

# GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

## Siddhartha

### Diverging perceptions in the struggle against oppression

Among those who contributed to the social advancement of the Harijans, Gandhi and Ambedkar are the most important. The former came from a caste of Vaishya status, while the latter was born into an Untouchable caste; the former approached the problem from the standpoint of an upper caste Hindu who wanted to rot out Untouchability from the fabric of society, the latter identified himself with the struggle against the exploitation which the untouchables had suffered under the upper caste Hindus across the centuries. 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.

It is our opinion that the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar are not merely personal approaches. They continue to be debated within Indian Society even today. In what follows we shall look at some significant situations where the differing positions of the two leaders emerge. After this we shall make a brief examination of the backgrounds and values which influenced and motivated their styles of leadership in their respective struggles against Untouchability.

#### The Vaikom Satyagraha

The demand for social and religious reforms was slowly gaining ground in Travancore State in the Nineteen Twenties. In 1918, the Exhale caste had already appealed to the Government to open out. The temples in the State to all Hindus, They later followed up with a threat to convert themselves to Christianity if the Government did not act decisively. It was in this climate that the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) took place.

The issue concerned the use of a road which ran beside the temple at Vaikom. Untouchables and other low castes were not permitted to use this road. A few followers of Sri. Narayana Guru, several caste Hindus and a Syrian Orthodox Christian began a Satyagraha to open out the road to the untouchable castes. Gandhi visited the area and began a negotiation with a Nambudri Brahman trustee of the temple. Mahadev Desais notes of that negotiation reveal Gandhi's reformist approach to the problem:

Gandhiji: Is it fair to exclude a whole section of Hindus, because of their supposed low birth, from public roads which can be used by non-Hindus, by criminals and bad characters, and even by dogs and cattle?

Nambudri Trustee: But how can it be helped? They are reaping the reward of their Karma.

Gandhiji: No doubly they are suffering for their Karma by being born as Untouchables. But why must you add to the punishment? Are they worse than even criminals and beasts?

Nambudri Trustee: They must be so, for otherwise God would not condemn them to be born Untouchables.

From the discussion quoted above we get some idea of the traditional understanding of the position of the Untouchable castes and Gandhi's divergence from this position. For the Nambudiri Trustee the notion of Untouchability could not be separated from the being of the Untouchable, which was a result of his Karma. It is clear from this discussion that while Gandhi's espousal of the cause against Untouchability is of great social importance, his reasoning appeared self-contradictory. The position taken by the Nambudiri Trustee was nearer the traditional understanding of Karma. Gandhi made a departure from tradition by rejecting the practice of Untouchability without giving up the system of caste.

Ambedkar's reaction to Gandhi's action at Vaikom was qualified. While he felt that the latter was not going far enough in his crusade against Untouchability, he nevertheless admitted that 'when one is spurned by everyone, even the sympathy shown by Mahatama Gandhi is of no little importance'. (On another occasion Ambedkar stated that Gandhi supported the temple entry movement because he wanted to weaken the distinction between Hindus and Untouchables, thereby hoping to deny the latter's demand for political rights.) Nothing that the Brahmans at Vaikom had used scripture to justify untouchability, Ambedkar said, 'This clearly indicated that either we should burn all these scriptures or verify and examine the validity of their rules regarding untouchability.. and if we are unable to prove their falseness or invalidity, are we to suffer Untouchability till the end of time!...Truly these scriptures are an issue to people. The Government should have confiscated them long ago.'

### Bombay Meeting

At Gandhi's invitation Ambedkar went to meet him Malabar Hill, in Bombay, on August 14th, 1931. The meeting did not go off well. Gandhi stated that he had been thinking of the problem of Untouchables ever since his school days, well before Ambedkar was born. He had incorporated the fight against untouchability in the programme of the Congress. He was surprised that Ambedkar opposed him and the Congress. Ambedkar replied sarcastically that it was true that Gandhi started to think about the problem of Untouchables before he was born. Old people always liked to emphasise the point of age.

However, the Congress had done nothing beyond giving formal recognition to the problem. Had the Congress party been sincere it would have made "the removal of Untouchability a condition, like the wearing of Khaddar, for becoming a member of the Congress". Ambedkar states that Hindus were not showing any change of heart concerning the problem of untouchables.

He continued: We believe in self-help and self-respect. We are not prepared to have faith in great leader sand Mahatmas. Let me be brutally frank about it. history tells that Mahatmas, like fleeting phantoms, raise dust, but raise no level. Why should the Congress men oppose our movement and dub me a traitor? towards the end of the meeting Ambedkar asked Gandhi what his position was on the question of special political safeguards and adequate political representation for the Depressed Classes.

Gandhi replied: "I am against the political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindus. That would be absolutely suicidal." When Ambedkar heard this his worst fears about Gandhi were probably confirmed for the brusquely thanked the latter and left the hall.

The problem of separate electorates

At the second round Table Conference had in London, in 1931, Gandhi and Ambdkar continued to have serious differences. While the latter wanted reserved seats and separate electorates for the Untouchables, the former wouldn't hear of it. Stating that Dr. Ambedkar did not speak for the whaled of the Untouchables in India, Gandhi went on to say: "I want to say with all the emphasis I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I will resist it with my life."

Gandhi was true to his word. under the Communal Award of 1932 the Untouchable castes were to choose a few representatives of their own by separate electorates and also vote in the general electorate. Gandhi imposed this move by going on the famous 'Wpic-Fast'. Ambedkar, with great reluctance, went to Poona to negotiate with Gandhi, whose condition was worsening. Eventually a compromise was arrived at where Ambedkar dropped his demand for separate electorates and Gandhi conceded the provision of reserved seats.

Gandhi's reason for opposing separate electorates was his fear that it would disrupt the Hindu community. He said. separate electorates will create division among Hindus so much that it will lead to blood shed. Untouchable hooligans will make common cause with Muslim hooligans and kill caste-Hindus.? At another level Gandhi felt that the time was ripe for caste Hindus to make reparation to the untouchables. Conceding separate electorates would take away this possibility of change of heart.

The Harijan Sevak Sangh

On September 30, 1932,, Gandhi organised a group called the All India Anti-untouchability League, which later came to be known as The Harijan Sevak Sangh. Several untouchables were on the central board, including Ambedkar. The goals of the organisation were to open out public wells, roads, schools, temples and cremation grounds to the Untouchables. Intra-caste practices like rules relating to commonality did not enter the reforms envisaged by the organisation. Between November 1933 and July

1934 Gandhi travelled 12,500 miles in India to talk about the evils of untouchability and collect funds for the organisation.

Ambedkar wanted the Anti-untouchable league to take seriously the question of equal opportunity in economic and social matters. His views do not appear to have been shared by the other founders. He resigned after a few months and the other Untouchable members also appear to have left. In course of time The Harijan Sevak Sangh did not admit Untouchable members. Gandhi explained that the organisation was there for repentance on the part caste Hindus. Therefore, Untouchables could advise but not play a leading role. From this it is clear that Gandhi was extremely concerned about a change of attitude among the higher castes and less preoccupied with the new ideas emerging from among the Untouchables themselves.

Formative years and divergent approaches:

Gandhi came from the Kathiawad peninsula which is today a part of Gujarat. He belonged to the Vaishya caste known as the Modh Bania. The Bania castes were wealthy, influential and took tradition seriously. Gandhi's father, grand-father and great grand-father had served as prime-ministers in the princely states of the peninsula.

Gandhi's capacity to compromise was developed during his years in South Africa. In accepting compromise one helped one's opponent not to lose face. It was an honourable way of resolving problems; for the dignity of all the contending individuals or groups was preserved. Thus, for example, when Ambedkar accepted to give up his demand for a separate electorate, Gandhi responded by conceding the claim for reserved seats.

Gandhi disliked conflictual struggle. The style of resolving differences where the two contending parties had to fight each other so that one of them might win was abhorrent to him. It has been argued by Lloyd and Susan Rudolph that Gandhi's preference for consensus and distaste for conflict has roots in village society. There was a constant search for consensus in village affairs and opposition to partisanship. De-emphasising open clashes, victories and defeats, appeared to be a widely prevalent way of resolving disputes. We are of the opinion, however, that the dominant castes' potential for coercion contributed to the success of the consensus approach.

One of the references in Gandhi's autobiography deals with his firmness on the question of admitting untouchable families to his ashram near Ahmedabad in 1915. In 1920, Gandhi said: "Swaraj is unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity. In 1921 he said, "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an Untouchable".

In 1937 Gandhi said, "One born a scavenger must earn his livelihood by being a scavenger, and then do whatever else he likes. For a scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your President. That according to me is Hinduism. " What is being implied is that all varnas have equal worth. Seen from another point of view, this would suggest

a denial of equal opportunity: for few people will admit that a scavenger is the equal of a lawyer or a President in worldly status, Gandhi believed in Varnashramadharma, the religious division of society into four groups: Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This four-fold ordering of society and the associated traditional duties were important for the preservation of harmony and the growth of the soul. "The law of Varna prescribes that a person should, for his living, follow the lawful occupation of his forefathers," Stated Gandhi.

We shall now look at Ambedkar's early years and the gradual hardening of his position towards Hinduism and caste-Hindu society. To begin with, there was a great difference in the respective family situations of Ambedkar and Gandhi. While the latter's forefathers had served as prime-ministers, the former's grandfather and father had served in the lower rungs of the British army. Ambedkar's father, Ramji Sakpal was an intensely religious man. He regularly recited the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to his children. Inspired by the Bhakti current of Kabir and Chokhamela, the family sang the praises of Krishna and Rama. Values of equality before God appear to have played some importance in this system. His followers believed that caste and rank at birth mattered little to God. In the army, Ramji (and his father before him) had been exposed to liberal English values. Ramji had picked up enough of the English language to impart it to his son, Ambedkar. The fact that the Mahars had been given their own regiment, the 111th Mahars, contributed to the strengthening of horizontal ties among those of their term who were in the army. Here they were not obliged to observe traditional practices which symbolised their Untouchability.

Life in the cantonments and in Bombay (where his father moved to during his last years of High school) permitted the space for young Ambedkar to develop ideas and attitudes which as village Untouchable youth could scarcely have hoped to arrive at. Thus, Ambedkar's childhood and early youth and the following influences: a Bhakti current which spoke of the individual's equality before God, the enchantment and inspiration of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the liberal English values which filtered down to the Mahar regiment. This was also a period when the beginnings of horizontal caste solidarities and the weakening of behaviour associated with traditional intercaste relations began to appear. If Ambedkar had grown up in the ideological context of the Untouchable Mahar quarters of a Hindu village. It is unlikely that he could have developed into the confident and persevering youth that he became. From the latter part of his childhood onwards there were several unpleasant incidents which brutally brought home to him that he was not the social equal of caste Hindus.

Ambedkar's earlier attitude to Hinduism was ambivalent. On the one hand, he was slowly coming to realise that within Hinduism there could be no liberation from untouchability; on the other, his own upbringing had been within an atmosphere where the Hindu epics were recited with great devotion. In the early 1920's he had some faith in the Untouchables changing their status through emulating higher caste practices. He gradually came to the conclusion that this process, which sometimes included wearing the sacred thread and celebrating marriages with Vedic rites, had little effect in changing the

attitudes of caste Hindus. By 1927, his mind was already made up when the Manusmriti was burnt in his presence at a large public meeting. In 1935, he announced his decision to leave Hinduism. Where Gandhi's path was one of rediscovering Hinduism, Ambedkar's was one of bitterness and eventual rejection of the religion of his forefathers. On October 14th, 1956, Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism along with several hundred thousand of his followers. His choice of this particular religion, and not any other, was based on need to be biculturally rooted in India. Furthermore, he felt that Buddhism espoused egalitarian values without resorting to the violent methods of communism.

#### Conclusion:

It is possible to argue that Ambedkar and Gandhi played complementary roles in the fight against Untouchability. While this may partly be true, it must not make us lose sight of the serious implications of their fundamentally different approaches to the problems. We shall briefly summarise these different approaches to the problem. We shall briefly summarise these differences below.

To begin with, Gandhi may be seen as coming from the dominant sections of Hindu society, while Ambedkar mainly represented the mahars (although he attempted, with limited success, to mobilise Untouchables all over India). The former believed that a change of heart on the part of the caste Hindus could revitalise Hinduism and permit the development of a varna system where all sections would be equal. For Ambedkar, however, Untouchability and Hinduism were inextricably interwoven.

Through calling Untouchables Harijan (children of God) Gandhi attempted to give them a new self-respect. His efforts to change the hearts of the caste Hindus did result in creating an atmosphere of concern among at least some of them, particularly the educated sections. During the crucial years of Ambedkar's struggle to uplift the untouchables, this climate probably helped to prevent a stiffening of caste Hindu attitudes against him.

For Ambedkar, equality did not stop with all varnas being equal. In fact he harshly criticised the caste-system and wanted Untouchables to have no part in it. When he advocated equality, he referred to equality in the economic, political and social spheres. While Ambedkar's dreams are still far from being realised, his contribution was realistic and lasting. He was largely responsible for creating reserved positions for untouchables in the civil service, legislatures and higher education. But more importantly, his major contribution was to have emphasised the importance of action from below: that political organisation was indispensable to securing justic and basic human rights.

The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar still continue to haunt the various Dalit movements and reformist Hindu organisations. For the reformist Hindu organisations the big dilemma is to keep the Harijans within their fold without watering down Hindu values and beliefs. This is not an easy task; for Harijans see lurking paternalism and upper-caste biases even within those organisations which have formally condemned

Untouchability. We have the Jatav Untouchables of Agra who quit the Arya Samaj because of the above mentioned reasons.

Ambedkar was clear that, as Hindus, the Untouchables could not hope to be treated as equals with the rest. He therefore advocated another identity through conversion to Buddhism. This did help considerably in giving the Dalits (mainly in Maharashtra) a new sense of purpose and militancy, although some people have stated that Buddhism as a religion would end up dampening the militancy of the Dalits. However, many caste Hindus persisted in seeing the neo-Buddhists as Untouchables.

The Dalit movements which have not embraced Buddhism are busy securing social, economic and political gains for their members. Some of the non-Buddhist Dalit leaders have been influenced by Marxism and Secularism. They do not see the religious question as being of importance. They feel that it is sufficient to criticise and condemn Hinduism. They do not see any need to convert to Buddhism. In our opinion, this position is fraught with ambiguity. Can the Dalit masses in the rural areas content themselves with rejecting Hinduism without finding an alternative religious identity? We do not think so. It is our opinion that many of the non-Buddhist Dalit masses will remain Hindu in some sense or the other while struggling for economic, political, social and educational rights. As for the non-religious Dalit intellectuals, it would be interesting to probe to what extent they remain culturally Hindu even if they have rejected Hinduism. And what would it mean to be a Hindu only in the cultural sense of term? Traditionally it was not possible to separate culture and religion. Today, it seems possible. But what this constitutes in theory and practice needs to be further explored.