. It was witnessed from the Rig Veda that the origin of human race was the outcome of four *Varna* systems. It is said that at the time of creation, the *Brahman* were born from the mouth of *Purusa* (the Primeval Man), the *kshatriya* from His arms, the *vaisya* from His thighs, and the *sudra* from His feet. In fact Rig Veda is the most important scripture of Brahmanism through which the so-called *Varna* systems are socially legalized. So when we search the origin of untouchability we find that it was the Vedas in general and Rig Veda in particular

which actually advocated the riddles of inequality among various Hindus in the name *Varnas*.



According to the “Rig Veda” the oldest of four Vedas, the distinction of the four Varna’s dates back to the origin of the human race:

**"Brahmana Asaya, Mukham Arita, Bahu Rajanya Krita,
Uru tatta, yatta vaishya Patvayam, Shudra Ajayata."** (Rig Veda X90,12)

That is to say at the time of creation, the Brahmin was born from the mouth of the purusha (the primeval man), the Khatriya from his arms, the vaishya from his thighs, and shudra from his feet. Nevertheless, in order to analyze and justify the origin of untouchability, it becomes imperative to examine the religious texts, travelers account etc, of the ancient time. On the order by creation it is shudra, who is born last. They were the lowest in the Hindu system. However, according to Rig-Veda untouchable lies outside the Varna system. According to the Vedas the Brahmins as the beholder of highest *Varna* systems earned the right to take up the positions of priest and teacher of the *Vedas*; the *kshatriyas* the second beholder of *Varna* systems took up the responsibility of politics as well as military; the *vaisyas* occupied the rank of cultivators, herders and merchants and finally the so-called *sudras* engrossed to the position of servants. According to the Vedic systems the first three *Varnas* were the regular members of the Aryan society and were known as *dvijati* (twice born). They were allowed to take part in religious workshop as prescribed by the Brahmins. On the other hand, the *sudras*, being the fourth caste, were segregated from the *dvijati as ekajati*. The difference between *dvijati* and *ekajati* is that those who belong to *dvijati* have earned the right to second birth- one from their mother wombs and the second birth was the initiation ceremony into the Vedic studies known as *upanayana* which they performed while they were young. On the contrary, *ekajati* were born only once from their mothers. They had no scope of doing *upanayana*. Barring these four *Varnas* or more specifically below the *sudras*, a class of inferior people known as *chandals* or untouchables were existed. Thus it appears that the so-called Vedic systems actually gave birth social discrimination in ancient India and this trend had been transmitted to the medieval period and even been persisted to the present society as well.

The Varna or caste of an individual is not determined by birth, but by psychological inclination and the profession determined accordingly. In the *Bhagavat Gita* this fact is classified by the great ‘Yogin’ Krishna, who by virtue of having true knowledge of Brahman identified himself with God. Krishna says:

"Chaturvarna Maya sristam
Gunakarma vibhagasha" (Gita 4/13)

But the rational basis of untouchability actually hinges on the selection of Hinduism on one hand and the scientific outlook and rational investigation on the other hand. Ambedkar supports the scientific interpretation of the concept of untouchability. For Ambedkar a person should be measured not in terms of the caste and religion in which he belongs to, but in terms of the quality and education he possesses. So it is wrong to run with the conviction that untouchability is an accredited religious sanction which must be abided by the every religious person having faith on Hinduism.

How can we overcome untouchability: Although the issue of untouchability is unanimously condemned by all, it is still prevailing in the society not in the same sense as Dr B.R.Ambedkar himself had been suffered, but in an invisible way one can easily realize if he is conscious of it. How can we overcome the concept of untouchability? Fortunately, we have already overcome the dark age of untouchability. In the past untouchables were identified by physical appearance because at that time some physical bars were imposed on untouchables in terms of their dress, food, cloths etc. Equally, the upper caste was so vocal in favour of untouchability. However, in the course of time there we notice a drastic change as far as untouchability is concerned. The same has happened in other parts of the world. This is the blessing of civilization. Thus, untouchability in most Indian states is not visible in barbaric fashion. An untouchable does not find any difficulty when he travels by bus or train. He may not find any problem to take food with others belonging to higher castes. These are good signs. But at the same time when we come to know that there are some societies where untouchability is a cause of concern, then we feel disgrace ourselves as the most intellectual representative of the globe. Untouchability is not something prevailing only in India. Historically, untouchability was prevailing elsewhere in the globe. Untouchability is there in South Africa, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and most of the countries where religion is the key of determining the social status of the individuals. However, the fate of untouchables in India was miserable than other parts of the world. In fact, India was the badly affected country as far as untouchability is concerned. In India untouchability is understood in terms of behaviour based on the concept of pollution and it has religious and secular sanctions. It is conceived that untouchables would remain untouchables by virtue of their deeds in the previous birth. Ironically, both Hindus as well as the untouchables are socialized in this belief. Where such belief comes from? Is it something present in Hinduism? Or is it something that has been injected by the so-called dominant class? According to Ambedkar Hindu religion in which he belongs to is the culprit of promulgating inequality among humans. We examine the Manusmriti's standpoint in due course. There are plenty of remarks which would actually create a great amount of distrust and inequality among castes. The social position of untouchables was miserable, they were basically right less. An untouchable has to perform many duties without enjoying any rights. Untouchability in fact even goes beyond colonialism. During colonialism a movement was created in order to overcome it, but there was no

movement against untouchability before the appearance of B.R.Ambedkar. It was Ambedkar who in fact protested and revolted against untouchability. The number of untouchability is not small, millions of people were considered to be untouchable. The question is: why were they not protested? Is it true that they are not aware about their Rights? They did not protest simply because due to some social and religious constraints they had been somehow or other convinced that they were untouchable. Colonial form of exploitation was revolted in terms of national freedom and there were no social and religious constraints. But the so-called untouchables were economically brittle, educationally illiterate, and culturally backward. They had no right to say anything; they had been compelled to believe that they were untouchables. Thus, the concept of untouchability is not something that can be eradicated by passing a bill in the parliament. As a social and religious issue, such problem can only be overcome by implementing a revolutionary change in Hinduism. Ambedkar throughout his life failed to do so. Even Gandhi did not agree with Ambedkar to change the caste system of Hinduism. Only time will tell whether untouchability can be removed from the Hindu society or not.

Ambedkar and Gandhi on Untouchability: The conflict between the Gandhi and Ambedkar is not ideological; it is essentially philosophical reflecting antagonistic views on how to order human life. It is this aspect of the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar that most commentators and critics lose sight of and therefore fail to see the cosmic drama played out in the microcosmic event of the movement of *harijan* uplift. As a result, they offer seemingly credible but really highly distortive interpretations of the political relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar. The bone of contention that put Gandhi and Ambedkar in politically opposing camps was the issue of untouchability, the bane of Hindu society that for several millennia, has kept millions of people in the shackle of poverty, exploitation and oppression. Gandhi view of the problem of untouchability is basically a religious and spiritual one. He wanted the *harijan* to remain within the Hindu fold. He took recourse to reforms as a means of not only improving the socio-cultural position of the untouchables but also of ridding the evils polluting Hindu society and purifying the conscience of the Hindus. That is why he put emphasis on opening up those traditional avenues that had been closed to the untouchables. That is why he opposed the Poona pact so vehemently because, as he saw it, it paved the way for the division of the Hindu society. Gandhi insistence on temple entry thus combined two objectives. It was meant to open up the temples for the untouchables as well as to convert the orthodox Hindus to the belief that it is wrong to prevent *harijan* from entering temples and to treat them as pariahs. Ambedkar on the contrary, did not want the untouchables to accept and play the role that this script assigned to them. He saw them as persons, who freed from the shackles of the Hindu society, would enjoy freedom and equality and shape their own destiny. He therefore sought to build an independent political identity for the untouchables in the structures of social, economic and political powers. The building of such an identity involved doing away with the caste system all together since it was humiliating for the untouchables. Ambedkar never budged from the position that nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system. Ambedkar refused to accept Gandhi's

religious and spiritual approach to the problem of untouchability and insisted on treating it as a civil right issue. The approach of Gandhi and Ambedkar for the removal of untouchability was diametrically opposite. Gandhi firmly believed that untouchability should be removed by change of heart by Hindus. Ambedkar emphatically felt that it cannot be removed only by change of heart. He insisted on safeguards and political rights for his people. Gandhi felt that he was a natural guardian of untouchables, whereas Ambedkar said that he was the natural leader of untouchables. The inclusion of so called untouchable into the mainstream was argued for by many social reformers. Mahatma Gandhi called the „*h a r i j a n s*’ (people of god). The term *dalit* (downtrodden) is used now as the term *harijan* is largely felt patronising. Gandhi's contribution towards the emancipation of the untouchables is controversial. This is usually highlighted by the commentary of his contemporary Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, an untouchable himself. Ambedkar was deeply suspicious of Gandhi's motivations and frequently saw his activities as detrimental to the cause of upliftment of his people.

How Human Rights can be established in our Society: Ambedkar wants an ideal society or a casteless society based upon the principle of justice. In his own words, the ‘ideal would be a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity’. While giving the meaning of justice, he said, ‘Justice is simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity.’ Therefore to understand Ambedkar’s vision of a ‘just society’ we have to understand the meaning of these three expressions, i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity. According to Ambedkar the existing social order based upon the Hindu classical religion is vitiated by evils and hence he asked for a complete change. Instead of caste based society, Ambedkar wanted an ideal society based on two principles. The first is that here the individual is an end in himself and that the aim and object of society is the growth of the individual and the development of his personality. Here society is not above the individual and if the individual has to subordinate to society, it is because such subordination is for his betterment and only to the extent necessity. The second essential is that the terms of associated life between members of society must be regarded by consideration founded on liberty, equality and fraternity. According to Ambedkar in the caste based Hindu society an individual has no place, whereas in the just society, individual is the final end. Moreover in the caste based society a person’s relationship with the member of his or her class or with the members of other classes were already fixed, but in just society as envisaged by Ambedkar, these relationship have to be based on liberty, equality and fraternity. Here the demand on the society is to protect the individual’s human rights. Ambedkar inclined to say that any good social order or society has to go through the two tests namely, *the test of justice* and *the test of utility*. Besides these two essential principles, one of the most important components was *justice* or *the principle of justice*, because the norm or the criterion of judging the right and wrong in the modern society is *justice* or in another name for liberty, equality and fraternity. Therefore to understand the real nature of the just society, we have to know the meaning liberty, equality and fraternity.

On the basis of the above observation, it becomes clear that Ambedkar was not just a critic or a person having some new ideas. In his analysis of the existing social order based on the caste, he was very clear what evils it carried, he was also very clear about *justice* as the basis of his alternative society. Again at the end regarding how to establish an ideal or just society, he was very clear. For Ambedkar the *Varna* system was the basis of the existing Indian social order and it was this system, which was responsible for all the evils of the existing order. He talked about the annihilation of caste, but he was very clear that it is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on what it, the caste system is founded. This was only possible through revolution, but not through a simple reformation. Ambedkar said that ‘you must give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion – a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity in short, with Democracy. It gives a complete change in the fundamental notion of life. It means a complete change in our look and in attitude towards men and things. It means conversion, i.e. a new life. New life can enter only in a new body. The old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it. To put in simple, the old must cease to be operative before the new can begin to enliven and to pulsate. That is why Ambedkar insisted to discard the authority of the *Shastras* and destroy the religion of the *Shastras*.

According to Ambedkar liberty, equality and fraternity are the foundation of social justice. Ambedkar understands fraternity in terms of democracy. For him democracy is not merely a form of government, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoin communicated experience. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. This is fraternity. Fraternity thus is the name for the disposition of an individual to treat man as the object of reverence and love and the desire to be in unity with his fellow beings. Fraternity strengthens sociability and gives to each individual a stronger personal interest in practically consulting the welfare of others. It leads him to identify his feelings more and more with their good. With a disposition of fraternity, he comes closer to one who of course pays a regard to others.

The term ‘equality’ means exactly the same or equivalent in value or quality. Equality may be a fiction but nonetheless one must accept it as the governing principle. Liberty is essential for social justice. Liberty falls under two classes, such as, civil liberty and political liberty. Civil liberty refers to liberty of freedom, liberty to speech and liberty of action. Political liberty consists in the light of the individuals to share in the framing of laws. Political liberty is really a deduction from the principle of human personality and equality. According to Ambedkar the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity when taken together, form an ethical standard by means of which we can measure what an individual does, what a society thinks, and what a nation aspires for. Hinduism fails to ensure it. Only Buddhism ensures it. Therefore, justice for the downtrodden is retained only in Buddhism. That is why Ambedkar ultimately shifted from Hinduism to Buddhism.

Ambedkar prefers religion conversion because he believes that Hinduism stands against Humanism and Social justice. Hinduism was separated from morality. It had

generated and became corrupt. The morality as found in Hinduism is not based on values like equality, liberty and fraternity. Hindu religion does not accept the principle of equality and brotherhood in general behaviour. Hinduism is destructive for humanism and social justice. Hinduism teaches one man to hate another. Ambedkar one says, "I am a snake in their garden". Even Gandhi warns and said to the Hindus, "You cannot neglect Dr. Ambedkar." For Ambedkar caste system stands as a barrier to social justice, because in the society every caste is limited to itself. Their thinking and way of living may be one and the same. Accordingly, they are not one society, nor one nation. Therefore, without eradicating the caste system it would be ridiculous to seek social justice in Hinduism. No caste can maintain social justice, social purity according to Ambedkar.

We will find that there are some other contemporary great thinkers with whom Ambedkar had disagreed. In this regard the front controversy between Ambedkar Vs Mahatma Gandhi/Untouchables Vs Horizon is particularly relevant. We think that both Ambedkar and Gandhi have involved in serious discussion regarding this issue of untouchability. Ambedkar uses the term untouchables and on the other hand Gandhi uses the term Horizon. Gandhi was a firm believer of Hinduism and Ambedkar was a firm disbeliever of Hinduism. But both of them have contributed a lot for the betterment of the downtrodden people. Therefore the comparison between Ambedkar and Gandhi deserves philosophical consideration. *Katha Dance* Theater presents Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated dance- drama *Chandalika* the untouchable maiden at the *Ritz Theater*. *Chandalika* is an examination of the marginalized women, untouchables, idealists and dreamers that have been found in societies throughout history and still today. It is a story of discrimination and spiritual conflict that touches on everything from self-confidence, self-respect and marginalization to love salvation and selfishness and self-realization. Rabindranath Tagore or simply Rabindranath as he is known in India was born into an affluent and brilliantly talented Calcutta family. Despite the fact that the family was an outcast Brahmin one, belonging to the group called pirali *Brahman – Brahmins* who had been made ritually impure by some times forced contact with the Moslems- the dynasty he founded gave Bengal and all of India some of its most prominent painters, poets, musicians and religious leader. Dwarkanath's own views were radical; his wife left him, for example, because he had violated Hindu practice by eating meat. Tagore's father, Debandranath was outstanding in fields of learning ranging from mathematics to ancient scripture and was a man of profound religious concern. He was one of the founders of the religious society called the *Brahma Samaj*. Among Tagore's works his novels are among the least-acknowledge. In *Rather Rashi*, Tagore wants to shows the caste base conflicts among the Hindus.

Concluding Remarks: Having been discussed the thought of Dr. Ambedkar, it became clear that he was a rationalist and not against Hindu religion But he was against the religion which teaches one man to hate another. He accepted that the religion teaches the lesson of equality and brotherhood but the Hindu religion did not accept the principle of equality and brotherhood in general behavior. The universal declaration of human rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations includes the rights of the education, the right to choose one's own marriage

partner, the right to vote, and hold public office and the rights to receive equal pay for equal work etc. All these rights were not guaranteed to the untouchables, as such in India. No attempt was made to strengthen respect for human rights or fundamental freedoms. Therefore no proper atmosphere was created to promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among the Hindus. That is why Ambedkar's great declaration is that- "unfortunately, I was born a Hindu, it was beyond my power to prevent that, but I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu." The centrality of the caste question in Ambedkar's thought cannot be over emphasised. He believed that untouchability was an expression of caste system. Therefore, Ambedkar chose to study the caste system and critically analyse the justification it received from Hindu scriptures. His thought does not deal merely with removal of untouchability which was but one part of the anti-caste movement. He was also concerned with the overall annihilation of caste. Gandhi, of course, was in favour of abolition of caste-based discriminations. In personal conduct too, he did not practise caste. But caste question does not occupy a place of urgency in his thought. He tended to emphasise untouchability more than the caste question. For Gandhi, untouchability formed the core of caste system. Once untouchability was removed, there will be no caste system. Gandhi was right in identifying untouchability as the most abhorring expression of caste-based inequality and attendant in-humanity. Gandhi and Ambedkar would have agreed on as many issues as they would have disagreed upon. They could not find much ground for co-operation and collaboration. In popular perception and in the perception of many of their followers too they remained opponents. Both indulged in verbal duels in order to expose the weaknesses of each other's thought and actions. Gandhi, as a believing Hindu, felt that Hinduism needed to be reformed of the excrescence of untouchability. Ambedkar, on the contrary, was convinced that the problem was a part of Hinduism and was enshrined in its sacred scriptures. Movements for social transformation are based on emancipator ideologies. At the present juncture in the Indian society we find that movements for social transformation are weak and localised. Further, the dominant discourse today does not believe in the project of emancipation. In this context it becomes necessary to tap the possibilities of re-alignment of emancipator ideologies. It would be inadvisable to be persuaded by the exclusivist claims of any ideology to the project of emancipation. The path of Gandhi and Ambedkar while often diverged, ultimately converged, forcing on the Indian conscience the problem of untouchability as an issue of national importance. Whatever the position of the untouchables has today in Indian society, it is the genuine efforts made by Gandhi to change the Hindu heart and the constant attacks made by Ambedkar on Hindus and Hinduism.

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