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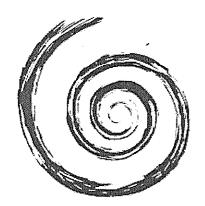
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### Reconciliation of Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate through Gadamer's Hermeneutics

Abstract: The paper introduces the *Varna System* that is understood as *Caste System* in India and its interpretation by M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. Both the masters were against the caste system that has degraded Indian society by oppressing the *dalits* (the broken/oppressed), those who were known as *Untouchables* and 'out of' Hindu Caste System. But it is well known that both the stalwarts were completely against each other, especially their approach to eradicate the caste system. One finds critics like Arundhati Roy, Aakash Singh Rathod, Ramachandra Guha and many others, those who find either Gandhi's views or Ambedkar's views and their respective prejudices very controversial. The paper is an attempt to reconcile the thoughts of Gandhi and Ambedkar through Gadamer's hermeneutical approach that brings forth, instead of debate, a dialogue between these two masters and through their writing one can foresee to establish unity and solidarity.

**Keywords:** Varna System, Caste System, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Indian society, Gadamer, hermeneutical approach, unity, solidarity.

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Martin Luther King (Jr.) said, "Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk."

C. D. Naik said, "There have been many saints and Mahatmas, who interested themselves in ameliorating the lot of untouchables, but none before has correctly diagnosed the disease. Dr. Ambedkar alone tracked to its source and prescribed the proper treatment."<sup>2</sup>

The two highly venerated and revered personalities of pre and post Independent India, M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, denounced all types of hierarchies - be it patriarchal, racial, class or most notably caste system; that is the Charturvarna, popularly known as Varna System in traditional Hindu society. The Varna system comprises of four castes, the Brahmins (the priestly community), the Kshatriyas (the royal or warrior community), the Vaishyas (the farmer or trader or merchant community) and the Shudras (the helpers or service providers). The Varna system resembles to Plato's concept of Ideal State (in Republic) with three divisions, namely the philosopher-kings, the soldier the community and artisan or labourer community. Plato, unlike in Phaedo, emphasizes on the virtue of justice (in Republic) if all the three communities work in harmony. Varna system in fact is the same. It is a social stratification of the classes as mentioned in Hindu texts. most notably in Manusmriti (the Laws of Manu) that lays down codes, norms and laws for individual and individual classes in an ideal society. [It is also called the Dharma Code of Manu; dharma meaning duty, obligation or cosmic law or order. It is known to have been written by Bhrigu who refused to disclose his name in Manusmriti.] Leaving apart the historical authorship of the Manusmriti, the text is highly revered, acknowledged and enforced from the time of its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Naik, C. D., *Thoughts and Philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*. Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 04.



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Green, Jen, *Gandhi and the Quit India Movement*. Raintree Publication, UK, 2014, pp. 53.

inception around circa 100 CE. That much to the background, the text has enormous significance till date. This is highly disquieting. The allegations are same as they were levied on Plato's Ideal State division as it fosters the feeling of master-slave concept. [Though Aristotle saved his teacher's theory by saying it is nothing but division of labour. As mentioned by Gerard Naddaf, "In his inquiry into the definition of justice and its effects on the individual soul, Plato proposes to seek the principle behind the logical development of an actual state. Since individuals are not selfsufficient, it is agreed that the state originates and develops according to the principle of the natural division of labour, that is, the notion that each individual should perform a single task for which each has a natural aptitude....."3]

The same defense for *Varna* system is found the holy scripture of Hinduism – the *Bhagavad Gita* [written around 400 BCE and 200 CE, where the authorship still remains a mystery. But legend has it that it was spoken by Lord Krishna and authored by Vyasa, a sage.] In the *Gita*, Krishna says, "The four-fold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and work. Though I am its creator, know Me to be incapable of action or change." (Chapter IV, verse 13) And further elaborates as which caste has to do what.

Then the question arises, who are these 'untouchables' and where they came from? Almost in the beginning of the medieval period, the two major groupings developed, namely the *survarnas* – those belonging to the four *varnas* (caste), and *avarnas* – those not belonging to any *varna*. The *avarnas* are known as *dalits* (the broken/oppressed) in contemporary times and were assigned to do menial jobs of scavengers, rearers of unclean animals like pigs, curers of hides of dead animals, sweepers, drainage cleaners, and the like. From former times to almost the present times they were and are degraded, loathed and hated. They are considered as *untouchables*.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Naddaf, Gerard, *The Role of the Poet in Plato's Ideal Cities of Callipolis and Magnesia*. Kriterian vol. 48 no. 116, Belo Horizonte (Brazil) July/Dec. 2007.

Many medieval mystic/saints and social reformers and later under British Rule the modern social reformers fought for their rights. In this context two names come to the forefront – one is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and the other Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).

M. K. Gandhi led the frontline in India's independence struggle that actually began in South Africa in around 1893; and it continued when he returned to India in 1914. But his 'non-violent civil disobedience' struggle against British rule was accelerated from 1915 upto the British left India in 1947. Gandhi was the founder-father of Sabarmati Ashrama at Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India). He was born in an upper caste Modh-Baniya (the Vaishya caste, the trader/merchants' caste) in a Gujarati Vaishanava (worshipping Rama and Krishna as incarnations of Lord Vishnu) Hindu prosperous family. Giving this background of Gandhi's early life is to bring to the light that Gandhi came from an elite caste of Hindu society. But Sabarmati Ashrama was open for all irrespective of caste, class, race or gender distinction, including the untouchables.

Gandhi believed in the *Varna* system and traces its existence before actually it was discovered. Gandhi was a proud Hindu, and had respect to the *laws of nature*. According to him, through the laws of nature Indians have risen from mundane to spiritual level. In the Western world, they prospered materialistically because of these *laws of nature*, but he was of the firm belief that India has rose to spiritual heights due to these *laws*. And *varna* system is a motivator to establish 'social welfare' [as called *Loksamgraha* in the *Gita*.] According to Mazumdar, "In the Gandhian concept, *Varna Dharma* occupies an important position. *Varna Dharma* is such a scientific social device which like that of division of labour makes the society strong, accurate and well coordinated. The science of *Varnashramadharma* is based on profession linked with the hereditary factors."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Mazumdar, Sukhendu, *Politico-Economic Ideas of Mahatma Gandhi: Their Relevance in the Present-Day.* Gandhian Studies and Peace Research Series – 20, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 28.

But in simultaneity Gandhi was completely averse to caste system that camouflaged into varna system. According to him caste system had distorted the varna that created a gross adverse and abrogating picture of Hinduism all over the world. This is how the fall of the ancient religion took place. It not only disfigured Hinduism in perversity but also brought about the down fall of economy by bringing about unemployment and poverty. It also advocates untouchability, the hulking evil in Indian society, vitiating the complete social texture of Hindu society. Mazumdar notes further, "He (Gandhi) did not believe in the so-called caste system. To him, not only truth was God or God was truth, but man in flesh and blood was an embodiment of God to him. His Karma (service) was always for the downtrodden and suffering masses. He was never lodged in the petty considerations of high and low castes." So it is out rightly clear that Gandhi despised caste system and untouchability but justified Varna system based on the potentials of an individual and also that the Varna system advocated division of labour. [This reminds of Plato's Ideal State concept.] So his fight for freedom and struggle for independence go hand in hand with his fight against caste system, more specifically the 'untouchability'. As noted by Das, "He (Gandhi) kept conditions in the recruitment of volunteers of the freedom movement that anybody who believes or practices caste system would not be qualified to join the freedom movement. So, people who revolted against the British had to forego the superstition of caste barrier."6 In fact Gandhi called the untouchables Harijan meaning Children/People of God.

But Dr. B. R. Ambedkar completely contradicted Gandhi though the aim remained same. Ambedkar was born in a Dalit Mahar (Scheduled Caste, known in his times, the untouchables) Maharashtrian family. His father worked for British-Indian Army, but he got education with many difficulties because of his social status. Through scholarships awarded to him he continued his studies in United States.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Das, Ratan, *The Global Vision of Mahatma Gandhi*. Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 208-209.

Britain and Germany. He refused the prestigious Baroda Public Service job as he was ill-treated by the upper caste Hindus. He was a lawyer, so started his practice in law and also started teaching. He was appointed as Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee of Independent India. This background of Ambedkar's life is essential to know how he could lead the movement for dalits and asked for equal rights for all. He openly denounced Gandhi's views on untouchability and wrote a book What Congress and Gandhi done to the Untouchables? (1945). He Thucydides, the Athenian Historian and General, 'It may be your interest to be our masters, but how can it be ours to be your slaves?' in the beginning of his book. Since he came from the dalit family, he had suffered the pain and agony of untouchability. Therefore he resigned as a Law Minister from the parliament as he could not find discrimination and inequality eradicated from Hindu society (and for several other reasons). Therefore in 1956 he renounced Hinduism as his religion along with two hundred thousand dalits and adopted Buddhism as their religion; and wrote a book The Buddha and His Dhamma (posthumously published in 1957). His Neo-Buddhist movement was a socio-political movement that propagated equality and justice, especially to the oppressed dalits. Some of the core ethical theories of Buddhism he could not accept therefore he radically reinterpreted the religion as a New Vehicle (Navayana) or Neo-Buddhism. Ambedkar out rightly denied the two legendary Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as these epics, he thought, emboldened the caste system by glorifying the upper two castes and always belittled and humiliated the lower castes.7

At this juncture it is very important to know that these stalwarts in their own way had very firm take on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>In the preface of his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* Ambedkar writes, '.....Another question is being asked: why I am inclined towards Buddhism....The direct answer to this question is that I regard the Buddha's Dhamma to be the best. No religion can be compared to it. If a modern man knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha. This conviction has grown in me after thirty-five years of close study of all religions.' [Rattu, 1995, pp. 96.]





marginalized dalits and eradication of caste system. But they stood on the extreme polls. The point that is very conspicuous is, was Gandhi completely against caste system? And if he supported Varnadharma; isn't it inherently suggested that he favored caste only conceptually considering 'ideal system for a Utopian society'? As such varnadharma is taken to mean that it is an ideal system for newly structured social and religious realms. On the other hand Ambedkar was of the opinion that the term 'varna' embroils into contaminated social hierarchy that leads to nothing but oppression and corruption. In fact the agendas at hand for Gandhi and Ambedkar were on different footings. Gandhi was more involved with the freedom struggle; and most of the time surrounded and addressed the elite of Hindu society. Ambedkar, on the other hand, personally suffered the humiliation under the upper caste Hindus. Therefore his first and foremost agenda was to fight for the rights of untouchables.

Gandhi glorified Hinduism. He believed in the concept of 'dharma' that played a pivotal role in the varna system also. He shared his views on dharma, often translated as 'duty' to Tolstoy. And dharma was highly emphasized in the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita to which Gandhi followed adherently. Chatterjee notes in her book that Ruskin's view on different kinds of work to be given equal footing; also "the parable of the talents in the New Testament confirmed him in his belief that all hold their talents in trust for the good of society. In this way, as was laid down in the Gita, he linked the dharma of the individual with Loksamgraha, the welfare of all."

As such Gandhi desired to establish *swaraj* (Home Rule) and according to him *swaraj* is not achievable if untouchability is not eradicated. This can be deduced from what he noted in *Young India*, "Non-cooperation against the government means cooperation among the governed and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability there will be no *Swaraj* whether in one year or in one hundred years. If I

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Chatterjee, Margaret, *Gandhi's Religious Thought*. The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983, pp. 20.

invite the depressed classes to join the movement of Noncooperation, I do so because I want them to realize strength. Swaraj is unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability."9 Therefore Gandhi was also reservation for the dalits as Ambedkar demanded as he thought that the divide is already created among the Hindus and the Muslims, one more divide can ruin India. Also that Gandhi, after returning from Africa did not accelerate the pace for his movement against caste system as he thought the Indian masses were yet not ready to give up their age-old tradition. Therefore the movement took gradual pace and later Gandhi openly proclaimed his anti-caste views. (Kolge, 2017)

Ambedkar was absolutely against class stratification, be it varna or any other system. And varnadharma belonged to Hinduism. Therefore according him, Gandhi never went against caste system per se. Roy has denounced Gandhi in her book The Doctor and the Saint: The Ambedkar-Gandhi Debate: Caste, Race and Annihilation of Caste. (2019) She notes that there are so many issues that are tackled at international level - like racism, sexism, terrorism etc., why caste has not been taken up by the international forum? And the answer is - it is because of Hindu mysticism, spiritualism, non-violence, and many other related factors; but mainly because of Gandhi, who is glorified as Mahatma (the Great Soul) who supported Hinduism vehemently. In fact she mentions Ambedkar saying that Hinduism for dalits is nothing but 'a veritable chamber of horrors.' Roy says if an author has to use terms for a group of people untouchables, backward classes, scheduled caste, and other backward classes to characterize our fellow human beings is nothing like living in a chamber of horrors. In fact words like 'dalits' or 'Harijan' is also quite humiliating as it is for the dalits to escape from the blemish of caste. Does the term Harijan give the dalits the equal status with the upper caste? Ambedkar could not accept the term Harijan for the same reason. Roy's contention is an admirer of Hinduism can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Kumar, Raj, ed., *Essays on Dalits*. Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 99.



Hinduism believes give system. caste never up reincarnation and transmigration of soul; an individual's present birth is the consequence of the karma (actions) of the previous birth. So an individual born in upper caste means the person had performed extremely good actions in the previous birth; likewise in the descending order for lower caste person. And therefore Ambedkar could never reconcile his views with Gandhi's views as he thought Gandhi being a proud Hindu would not and cannot bastion a movement that anti-Hindu. For him fighting against establishing India as Sovereign Secular Democratic Republic is nothing but a farce; as after imperialist regime, the dalits will have to tolerate and suffer the 'upper-caste regime'. Their situation remained same. For him the dalits never had freedom in pre, during and post British rule. In fact in one of his interviews (1955) he mentioned Gandhi as a hardcore orthodox Hindu; therefore annihilation of caste was never his agenda. This is too obvious in his vernacular writing · he supported Dinbandhu (in Gujarati where Varnashramadharma) which Gandhi did not express in his weeklies (in English) Young India and Harijan where he spoke of democracy that was well appreciated by the Western world. In his interview he said, "I know Gandhi better than his disciples. They came as devotees and only saw the Mahatma. I was an opponent and I saw the bare man in him. He showed me his fangs."10 Gandhi's most popular movement was Satyagraha (Soul Force); and that made the oppressed more docile and quiet on their sufferings.

Ramachandra Guha has vividly described the difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar, "Gandhi wished to save Hinduism by abolishing untouchability, whereas Ambedkar saw a solution for his people outside the fold of the dominant religion of the Indian people. Gandhi was a rural romantic, who wished to make the self-governing village the bedrock of free India; Ambedkar an admirer of city life and modern technology who dismissed the Indian village as a den of iniquity. Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> BBC, December 31, 1955.

non-violent protest while being suspicious of the state; Ambedkar a steadfast constitutionalist, who worked within state and sought solutions to social problems with the aid of the state. (2010.33)<sup>11</sup> From the quote of Guha would it be just to criticize Gandhi for favouring Hinduism; or to criticize Ambedkar for being a rationalist and constitutional?

According to Rathore, Gandhi was against slavery, as Indians were under British imperialism. But *dalits* were slave under the majority community (the Hindus), and also under British Rule. Therefore the *dalits* were "slaves of slaves". <sup>12</sup> So the point is very clear, Gandhi and Ambedkar could never reconcile their ideological differences.

Can one try to see the whole scene from hermeneutical point of view? Why Gandhi was not interpreted literally, with its original and first version writing and so was Ambedkar? From Gadamer's hermeneutical approach the difference between these two masters can be resolved and reconciled. Gadamer employs orthodox and modest method in his hermeneutics and that he engages in 'philosophical dialogue' that remains objective but at the same time maintains practicality. Can we employ Gadamer's hermeneutics to Gandhi's and Ambedkar's writings? The 'idea of phronesis' that is 'practical wisdom' coming from Plato will bring worth of Gandhi and Ambedkar's writings together. Gandhi had his own prejudices towards Hinduism from Ambedkar's point of view and Ambedkar had his own prejudices towards untouchables from Gandhi's point of view. Looking from Gadamer's point of view one can interpret both prejudices more from phronesis and arrive at 'existential practical wisdom'. Through his hermeneutical approach both - in the writings of Gandhi and Ambedkar one can pull out historical and linguistic positioning of human understanding that opens up the layer to reveal the Being who is the foundation; and the 'Truth as event is discovered', the experiential truth and not the derived or deduced truths. The caste system

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<sup>11</sup> Pföstl, Eva, ed., Between Ethics and Politics: Gandhi Today. Routledge, New Delhi, 2014, pp. 148.

Rathore, Aakash Singh, *Dalit Svaraj: Toward a Political Theory*. icpr.in/Seminar/dalit/theory\_aakash singh rathore, pp. 02.

which these stalwarts completely deny; and the method they implement to erase caste system, where Gandhi uses Satyagraha as a method and Ambedkar uses the Constitutional method, both tried their best to eradicate caste system and establish experiential practical wisdom, making the whole method turn into 'an event'. How much they were successful is completely other point. But the differences can be reconciled.

For example, few of the quotes from the masters:

As Gandhi says, "Varna has nothing to do with caste. Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of varna. It is this travesty of varna that has degraded Hinduism and India. Our failure to follow the law of varna is largely responsible both for our economic and spiritual ruin. It is one cause of unemployment and impoverishment, and it is responsible for untouchability and defections from our faith." 13

Ambedkar says, "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind." <sup>14</sup>

Gandhi says, "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* or *Shudra*, but as an *Atishudra*." <sup>15</sup>

Ambedkar says, "There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you can change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilize the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Gandhi, M. K., Young India, 24-11-'27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Rodrigues, Valerian, *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 289.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Gandhi, M. K., Young India, 4-5-1921.

on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole." <sup>16</sup>

Therefore, as Gadamer believed that the teleos of having a dialogue is not to have any confrontation and prove your point; but to relate, not through subjectivity, but through openness to be ready to 'understand the other' and create 'a good-will.' This is to bring wholeness, unanimity, unity and solidarity. As mentioned by Nuria Boronate. Gadamer's rehabilitation of Aristotle is not a nostalgic plead for ancient polis. Rather, Gadamer's intention is to preserve spaces where solidarity can still grow." So we arrive at a dialogue through which we open ourselves to others and vice versa. And, like Socrates, a dialogue opens up the possibility accept one's ignorance. Therefore from Gadamer's hermeneutics we deduce that both Gandhi and Ambedkar were against caste system and their respective critiques can arrive to various truths through method of interpreting their writings and reconcile their practical thoughts to be shared by whole of humanity. [Gandhi wrote an article in Harijan -'Caste Has to Go' in November 16, 1935 and Ambedkar wrote 'Annihilation of Caste' in1936.]

Can we therefore say that we can have the 'Gandhian-Ambedkarite or Ambedkarite-Gandhian universal situation' that sees no discrimination of caste, class, creed, race or gender! Through the historical to the present – the journey of both these masters is in fact the need of the hour.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ambedkar, B. R., *Annihilation of Caste*. Gautam Book Centre, Delhi, 2008. pp. 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Castillo, R. del, Faerna, A. M., and Hickman, L. A., eds., *Confines of Democracy: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard J. Bernstein*. Brill Rodopi, Houston, 2012, pp. 129.

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