

**Caste-based Discrimination
in the Indian Church:
Lessons from Gandhi's fight
for human dignity**

• Siby K. Joseph

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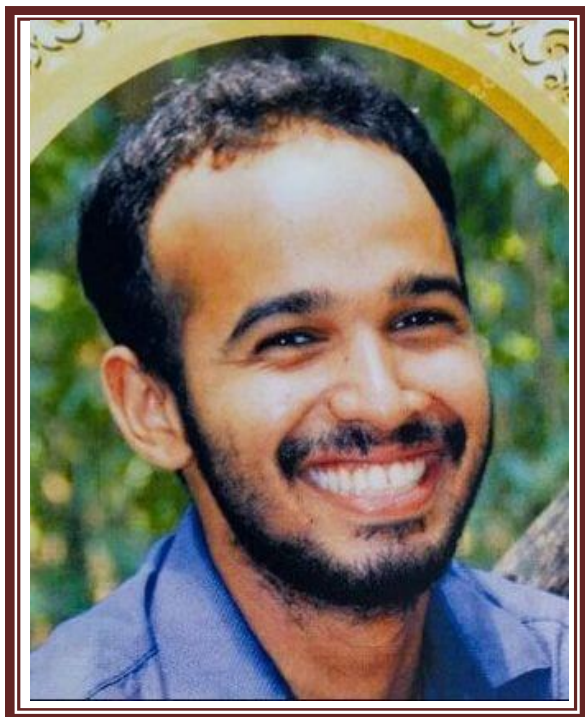
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Preface

The present work is a revised version of a lecture delivered at a Symposium on the topic “Caste-based Discrimination in the Indian Church” organized by the Carolian Theological Forum of St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur on October 2, 2017. This work is divided into three parts. The first part of the study analyses the issue of caste discriminations in the Indian Church. The second part describes Gandhi’s fight against caste discriminations for restoring human dignity. It reviews all major writings as well as actions of Gandhi on these issues to understand Gandhi’s mind and his actual practice. This analysis gives the reader a clear picture of all the issues involved in respect of Gandhi’s approach to caste and untouchability. What Christians can learn from Gandhi’s strategy against caste discrimination is summarised in the last part of the study. Some important writings of Gandhi and Ambedkar are given in the appendices to have clear understanding of their viewpoints. It is hoped that the present work would further stimulate introspection, reflection and deliberation on the theme and finally to root out this evil practice from the Christian community and from the Indian society at large. Further, it will remove misconceptions about Gandhi’s very approach on these issues in the minds of readers. I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Ramchandra Pradhan, Senior Member of the teaching faculty of Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha; John Chelladurai, Dean, Gandhi Research Foundation, Jalgaon; Fr. Anil Prakash D’Souza, Lecturer in Dogmatic Theology and Director of the Carolian Theological Forum, St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur; and to the participants of the symposium for their active participation, useful comments and insights. I am also grateful to Louis Campana, President, Gandhi International, Carcassonne, France and Christophe Grigfor for their cooperation in the publication of the book.

Siby K. Joseph



Dedication

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of Christy Mathew Philip who passed away on September 21, 2017.

Caste-based Discrimination in the Indian Church: Lessons from Gandhi's fight for human dignity

I

Introduction

At outset, I would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to the Carolian Theological Forum of St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur, for inviting me to deliver a lecture on the theme “Caste-based discrimination in the Indian Church: Lessons from Gandhi’s fight for human dignity.” St. Charles Seminary has a long cherished history dating back to 1851 and I consider this opportunity to share my views with all of you as a great privilege and honour. I understand that the term “Carolian” denotes the students of theology and philosophy studying at St. Charles Seminary. This symposium is intended to motivate these young seminarians who would be the future leaders of the Church in India. The organizers hope that if the seminarians of today are convinced of the need to treat every human being equally, especially within the Church, then the transformation within the Church and the society at large is not far away. However, if the situation does not improve, and if there is no willingness to change the situation, then our lofty speeches about justice and equality, would be nothing but “a noisy gong” and “a clanging cymbal” (cf. 1 Corinthians 13,1).

This symposium is basically looked upon as an exercise aimed at stimulating introspection, reflection and deliberation on the theme and raising important questions connected with this evil social practice. I am overwhelmed by the presence of representative of different organizations, leaders of different religions, clergy and laity, civil society, academics and others. It should not be a one-way track, rather a

joint search by all concerned to root out this evil from the Christian community and from the Indian society at large.

Caste has no place in Christianity

It is obvious that Caste has no place in Christianity. Every Christian, irrespective of his or her social background, gender, colour or economic status is equal before God, who “shows no partiality” (Romans 2, 11; cf. Acts 10:34). “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10, 12).” But as Christianity spread across different countries, cultures and societies, it went on absorbing and assimilating a number of local traditions and traits, including unfortunately a number of evil practices. When Christianity arrived in India and as it spread in different parts of the country, it had a direct encounter with Hinduism and its several cultural traditions. Hindu society has always been marked by hierarchy and holism. The existing caste system did impact and affect Christian social system. Since different groups with their caste label started getting converted to Christian religion, they carried their cultural baggage to the new religion of their choice. Despite Christian egalitarian system, they could not get rid of the caste background of the Hindu society. A kind of caste system got imperceptible entry in Christianity in the Indian context which is quite contrary teachings of Jesus Christ.

Caste Discrimination: A major concern

Today we are having a discussion on the theme “Caste-based discrimination in the Indian Church.” This is because even in the 21st century caste mentality and caste discrimination have not completely disappeared from the Indian Church and from among Christians in India. Discrimination based on caste is a phenomenon in the Indian Church from the very beginning and is found in its worst form in some South Indian States.

Although some improvements have taken place with the progress of time through deliberate interventions and concrete social action, caste-based discrimination is still a plague in the Indian Church. I don't think a detailed elaboration of this point is necessary, as every one sitting here is aware of the situation.

We celebrate today the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. It would be a fitting homage to the Father of the Nation who fought all his life for the dignity of his fellow human beings whom he called *Harijans*, by evaluating the situation of caste discrimination in the Indian Church in the light of what Gandhi himself experienced, practiced and taught.

Church Leadership on the Question of discrimination

The discrimination based on caste identity continuous to remain an important issue for the Indian Church both among Catholics as well as Protestants. It has been a major issue for all those who are in leadership position in the Church for a long time. This is evident from the address of his Holiness John Paul II to the Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Madras-Mylapore, Madurai and Pondicherry-Cuddalore, at the conclusion of the series of *Ad Limina* visits of the Bishops of India on Monday, 17 November 2003.¹ He said "We cannot hope to spread this spirit of unity among our brothers and sisters without genuine solidarity among peoples. Like so many places in the world, India is beset by numerous social problems. In some ways, these challenges are exacerbated because of the unjust system of caste division which denies the human dignity of entire groups of people. In this regard, I repeat what I said during my first pastoral visit to your country: 'Ignorance and prejudice must be replaced by tolerance and understanding. Indifference and class struggle must be turned into brotherhood and committed service. Discrimination based on race, colour, creed, sex or ethnic origin must be rejected as totally incompatible with human dignity'" (*Homily preached during*

the Holy Mass at Indira Gandhi Stadium, New Delhi on 2 February 1986).

I commend the many initiatives that have been implemented by the Bishops' Conference and individual Churches to fight this injustice. The brave steps you have taken to remedy this problem, such as those of the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council in 1992, stand out as examples for others to follow. At all times, you must continue to make certain that special attention is given to those belonging to the lowest castes, especially the Dalits. They should never be segregated from other members of society. *Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church's mission of evangelization.*² Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of the solidarity of the whole Christian community. As the Apostle Paul teaches us, "if one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12, 26). It is the Church's obligation to work unceasingly to change hearts, helping all people to see every human being as a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ, and therefore a member of our own family."

The election of the Argentinian Jesuit Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the Supreme Pontiff in 2013 has furthered the Catholic Church's efforts at fighting injustice and discrimination. Already in the past, before becoming the Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio had accused his fellow Church leaders of forgetting that Jesus Christ bathed lepers and ate with prostitutes. He was the first pontiff from Latin America and also the first pontiff to adopt the name of Francis - the name of the rich young man from Assisi who renounced wealth and founded the Franciscan order of friars in 1290. The former President of the United States Barak Obama described him as

“a champion of the poor and the most vulnerable among us, he carries forth the message of love and compassion that has inspired the world for more than 2,000 years-that in each other we see the face of God.”³

A letter along with a Memorandum of Dalit Catholic Community was presented to Pope Francis couple of months after his election as the Supreme Pontiff by Most Rev. A.M. Chinnappa SDB, Most Rev. Antonysamy Neethinathan, Most Rev. Soundarajan Periyayagam SDB and Rev. Fr. S. Lourduwamy.⁴ The document clearly highlights the gravity of the situation and reminds the Holy Father about the mission of the Church and the need for empowerment of Dalit Christians.

Based on 2013 statistics, Memorandum of Dalit Catholic Community placed sufficient data to reveal the extent of discrimination prevalent in the Catholic Church in India. (See Table no.1). It also provides statistics related to the State of TamilNadu. It further stated that the number of tribal Catholics may be 2 Millions in the total Indian Catholic population. They are given around 20 Bishops and one Cardinal (Cardinal Telespore Toppo of Ranchi). Very thin catholic population of 4,20,000 of Syro-malankara Church has been awarded with 8 Bishops and one Cardinal (Cardinal Moran Baselious Cleemis of Trivandrum). The majority 65% Dalit Catholic Community's are given only 7 Bishops only. These people are denied the right of having an Archbishop and a Cardinal. At present their representation in the hierarchy, among priests and religious is less than 5%. The same injustice is found in other structures of the Church, such as a Religious Congregation generally Provincials, Rectors, Superiors, Principals, Secretaries of National and Regional Commissions etc. Therefore, they felt that there is an urgent need to take immediate action to eradicate discrimination and oppressions on the basis of Caste and gender Justice for the transformation of the oppressed people⁵

Discrimination in the Catholic Church – 2013 Statistics

Population	Total Number	Dalit Catholics	Percentage
Total Indian Population	1200 Millions		
Total Christians	25 Millions		
Total Dalit Christians		20 Millions	(65%)
Total Catholics	18 Millions		
Total Dalit Catholics		12 Millions	(65%)
Catholic Dioceses	166		
Catholic Bishops	180		
Dalit Bishops		07	(4%)
Catholic Diocesan Priests	15420		
Dalit Catholic Priests		754	(5%)
Religious Priests	7031		
Dalit Religious Priests		310	(4%)
Religious sisters	65,000		
Dalit Religious Sisters		3200	(5%)
Cardinals	06		
Dalit Cardinals		Nil	

Source: Memorandum of Dalit Catholic Community to Holy Father His Holiness Pope Francis

The Proposals for Empowerment of Dalit Catholics placed in the Memorandum are the following:

1. As the Government of India extends reservation to Dalits according to the percentage of Scheduled Caste population in the country, Dalit Catholics could be given reservation in all structures of the Church in proportion to the population in the diocese and region.
2. Appropriate actions should be taken to eradicate untouchability in all the levels of the Church in order to promote equality and solidarity.
3. Educational institutions and resources of the Church should be made available to poor Dalit Catholics with the view of empowering them through education.
4. A Catholic University in India is very necessary for socio, educational and economic mobility of our Catholic Community.
5. Social Service Societies and other organs of the Church must have special programmes with sufficient financial support for the integral development of target people.
6. Establishment of the institutions for the promotion of the Dalit studies, Dalit theology, Dalit culture, Dalit literature and subaltern theology must be part of syllabus in all priestly and religious formation houses.
7. Well-defined policies and regulations at all levels of the Church to provide leadership in the administration of the Church.
8. The whole Christian Community should make concerted efforts for the extension of the Scheduled Caste Rights to all Scheduled Caste converts Christianity.

9. All the Diocesan, regional and national commissions must adopt the policy of empowerment to Dalit Christians.

10. A monitoring Committee in each dioceses and congregation for the facilitation of effective implementation of all the programmes, declared by the Church for the empowerment of Dalits.⁶

The Holy See has taken cognizance of the situation caste-discrimination in India. In an article appeared in *Vatican Insider* 10 December 2014 titled, "India's Church and the Dalits: An open wound" we read: On Human Rights Day, bishops returned to the issue of the outcasts. "But the wound of discrimination continues to bleed in the Church too. The diocese of Tamil Nadu is a case in point..."

The stigma is also alive in the Catholic Church, which is good at proclaiming its defence of Dalits but not so good at stopping the subtle discrimination shown by bishops, priests and the faithful belonging to higher castes toward faithful of lower castes, or even worse, those labeled as "outcasts".

"Dalits are subject to unscrupulous violence." And although untouchability was formally abolished by India's Constitution, "it is still practiced and Dalit Christians and Muslims are discriminated the most." This is why the Indian Catholic Church is pressing for the abolition of a Presidential Decree passed in 1950, which legitimizes distinction, denying non-Hindu "outcasts" job reservation rights in the public sector."⁷

It is true that Constitutional rights of Dalit Christians have been denied because of religion for more than 67 years.

Since 2009 the Dalit Christians and Muslims have been observing "Black Day" on August 10, the anniversary of the signing of the presidential order.

The Black Day was observed this year too by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) and National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) with meetings, rallies,

demonstrations, fasts, submitting memoranda, candle vigils and other forms of demonstrations at the State Capitals and district headquarters to show solidarity with the Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims who are denied their Constitutional rights.⁸

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India's (CBCI) formally acknowledged in December 2016 that Dalits face discrimination within the Church and emphasized the need for formulation of a policy to tackle the issue raised some hopes among Dalit Christians. The CBCI in its report titled 'Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church in India', specifically asked its dioceses to submit plans to end discrimination against Dalit Christians.⁹

Responding to it Rev. Fr. Vincent Manoharan, convener of National Dalit Christian Watch said that the institutional discrimination within the Church mainly happened at three levels: First, among the congregation on matters such as worship, burial rights and marriages; second, in the diocesan administration; and third, in educational institutions. Citing the CBCI policy document, Fr. Manoharan said that despite Dalits constituting roughly 65 per cent of the Catholic population in the country, only 12 of around 200 Catholic Bishops in India were Dalits, a meager six per cent. "In Tamil Nadu, there are only two Dalits among 17 Bishops. The gross under representation is at all levels, right from priests."¹⁰

Is it enough for the Church leadership to formally acknowledge the discrimination faced by Dalits in the Church and fight for reservation? The reservation will help them to overcome their economic deprivation and not the social deprivation they face in the society. What is required is going back to the principles of Jesus Christ and become a member of a universal family visualized by him without having any scope for discrimination or injustice.

Universal Family of Christ

In the Old Testament, we see that Jews were divided into 12 tribes and they looked down contemptibly upon the rest of humanity as “heathen” “polluted” and therefore it would be worth “eliminating” them. Jews, according to their belief, were the only chosen people, and the rest are condemned to death. In the New Testament, we see Jesus Christ recognizing the divine spirit in all and everyone being worthy of salvation. He, thus formed a new tribe of “children of God” all-inclusive, with no sign of discrimination. All those who accept the path of universal love as propounded by Christ, will together form this new tribe. He called this new tribe of humanity as “Church”. He said, in this Church: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) Those, in my name, coming together form the church; here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free, but Christ is all and is in all (Colossians 3:11). This is the new covenant given by Jesus.

Under this new covenant, there will be only one human family united in the bonds of love. In this community we will be looking at each other as siblings irrespective of whether he or she is Dalit or not. The members of this new family of God are called to see in one another, especially among the poor and marginalized the face of Christ. The Church is thus called to be an example, the conscience of humanity; prompting us incessantly to treat fellow human beings with respect and dignity that he or she deserves.

The present situation remains far behind the expectations of the New Covenant. The shortcomings in the church are glaring. The very purpose of Christ of founding the Church seems to have failed. Divisions continue to mar the image of the Church. We notice that people in the Church, who are made to feel low in the name of caste, continue to find

themselves discriminated. The very tag 'Dalit' being used in the Church to refer to those 'not accorded equal social status' or those 'facing discrimination' is not fully in accord with the Christian spirit of social equality. The fact that a section of the Christian community continues to feel that they are labeled as 'Dalits,' is itself seems to be a failure in living out the implications of the New Covenant. The basic question before us is whether we stand as witnesses to Christ and the good news of liberation which he proclaimed. There is a need for introspection and a thorough examination of our relationship with one another.

It is true that the Christians do not discriminate people in the way they used to do, let's say, a few decades ago. During those days, there used to be separate churches for the people of different social strata; different dining, no intermarriage, some were branded as untouchables and treated inhumanly by depriving all social privileges. While the news of separate 'graveyard', separate 'chapel' for people from 'lower strata of community' is a thing of the past or a fast disappearing practice, we cannot be fully happy with ourselves, as we continue to see caste based inequality and discrimination in our behaviors in a number of ways and in a number of places.

The root of the problem could be that even after becoming part of the family of God, which is the Church; Christians unfortunately continue to live individualistic, selfish lifestyles. The question that needs to be asked is this: How can I be happy when so many of my brothers and sisters are in distress and are treated as sub-humans? Church is very often seen only as a stepping-stone or an instrument for individuals to attain salvation in the life to come. It is often forgotten that all members of the Church are members of the one body, that all are part of God's family, sharing in the life of God and waiting in hope to attain the same goal, namely, loving union with God in the Kingdom of God where "the last will be first, and the

first last” (Matthew 20,16). There is no doubt that caste-based evil practices in the Church will persist as long as Christian pursue individualistic narrow life-styles, without allowing their faith to radically transform their way of life. As long as riches, wealth and social status are considered to be sign of divine favour, we’ll continue to have the poor among us. Let us consider this day as an opportunity to reflect on all these issues.

II

Gandhi’s fight against Caste discriminations for restoring Human dignity

As we assembled here today on the eve of Gandhi Jayanti, it would be befitting to analyse Gandhi’s fight against caste discriminations and untouchability for restoring human dignity and what lessons we can learn from his approach or strategy to root out the evil of caste system. Gandhi fought against racial and caste based discriminations in his fight for dignity of people both in South Africa and India. He unequivocally stood against its practice from the beginning to the end of his life. Actually his total rejection of untouchability went on gathering greater and greater intensity with the passage of time. However, Gandhi’s approach to the problem of caste discrimination including untouchability has been subjected to criticism particularly among a section of left intellectuals and the followers of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Even in his lifetime, these groups were critical of his entire thinking on the issues. They even went to the extent of saying that his approach to these issues hardly differ from those of other high caste leaders.

It is interesting to note that these issues have been raked up recently by no less a person than Booker prize-winning author, Arundhati Roy, in her new introduction entitled ‘The Doctor and the Saint’¹¹ to the annotated edition of *Annihilation of Caste* originally written by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. She again

raised some of these issues while delivering a lecture at the University of Kerala in the memory of Mahatma Ayyankali, a renowned dalit leader of the State. In the course of her speech, she castigated Gandhi for his racist and casteist approach. She even demanded that it was high time that all institutions named after Gandhi to be rechristened.¹² The points raised by Roy have been resurfacing off and on.¹³ In response to the points raised by Roy, Rajmohan Gandhi wrote a longish piece “Independence and Social Justice: The Ambedkar –Gandhi Debate.”¹⁴ Roy again tried to defend her original position by reiterating her arguments originally presented in her introduction.¹⁵

In this series, a new book viz. *The South African Gandhi Stretcher Bearer of Empire* was published simultaneously both in India and United States in 2015. It is to be noted that the annotated edition of *Annihilation of Caste* and the new book was published in India by the same group. This book was written by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed scholars associated with South African universities. They argue that Gandhi’s “racism was matched by his class (and caste) prejudice towards the Indian indentured.” These developments created misconceptions about Gandhi’s approach to these issues among general readers who have not studied Gandhi systematically and in detail.

All these controversies and misconceptions provide an opportunity to revisit Gandhi’s struggle against caste-based discriminations and his fight for dignity of people both in South Africa and India. This study attempts to take into account all major writings as well as actions of Gandhi on these issues which cropped up in the course of his long and eventful life. In other words, both the writings and the major events from Gandhi’s life would have to be reviewed to clarify and understand Gandhi’s mind and his actual practice. This will give a holistic vision of all the issues involved in respect of

Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability. It has to be admitted that his views on caste and *varna* are to some extent likely to produce misconceptions and controversies, if it is analysed out of context and time. Therefore, this study would deal with Gandhi's thinking and actions in regard to caste discriminations including untouchability and their evolutions, if any, in the course of his life.

Early Life

In order to know whether he was consistent in his approach on the question of caste discriminations or it evolved in the course of his eventful life it would be quite expedient to go back to his early life. Recalling his early life in 1921, he explained his protest against the practice of untouchability which started at a very tender age of twelve at his very home. A scavenger named Uka, an 'untouchable', used to come to his house for cleaning latrines. Very often Gandhi used to ask his my mother why he was forbidden to touch him. If inadvertently he even touched him, he was required to perform ablutions. As an obedient child, he performed ablutions under protest saying that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion. Therefore, he reminded his mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with an untouchable as a sinful act. Despite such a scolding at a home he would quite often touch untouchables at his school. But as a truthful child he never concealed these facts from his parents and performed the ablution asked by them; though he never took it as a religious obligation. He recalls a story from *Ramayana* where a *nishad*, who were considered to be untouchable, took Rama across Ganga in his own boat. If Ram did not consider him as an untouchable, it would not be taken less than a sin and sacrilege if a human being practices untouchability. Gandhi admits the fact that it was not crystallized as a conviction at the age of twelve,¹⁶ but at the same time he regarded untouchability as a sin.¹⁶

Young Mohandas not only rejected the practice of untouchability, he even went much beyond caste and religious barriers. This could be easily illustrated by his long friendship with Sheikh Mehtab, a Muslim. It is to be noted that during those days for caste Hindus any friendship going beyond caste and religion was unthinkable. But even during his school days, he broke these barriers and stuck with friendship of Mehtab lasting at least for a decade in spite of latter's wicked nature and dubious character. The fact that Mehtab successfully tried to take Gandhi on a stray path is not so much relevant for the present study. What needs to be underlined is the fact that Gandhi is free from caste and religious prejudices even during his adolescence years. That he did not care much for caste system is also illustrated by the fact that when he was made outcaste for his decision to go England for higher studies by his caste men he remained adamant and totally indifferent to the feelings of his caste men. It is true that after coming from England he did performed some acts of atonement but it is quite evident from his writings in the *Autobiography* that he was not much bothered about his excommunication from his caste nor did he nourish much ill feeling against his people who had excommunicated him. Nor was he too much keen to get back to his fold of caste.¹⁷ One could also infer from his adamant decision to go to England by crossing the sea that he did not suffer from any racist feelings. After all, during those days a caste Hindu was not supposed to cross the sea, lest he violates his religion. He was aware that he was going to land of the Whites who were highly prejudiced against the coloured races. Thus he stood his ground on both counts of breaking caste as well as racial barriers.

England and South African Phases

Gandhi's three year stay in England and his interactions with people of different religions and ideological orientations not only broadened his vision but also freed him from limited

barriers of religion, caste and race. It is worth noting that Gandhi even in his younger days while living in India was not a narrow minded and conservative religious person. During his stay in England, he was introduced to different religious and spiritual traditions and their scriptures including the *Holy Bible*, *BhagawatGita* and some Buddhist and Islamic literature like the *Light of Asia* and Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. All these readings and acquaintances inspired him to unify the basic teachings of different religions.¹⁸ Later recalling his days in London, he wrote in his *Autobiography* "That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly." Renunciation in every tradition including Hinduism brings a man at a point where he becomes free from narrow limitations and helps him to develop a universal outlook which involves crossing all social barriers such as race and caste. These references to his life in England are simply meant to underline the process of broadening of Gandhi's vision and should not be taken as an attempt to project him as a Mahatma when he was just an ordinary law student. What is being emphasized here is the fact of the gradual broadening of his worldview through his wider contacts of secular, spiritual and atheist groups. One could easily infer from his early life that young Mohandas to a great extent, transcended over caste and racial prejudices.

It was in 1893 Gandhi had gone to South Africa in search of a better prospect as a lawyer. In South Africa, he was faced with racial discrimination both in personal as well as societal terms. In the course of his long stay in South of more than 21 years he evolved a strategy expressed in the form of *satyagraha* which turned out to be quite effective in meeting the challenge of racial discrimination and getting some relief and respite for the people of Indian origins in South Africa in his fight for human dignity. It would be interesting to narrate the history of his fight against racial discrimination but it is beyond the scope of our analysis.

The case of Balasundaram, a Tamil indentured labour, employed by a White settler could be cited to illustrate Gandhi's concern for protecting the dignity of the poor and downtrodden section of Indian people living in South Africa even in the initial stages. Balasundaram was badly beaten by his employer. He came to Gandhi with tattered clothes, broken teeth with bleeding mouth. There was an obnoxious practice where by an indentured labour was supposed to take off his headgear before his European master. The system of indentured labour was in no way less than slavery. He had appeared before Gandhi, with a very humiliating and demeaning demeanour. He had even taken his headgear in front of Gandhi. Gandhi not only was saddened but even felt a kind of personal humiliation being a member of Indian community. Gandhi was very much concerned about protecting his dignity and asked him to put back his head gear. Gandhi not only got him medically treated but also got a legal case filed against his employer. The case of Balasundaram was ultimately settled. His case and the kind treatment which Gandhi had given to him reached out to the large sections of indentured labour, most of them belonged to depressed classes. They could see that here was a man who was not only sympathetic to them but also ever willing to take up cudgels on their behalf. Thus a stream of indentured labourers started visiting Gandhi's office with their own tales of woe and misery. This case has touched Gandhi to the core of his being so much so that later reflecting on the case he wrote "It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow beings."¹⁹ That shows his deep concern for the dignity of all men whatever may be their caste, colour or creed.

How much Gandhi had gone beyond caste prejudices could be illustrated by his firm decision to forsake his wife who refused to clean chamber pots used by one of his clerks who was a Christian, born of *Panchama* parents in South Africa. It

would be quite appropriate to relate the story in Gandhi's own words. "I was far from being satisfied by her merely carrying the pot. I would have her do it cheerfully. So I said, raising my voice: 'I will not stand this nonsense in my house.' The words pierced her like an arrow. She shouted back: 'Keep your house to yourself and let me go.' I forgot myself, and the spring of compassion dried up in me. I caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate, which was just opposite the ladder, and proceeded to open it with the intention of pushing her out."²⁰ These words echo his total commitment against caste and racial prejudices and total rejection of untouchability.

He welcomed inter-religious marriages even during his South African days. Henry Polak one of his close associates in his Phoenix experiment was a Jew. He was married to a lady who was Christian by birth. Gandhi described, "Their common religion was the religion of ethics". Similarly, another associate Albert H. West who was in charge of the weekly Indian Opinion got married while he was in Phoenix Settlement. She was from a family of shoemakers. Gandhi welcomed Mrs. West and her mother to Phoenix which was common home for all. Gandhi never considered shoemaking as an untouchable's work. He himself mastered this work and used to make sandals while he was in jail and once he presented to General Smuts a pair of sandals made by him.

In December 1901, he attended the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress and moved a resolution on problems of Indians in South Africa. One finds Gandhi deeply anguished by seeing the prevalence of 'untouchability in a fair measure'²¹ even among Congress delegates. What shocked him more was the insanitary and unhygienic conditions in and around the premises where the Congress session was being held, particularly in the lavatories. He tried to impress upon Congress volunteers to undertake the cleaning work. They flatly refused by saying that 'that is not our work, it is the

scavenger's work.²² Finding the entire cleaning beyond him, he satisfied himself by cleaning the lavatory used by him.

Finally, as a result of series of struggles led by Gandhi, the South African Government appointed a Commission under the chairmanship of Sir William Solomon, to look into the grievances of Indians on 11 December 1913, which led to the passage of Indian Relief Bill in 26 June 1914 and termination of the struggle which had started in 1906.

The Indian phase and Gandhi's approach to *Varna*, Caste and the issue of Untouchability

As it is well known Gandhi came back to India with great hope of applying and testing some of his ideas evolved in the course of his South African sojourn. In particular, he was deeply involved with his ideas of *Swaraj* and *Satyagraha* and wanted to test their applicability in the Indian soil. Gandhi was fully aware of the cross current of national movement as well as some of the intractable problems like caste and religion in the country. In this part of the study, no attempt would be made towards a comprehensive assessment of all that he did including leading the national movement during more than three decades of his eventful life. Here the primary focus is on views and actions in respect of *Varna*, Caste and the issue of Untouchability. In this regard, it is necessary to differentiate his views on *Varnashram* and caste. As we know the problem of untouchability was constant refrain of his life and work. But after coming to India in 1915, it became a more than an intellectual concern. He had to face and work in the concrete social condition of India in which caste was an important factor.

It was at Shantiniketan that Gandhi came to realize that scavenging work was the most intricate problem of Indian society and he and his coworkers from Phoenix would have to take up this challenging work with all earnestness. This was further confirmed when Phoenix party led by Gandhi visited

several places including Haridwar where *Kumbha Mela* was in progress. Gandhi was busy there giving *Darshan* to the people and Maganlal Gandhi had to lead from the front in the scavenging work with his Phoenix co-workers. That was the first lesson Gandhi wanted to teach to the people of India that caste barriers are meaningless and anybody doing scavenging work could not be put on the lower rung of the society. Earlier during his stay at Shantiniketan with the cooperation of teachers and students he had undertaken all kinds of work including scavenging to break the caste barriers prevailing in the society. When he founded the *Satyagraha* Ashram in May 1915, he came face to face with the problems of *Varna*, caste, *untouchability*. He tried to clearly spell out his approach to all these problems when he listed the vows which every inmate of *Satyagraha* Ashram had to swear by. The vow of untouchability in the Ashram was unequivocal and was marked by its total eradication. It reads as follows “The so-called untouchables have equal place in the Ashram with others.”²³

Similarly, he made a clear and categorical distinction between *Varnashram* and caste system whereas he totally rejected the caste system prevailing in the society but he stood by *Varnashram*. It is evident from his vows of the Ashram penned by him. “In the Ashram caste distinction has no place. It is believed that caste distinction has caused harm to the Hindu dharma. The ideas of the superior and inferior status and pollution by contact implied in caste distinction serves to destroy the dharma of non-violence. However, the Ashram does believe in *Varna* and the *Ashram dharma*. The division of *Varna* is based upon occupation. One who follows that division lives by his parents’ occupation, not inconsistent with larger dharma, and spends his spare time in acquiring and advancing true knowledge as well as performing service.” He added, “The Ashram believes, as in the *Varna*, so in the four Ashrams of the Brahmacharya, *Grihastha*, *Vanprastha*, and *Sanyasa*. But the

Ashram does not believe that life of renunciation can be lived in a forest only or by giving up performance of one's duties. The Ashram believes that dharma of renunciation can be and should be observed while leading a normal life and that it alone is true renunciation."

Like many other areas in which Gandhi made contributions by changing the traditional notions of Hindu religion, here he virtually redefined the nature of *Sanyasa* by underlining its secular nature. Gandhi was very clear that in keeping with Ashram principles he would admit a worthy untouchable candidate to the Ashram at the first opportunity. He did admit an untouchable family which created a big stir both inside and outside the ashram. They were being insulted for drawing water from the common well but Gandhi had advised them put up with such problems without sharply reacting to such humiliation. There was also protest from some of the female members including Kasturba. But Gandhi refused to yield to either internal or external pressure. Even monetary assistance from the supporters of the ashram stopped and there were threats of social boycott. Gandhi stood his ground and even threatened to go and stay with untouchables and live on whatever they could get by manual labour for sustenance. In the course of Champaran *Satyagraha* he also experienced caste discriminations even on the part of social and political activists. He persuaded them to give up such practices based on social and religious prejudices.

It is clear from the above discussion that Gandhi had very consistent views on the issue of caste system in general and *untouchability* in particular. It is true that at this stage Gandhi did not impose the practice of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage on unwilling people. As he put in 1918 "We are not bound to subscribe to promiscuous inter-dining and intermarriage." But in the course of time his approach to inter-dining and inter-caste marriage underwent radical changes. By

1920 Gandhi took over the leadership national movement by launching non-cooperation movement. It was in course of non-cooperation movement that he has established a number of institutions for national education. Gujarat Vidyapith was one of them. He showed his commitment against the scourge of untouchability by taking the decision to admit untouchables in all the schools under the purview of Gujarat Vidyapith. If we take into account then prevailing social condition in the country, such a bold step was nothing short of a revolutionary measure to fight the demon of untouchability.

In a speech that Gandhi delivered at the Suppressed Classes Conference in Ahmedabad in 1921 underscores Gandhi's commitment and identification with the cause of untouchables. He said, "...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 prayed that if I should die with any of my desires unfulfilled, with my service of the 'untouchables' unfinished, with my Hinduism unfulfilled, I may be born again amongst the 'untouchables' to bring my Hinduism to its fulfillment."²⁴. It needs to be added that such a firm attitude did not come to him like a bolt from the blue. Rather it was a culminating point of his liberal and egalitarian outlook which was to be found from the very beginning of the life. He reminded the people that the accusing the British people for enslaving us is meaningless so long we go on enslaving a section of our own people. He wrote in *Young India*, in 1921. "The curse of foreign domination and the attendant exploitation is the justest retribution meted out by God to us for our exploitation of a sixth of our own race and their studied degradation in the sacred, name of religion. Hence is it that I have put the removal of untouchability as an indispensable condition of attainment of *Swaraj*. Slaveholders ourselves, we have no business to quarrel with our own slavery

if we are not prepared unconditionally to enfranchise our own slaves. We must first cast out the beam of untouchability from our own eyes before we attempt to remove the mote from that of our masters.”²⁵ Subsequently he emphasized on three major programmes viz. removal of untouchability, Hindu- Muslim unity, popularisation of Khadi as means for achieving true *Swaraj*.

Gandhi supported Vaikom *Satyagraha* (1924-25), which involved the right of untouchables to walk on the roads around Vaikom temple, which was located in the princely state of Travancore (present Kerala). Not only that, he even personally got involved in the negotiations. In one of his speeches in Travancore, he categorically stated that he was ready to renounce Hinduism if he found it supporting practice of untouchability. “Untouchability in its extreme form has always caused so much pain, because I consider myself to be a Hindu of Hindus saturated with the spirit of Hinduism. I have failed to find a single warrant for the existence of untouchability as we believe and practise it today in all those books which we call as Hindu Shastras. But as I have repeatedly said in other places, if I found that Hinduism really countenanced untouchability I should have no hesitation in renouncing Hinduism itself. For I hold that religion, to be worthy of the name, must not be inconsistent with the fundamental truths of ethics and morality. But as I believe that untouchability is no part of Hinduism, I cling to Hinduism, but daily become more and more impatient of this hideous wrong.”²⁶

It was around the same period that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a prominent *dalit* activist, also entered into the political and social arena of the country. He led Mahad Satyagraha on 20th March 1927 demanding right of the untouchables to draw water from a public tank in a village called Mahad, which is currently in Raigad district of Maharashtra. Earlier they had been denied

such rights by caste Hindus. Soon the Simon Commission, comprising all White members, visited India with a view to consider and recommend a framework for new Constitution of India. The Congress boycotted it and a big movement was launched with a countrywide slogan 'Simon Go Back'. Ambedkar was not in favour of boycott and presented his own views from the perspective of the suppressed classes. A number of untouchable organisations presented memorandums to the Commission demanding separate electorates for themselves. Any way, Simon Commission's working and Report was overtaken by Gandhi led movements like Salt *Satyagraha* and Civil Disobedience Movement. So the British Government was forced to ignore Simon Commission Report and it called for a Round Table Conference. The First Round Table Conference was boycotted by the Congress party hence it came to a naught. Meanwhile, in the early part of 1931, Gandhi Irwin Pact was signed which opened path for Second Round Table Conference.

It was in the Second Round Table Conference which brought Gandhi and Ambedkar face to face. Both reiterated their long held viewpoints, which brought their differences in approach to the problem of untouchability to the fore. Ambedkar insisted on separate electorate for suppressed classes, where as Gandhi as the sole representative of the Congress claimed to represent every section of Indian society including the suppressed classes. He was of the firm opinion that taking out the suppressed classes from the broader fold of Hindu society would do more harm than good to them. He explained it by saying that once they go out of the Hindu fold the possibility of reforms in Hindu society leading to amelioration of the conditions of suppressed classes would be precluded once forever. On the other hand, Ambedkar was of the opinion that untouchables could never have the feeling of liberation so long they remain as an integral part of the Hindu society. No agreement could be reached and Ramsay

Macdonald, Prime Minister and Chairman of the Conference, ended the meeting by saying that if no agreement was reached between the warring parties, he would give his own Award. In the course of his submission, Gandhi had made it clear that he would risk his life if any attempt was to be made to take out suppressed classes from the manifold of Hindu society. Ultimately, Macdonald gave his Communal Award in August 1932. Gandhi demanded its withdrawal and in the absence of any positive response from the Government, he sat on fast unto death on 20 September 1932.

Gandhi's fast stirred entire country and great pressure was mounted on Ambedkar to come to the negotiating table with Gandhi. With support of some of the tallest leaders of India, a compromise was reached which led to the signing of Poona Pact. It was signed on 24 September 1932 by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, M.R. Jayakar, Chunilal Mehta, B.R. Ambedkar, M.C. Rajah, P.D. Solanki, C.R. Rajagopalchari, G.D. Birla and others. It provided the reservations for the members of suppressed classes. However, it was decided that joint electoral system would be retained. As a part of compromise provision was made for the doubling of the reserved seats for the suppressed classes from what was originally provided under the Communal Award. It is worth noting that Ambedkar at this juncture even went to the extent of saying that there was more in common between him and Gandhi than between him and others.²⁷ It shows the degree of reconciliation achieved as a result of "epic fast". In the wake of Gandhi's fast, thousands of temples including Kashi Vishwanath opened their gates for the members of suppressed classes. This process continued even after Gandhi came out of the jail. The Brahmins and the untouchables crossing the barrier of caste inter-dined and intermingled throughout the country.

Soon after signing the Poona Pact, the caste Hindus convened an All India Conference consisted of the caste-

Hindus and Depressed classes at Bombay on 25th September 1932. To carry on the propaganda for the abolition of untouchability, the caste-Hindus laid the foundation for an All India AntiUntouchability League in Bombay on 30th September 1932 with the blessings of Gandhi. The most remarkable part of this new organization was that the depressed class leaders like B. R. Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah were also members of its central Board. The League was subsequently renamed as Harijan Sevak Sangh, having the headquarters at Delhi.²⁸ But Ambedkar disassociated with it after three years. With the aim of upliftment of depressed classes Gandhi launched a new journal called '*Harijan*'. It appeared in English, Gujarati and Hindi. Even from jail, Gandhi contributed a number of articles in the columns of *Harijan*. He was released on 22nd August 1933. On the day of his release, he declared that Harijan service would always be after his heart and would be the very breath of life for him, most precious than his daily bread. He further stated that that he could not live without *Harijan* service for one single minute.²⁹ At this juncture, Gandhi more than ever appeared determined to work for the total eradication of untouchability. Once out of jail; he went around the country and almost worked incessantly for a year creating a new environment of close amity in the Hindu society.

This was time when differences of Gandhi and Ambedkar on the question of untouchability became very apparent. Gandhi's strategy was a part of religious reforms by stinging the conscious of the caste Hindus. On the other hand, Ambedkar insisted on organization of untouchables for militant struggle with a programme of socio-economic reforms and for coming out of the Hindu fold. Unlike Gandhi, who as a national leader, had to carry different sections of Indian society with conflicting interests, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was solely committed to serve the sectional interest of the depressed classes. That

made all the difference between their respective approaches to the problems of untouchables. That also could account for their difference in strategy in tackling the problems of untouchables. If we keep in mind, the differences of their perspectives, it would go a long way to explain their difference both in their approaches and strategy. They also differed in their approach and assessment of the British rule in India. Gandhi had turned into a bitter critic of British rule and started working vigorously for the *Swaraj* of the Indian people. On the other hand, Ambedkar could find a protective cover under the wings of British for the depressed classes. Hence, he wanted the problem of depressed classes to be solved first by getting removed the yoke of the caste Hindus on the depressed classes. For him, continuation of British rule was no anathema, whereas for Gandhi it was nothing sort of a satanic rule. Their different strategy and programmes for suppressed classes was actually embedded in their different perspectives on all these counts. It is beyond the scope of this study to go into all these details.

Gandhi's decision to go fast unto death in September 1932 was not a result of a sudden knee jerk reaction. He had been consistently thinking and evolving his ideas regarding untouchability and even implemented them in his own personal life. For instance, on 6th March 1927, Gandhi had got his son Manilal married to Sushilabehn, niece of Kishorilal Mashruvala who did not belong to his sub-caste. Another time, when his other son, Devdas Gandhi, wanted to marry Lakshmi, daughter of C. Rajagopalachari, a high-caste Brahmin, he wanted them to wait for five years before their marriage could be solemnised. Finally they got married with the consent and blessings of Gandhi. Not only that, he had arranged the marriage of Lakshmi his adopted daughter from untouchable couple, to Marutidas, a boy coming from a South Indian Brahmin family. All these instances only go to prove the unity of his profession and practice in respect of untouchability.

Despite such a revolutionary steps taken by Gandhi of late some critics have strongly objected to the use of term *Harijan* for the dalits used by Gandhi as early as 1931 much before Poona Pact. They often forget that Gandhi had used this term to highlight and assign a high position to the untouchables in the social hierarchy. He was underlining the fact that untouchables had ‘toiled and moiled and dirtied’ to help the caste Hindus to lead a clean, dirt free and comfortable life. These people often forgets the other part of the comment which Gandhi had made while calling untouchables as Harijans, when they ask if they are the children of God, are the caste Hindus the children of satan? They should bear in mind that Gandhi himself had called caste Hindus as *Durjan* (men of evil) as they have suppressed and exploited the untouchables for millenniums. They also ignore the fact that the term *Harijan* was first used by Narasinha Mehta. Though belonging to Brahmin community, he had dedicated his entire life in the service of untouchables. Gandhi had just taken the word *Harijan* from him and had applied in a new context with new meaning.³⁰

Gandhi also categorically stated, “Restrictions on inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage is no part of Hindu religion. It is a social custom which crept into Hinduism when perhaps it was in its decline.”³¹ Further he added “Today these two prohibitions are weakening Hindu society, and emphasis on them has turned the attention of the mass mind from the fundamentals which are vital to life's growth.” He even went to the extent of saying that dining and marriage restrictions stunt Hindu society. It was brought into the notice of Gandhi by a correspondent that he found it difficult to reconcile Gandhi’s recent writings about inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriage and corresponding writings of some years ago. What Gandhi wrote in reply to him shows his ever evolving mind and the very approach to the issue. “I would like to say to this diligent

reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.”³²

It has to be remembered that Gandhi was touring the country in connection with his struggle against untouchability. It was amidst such battle that Bihar earthquake struck the people. Gandhi was in the Southern part of the country. Here one need not engage in the debate whether or not his characterization of Bihar earthquake as God’s wrathful retribution actually lent to promotion of superstitious belief as perceived Tagore. The point to be underlined is that his mind and heart was so full of struggle against menace of untouchability that he could not held to characterize it as the result of practice of untouchability and their suppression by caste Hindus. Defending the charge superstitious belief among the people he said “With me the connection between cosmic phenomena and human behaviour is a living faith that draws me nearer to my God, humbles me and makes me readier for facing Him. Such a belief would be a degrading superstition, if out of the depth of my ignorance I used it for castigating my opponents.”³³

All the three Round Table Conferences failed to produce a general consensus on the issue of constitution making in India. The British Government came out with the Government of India Act of 1935 through parliamentary committee of the British Parliament which provided provincial autonomy to Indian provinces. Ambedkar was so much

aggrieved against the treatment meted out to untouchables at the hands of caste Hindus that he went to the extent of saying that he would not die as Hindu. After sometime he lost interest in the opening of the gates of temples for untouchables. He even set up his own organization and decided plunge into the electoral politics. Meanwhile he was invited by *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal*, Lahore, an organization of Hindu Reformers, to deliver the presidential address in 1936. Ambedkar prepared a quite longish piece of his address and get it printed in Bombay own his own. It is that address in the book form which came to be known as *Annihilation of Caste*. He could not deliver his speech, as the *Mandal* wanted him to drop a small portion of that speech where he was talking more of an outsider rather than being an insider of Hindu society. This was unacceptable position to the *Mandal*, as they were working as the reformers of Hindu society. They did not want an outsider to attack Hinduism per se. It should not be forgotten that a couple of years back Gandhi had launched his biggest movement for the eradication of caste with his own strategy and approach which has attracted both caste Hindus and untouchables in a big way. There was unprecedented bonhomie between caste Hindus and untouchables which might have posed a serious threat to leadership of Ambedkar. Ambedkar was getting apprehensive of loosing his support base among the untouchables. He wanted to use the opportunity of his address at the *Mandal* to chalk out his own strategy and even checkmate emerging challenge of Gandhi. This is what he tried to achieve through the publication of *Annihilation of Caste*.

It is difficult to say why Ambedkar alienated both Gandhi and *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal*. They were working for the eradication of caste as much as Ambedkar was concerned. If at all there was difference it was not one of purpose but that of approach and strategy. It seems that Ambedkar was more interested in annihilation of Hinduism rather than caste. This is

evident from his book *Annihilation of Caste* in which he virtually ruled out any possibility of reform in Hinduism. He also refused to accept that even theoretically any difference could be there between *varna* and caste. He castigated Gandhi for defending caste under the guise of *Varnashram*. He never got reconciled, it is quite apparent in his book, to the fact that Gandhi has succeeded through Poona Pact and his subsequent struggle in keeping the untouchables within the fold of Hindu society. One could find some justification for Ambedkar's attitude and anger being the victim of caste discrimination. But his strategy against Hinduism amounted to throwing baby with the bath water. No one was more aware than Gandhi for Ambedkar's bitter reaction on Hinduism in general and caste in particular. It is evident from the perusal of Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* and Gandhi's response to it that there was a fundamental difference in their approaches to each other. Ambedkar was not willing to accept Gandhi's credential as radical social reformer of Hinduism and his commitment total annihilation of caste. On the other hand Gandhi was more sympathetic even to Ambedkar's vitriolic pronouncements as they emanated from his feeling of victim hood. Responding to Ambedkar's book Gandhi wrote in *Harijanon* 11 July 1936.

“The readers will recall the fact that Dr. Ambedkar was to have presided last May at the annual conference of the *Jat-Pat-Todak- Mandal* of Lahore. But the conference itself was cancelled because Dr. Ambedkar's address was found by the Reception Committee to be unacceptable. How far a Reception Committee is justified in rejecting a President of its choice because of his address that may be objectionable to it is open to question. The Committee knew Dr. Ambedkar's views on caste and the Hindu scriptures. They knew also that he had in unequivocal terms decided to give up Hinduism. Nothing less than the address that Dr. Ambedkar had prepared was to be expected from him. The Committee appears to have deprived

the public of an opportunity of listening to the original views of a man who has carved out for himself a unique position in society. Whatever label he wears in future, Dr. Ambedkar is not the man to allow himself to be forgotten. Dr. Ambedkar was not going to be beaten by the Reception Committee. He has answered their rejection of him by publishing the address at his own expense. He has priced it at 8 annas, I would suggest a reduction to 2 annas or at least 4 annas. No reformer can ignore the address. The orthodox will gain by reading it. This is not to say that the address is not open to objection. It has to be read only because it is open to serious objection. Dr. Ambedkar is a challenge to Hinduism. Brought up as a Hindu, educated by a Hindu potentate, he has become so disgusted with the so-called *Savarna* Hindus or the treatment that he and his people have received at their hands that he proposes to leave not only them but the very religion that is his and their common heritage...”³⁴

Subsequently Gandhi elaborated on his observations on Ambedkar views and defended his stand in an article published in *Harijan* on 11 July 1936. Further, Gandhi wrote in response to Sant Ram of the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal* of Lahore “I have certainly meant when I have said that if *Shastras* support the existing untouchability I should cease to call myself a Hindu. Similarly, if the *Shastras* support caste, as we know it today in all its hideousness, I may not call myself or remain a Hindu since I have no scruples about interdining or intermarriage. I need not repeat my position regarding *Shastras* and their interpretation. I venture to suggest to Shri Sant Ram that it is the only rational and correct and morally defensible position and it has ample warrant in Hindu tradition.”³⁵ (See Appendix-I)

Ambedkar responded irreverently to Gandhi’s observation and accused him of being a great defender of caste Hindus and caste system by feigning distinction between *Varna* and caste. (See Appendix -II) After that Dr. Ambedkar entered into the arena of electoral battles and contested the elections

both in 1937 and 1946 under the banner of his own organization. Unfortunately he turned out to be unsuccessful on both occasions.

Arundhati Roy³⁶ has taken serious objections to the write up *The Ideal Bhang i*³⁷ of Gandhi which appeared in *Harijan* on 28 November 1936 (See Appendix-III). Gandhi presented the picture of an ideal *Bhangi* who would have all the qualifications needed for the job. Nowhere in that write up he links it up with any particular caste. He compares this job in respect of the society with that of a mother who washes and cleans the baby with all love, sincerity and earnestness. Thus, he does not look at the job of a *bhangi* as degrading one. Rather by comparing it with mother's job, he puts it to a higher pedestal. It should not be forgotten perhaps he had painted himself as the ideal *bhangi* because he had been doing that job for decades. Roy refers to a suggestion by Gandhi that an ideal *bhangi* need not engage himself/herself in accumulation of wealth. Again it seems that he was writing about himself as he was living in an ideal state of total non-possession. Yet Roy goes out of her way to say that he pleaded for the system of trusteeship for the rich people where as he wants a poor *Bhangi* to rejoice in his poverty without any desire for accumulation of wealth. Roy forgets that reduction of needs and self imposed poverty Gandhi advocated even for the elite. It was one of the fundamental principles of his life. Besides, she is not perhaps aware that the trusteeship was meant to cover everyone in the society as any kind of talent found in any member of society was to be covered by its principle. Hence her criticism is not only off the mark but it also amounts to gross distortion of Gandhi's actual positions.

After the elections in 1937 and the formation of provincial governments in July, Congress got big foothold at the level of State power. Thus the role of a State started being viewed in a much more favourable perspective than what was

there when Congress was far away from State power. By early part of 1940 with the prospect of Indian National Army (INA) being organized under the leadership of Subash Chandra Bose and with hectic preparations for the Quit India Movement, it could have been any body's guess that India could soon become independent. Gandhi outlined his programme of national reconstruction in the form of 18 fold Constructive Programme in the year 1941. He included the removal of *untouchability* as the second item which underlines the importance he attached to it. He considered *Satyagraha* and constructive programme should go hand in hand. Constructive programmes supplement *satyagraha* in Gandhian scheme of social change. Inclusion of removal of untouchability clearly establishes the fact that breaking of caste barrier even when he was involved in individual *satyagraha* and making preparations for Quit India Movement was not far away from his mind. Emphasising the role of Congressmen in the removal caste barrier he wrote, "If Hindu Congressmen take up the cause for its own sake, they will influence the so-called *Sanatanis* far more extensively than they have hitherto done. They should approach them not in a militant spirit but as befits their non-violence, in a spirit of friendliness. And so far as the *Harijans* are concerned, every Hindu should make common cause with them and befriend them in their awful isolation-such isolation as perhaps the world has never seen in the monstrous immensity one witnesses in India. I know from experience how difficult the task is. But it is part of the task of building the edifice of *Swaraj*. And the road to *Swaraj* is steep and narrow. There are many slippery ascents and many deep chasms. They have all to be negotiated with unfaltering step before we can reach the summit and breathe the fresh air of freedom."³⁸

During this period, one finds a few new strands of themes in Gandhi's perception about *untouchability*. That led him to lay greater emphasis on the role of a State and

Constitution to solve the problem of *untouchability*. Thus he started talking more concretely about the constitutional measures including making practice of *untouchability* as a legal offence, reservation of seats to tackle the issue. While responding to the questions of an untouchable M.L.A., he wrote in 1942. “The constitution which I could influence would contain a provision making the observance of untouchability in any shape or form an offence. The so-called ‘untouchables’ would have seats reserved for them in all elected bodies according to their population within the electoral area concerned.”³⁹

Another strand of Gandhi’s perspective on *untouchability* during this period came in the form his categorical distinction between *Varna* and caste. What was more even his view on *Varna* was slightly changing in its emphasis. While still sticking to his earlier position *Varna* as the basis of an ideal social system which once prevailed in ancient India, he started reiterating that in the present India it has ceased to be of any practical use. That is why he has started pleading with Indian people that all of them irrespective of their social and ritual status must consider themselves as *Shudras* or even *Ati-Shudras*. This was a plea for social equality on an unprecedented scale. He even took out heredity, mainstay of traditional *varna* and caste system from his new understanding.

On 31 May 1945 Gandhi in his foreword to his collection writings on *Varnavyavastha* wrote: “...It would not be correct to say that my views on *Varnashram* are the same as they were in the past. I have said that the *varnas* and the *ashramas* are the gifts of Hinduism to the world, and I still adhere to that view. But today neither the *varnas* nor the *ashramas* of my conception are in existence anywhere. They should form a part of our religion. But it can be said that these days the *ashramas* have disappeared altogether and *varnas* are found in the form of privileges. The claim of being a Brahmin,

a *Kshatriya*, a *Vaishya* connotes pride. How can there be pride where there is religion? And the *Shudras* are not taken into consideration at all! *Shudras* are low and the *Ati-Shudras* are the lowest of the low. This is not religion but a negation of it. ...Where are the four *varnas* of the *Gita* today? *Varna* is entirely different from caste. There are numerous castes. I know of no authority for caste in the *Gita* or any other scripture. The *Gita* has prescribed four *varnas* and they are based on one's aptitudes and *Karma*. I am saying four just to give you an example. There can be more or less *varnas* than that. But there prevails only one *varna* today, that is, of *Shudras*', or, you may call it, *Ati-Shudras*', or *Harijans*' or untouchables".... In the eyes of religion all men are equal. An educated, intelligent and affluent man is no better than an ignorant, stupid and poor man. If he is cultured, that is to say, if he has been purified by *dharma*, he will utilise his education, intelligence and money in the service of his illiterate, stupid and poor brethren. And he will strive to give them, that is to say, the whole world, what he has got. If that is true of religion, then in our present condition, devoid of religion our *dharma* lies in becoming *Ati-Shudras* voluntarily.⁴⁰

Further, in a letter to Vallabhram Vaidya in December 1945, Gandhi tried to remove the prevailing misconceptions about his own concept of *Varnashram*. He wrote: "What I believe is that if we want to preserve whatever is good in *Varnashrama* every Hindu has to become not only a *Shudra* but an *atishudra*, and regard himself as such. And as a true indication of it marriages should really take place only between *atishudras* and the so-called other *varnas*". Those who claim that Gandhi had tried to protect caste system under the clock of *Varnashram* should ponder over Gandhi's changing approach to mitigate the problem of untouchability even by advocating inter-caste marriages. It is also significant note that he also in a way stood for total annihilation of caste as he wanted every

Hindu to consider himself belonging to *Shudra* and even *atishudra* castes.

Another important change in his strand was his decision to stay in *Harijan* quarters in order to identify with them during his visit to Bombay and Delhi. He explained the reasons for his stay untouchable quarters in the columns of *Harijan* of March 31, 1946. "Friends are puzzled over my keen desire to reside in Bhangi quarters in the cities or towns, I may visit. To ask why I have not entertained that desire all these years would be more pertinent. To answer why I did not have the desire long ago must be reserved for a future occasion. Just now I must answer why the desire has come upon me at all.

I have for some time been saying that we must all be *Bhangis* or untouchables. But it has worried me that I have not accorded the statement with corresponding action. It may not be possible to establish complete accordance with the wish. But it ought to be done so far as possible. Whilst this thought was agitating me, I got the news which I have already shared with the readers that in Gujarat only one well and one temple is shared with Harijans and this in Karadi. Whether the news is true or not is immaterial here. The material thing is the reaction produced on my mind by the news. To be angry was madness. The news quickened the desire for residence in untouchable quarters. I said to myself: 'If I lived apart from Harijans, what right had I to question the action of others who went further in their adherence to untouchability? But whether the others changed their mode or not was not' for me to judge. If it was my duty to reside in Harijan quarters I must perform it irrespective of the reaction of the step on the others.' This is the thought which is possessing me and goading me to the adumbrated action."⁴¹

The fourth changing strand in his thought process, that he openly started pleading for inter caste marriages in which one of the party must be from the untouchables. He will attend

and bless any couple in his ashram only if one of party of the marriage was an untouchable. It was on that count he refused his blessing on the occasion of marriage of Narayan Desai, son of Mahadev Desai whom Gandhi had always treated as his own son. Naryan Desai wrote about Gandhi's approach in the following words. "Gandhiji supported the *Varnashrama*. But, during the last twelve years of his life, he attended marriages only when either the groom or the bride was untouchable. He made no exception to this practice even in the case of young men and women who were particularly close to him"⁴² Thus it is evident that Gandhi has become almost non-compromising on the issue of caste discrimination and untouchability and his fight for human dignity, even going to the extent of ignoring his consideration for personal relationship.

On the basis of the survey of Gandhi's thought processes and work in respect of *Varna*, caste and untouchability for many decades one can see that he has stuck to his basic positions on these issues and all along fought for human dignity. What is remarkable is that he continued to evolve and grow throughout the period while retaining his basic formulations and ideas. Thus consistency, evolution and growth are embedded in the entire process of his life and work. This in itself is a great achievement by any standard of human endeavour. Another aspect which strikes any scholar of Gandhian thought that unlike many others he did not go always out of his way to defend his earlier held ideas and actions. At times, he has the courage of conviction to say that he has committed Himalayan blunders.

The present study had gone a long way to show his commitment and sincerity in his fight for human dignity which started at an early age and it became more intense in the course of his eventful life. In this struggle, he faced the challenges from different sectional interests like leaders of depressed classes on the one hand and those of Hindu fundamentalists on the other.

It goes to his credit that he steered clear of these extremes and could always find a middle path to carry the bulk of people with him. He was fighting on two fronts. He needed cross sectional mobilization to fight the British which required the very skillful art to reconcile the reconcilable. The fact that he led India to independence speaks volumes for his techniques of mass mobilisation and reconciliation of conflicting interests. He faced greater challenges in respect of problems of caste and untouchability. At times, he had to fight with caste Hindus whose support he had to count for his fight for independence of the country. On the other hand, he was committed to bring about revolutionary social change which would free untouchables from the yoke of caste Hindus in his fight for human dignity. By any standard, it was a Herculean task.

He went on adjusting his strategies for fight for human dignity to the kind of challenges he faced on all these fronts in different stages of his life and work. As a people's leader he was aware of the centrality of public opinion in such a difficult and arduous task. He had to walk with the people and get their support and yet walk ahead of them for changing their mindsets and age old pride and prejudices. That explains why he moved by step by step. At times that was expressed in his own words 'one step is enough for me'. His critics often miss the nuances of his strategic moves by accusing him that he never formulated and revealed all the strands of his fight for human dignity at one go. As this study has shown that was his real strength instead of being his weakness.

By the time, he reached the fag end of his life, as a result of his fight for human dignity the menace of caste and untouchability has been tamed to a great extent. Ambedkar, who considered himself as arch rival of Gandhi so far in the work of untouchability was concerned, joined the mainstream of Indian politics as the Chairman of Drafting Committee of the Constitution and first Law Minister in Nehru Cabinet. That was

partly out of on his own volition and partly persuaded by Gandhi and his co-workers. It also speaks for magnanimity, sagacity and his skill to weave a fabric of United India despite his failure to prevent the partition of India. It is high time that the Christian churches in India evolve a new strategy taking a clue from Gandhi's ideas and work in its fight against caste discrimination and new form of untouchability found among the Christians.

III

What Christians can learn from Gandhi's Strategy against Caste discrimination?

From the above analysis, it is clear that the basic objective of Gandhi's fight against caste discrimination and untouchability was aimed at uniting all sections of Hindu society and bring them under one umbrella on an egalitarian basis. To that end he adopted a multi pronged strategy.

To counter the argument of certain traditional groups that caste system has sanction of religious scriptures like *purush shukta* of the *Rig Veda*, he challenged them to prove that the original system was based on hierarchy and holism. He strongly argued that untouchability has no religious sanction and hence it is not a part of religion and it has to shun at all costs. He even went to extent of saying even if it is proved it has the Shastric sanction he will not accept it any case.

As the most popular leader of the country, he not only imbibed egalitarian values in his personal life but also demonstrated it through his various organizations and ashram practices. He established himself as an example for the wider masses.

He was aware that high caste Hindus has done great injustice to the lower caste brethren. So he tried to what he himself called to sting the conscience of the high caste Hindus making fully conscious of their acts of injustice. He engaged a

number of well known High caste Hindu leaders, intellectuals with a view to spread his ideas among the caste Hindus.

In his strategy to deal with the caste injustices, he build up organizations which will work for the elimination of caste prejudices and also for ameliorating the existing conditions of lower caste Hindus particularly Shudras.

Another plank of strategy was to work certain legal entitlements for these groups like some kind of reservations in the legislatures and other places.

He also promoted some organization led by leaders like Jagjivan Ram to create consciousness and even to struggle for the rights of these classes.

Last but not the least part of his strategy was not to allow the depressed classes to go out of the broad framework of Hindu society. In this regard his argument was that once they are out of Hindu system all chances of social reforms for the betterment of their conditions will sealed forever.

Through these planks of strategy, he struggled to eliminate caste prejudices from the high caste Hindus, to better the conditions of lower caste and to promote the unity of Hindu society leading to a state of egalitarian order.

As stated earlier, Christianity also passes through the stage of caste discriminations which has to go if it seeks to retain original ethos. Some of the top leaders, priests and pastors would have to take the lead like Gandhi did in respect of Hindu society. Not only that they have to work as exemplars in their fields of action following the footsteps of Jesus. The lead would have to come from high caste Christians who might open the gates of churches under their control for all irrespective of social background. They have to bear in their mind that one of the greatest contributions of Jesus was to open the gate of religion for everyone removing all the constrictions of the Jewish society. This is also quite in keeping with What Gandhi has done in our times in respect of Hindu society.

It is a positive development that some of the dalit Christians are raising their voices and building up their organizations to bring about radical changes in the Indian Christian society. Presently they are not getting much support from the dominant churches and their leadership. It behooves on the part of the dominant leadership of the churches to extend all out support to these groups and their leaders. Only through such sustained efforts a vibrant Christian society could really emerge sticking to the egalitarian principles of Jesus. To that end it would be expedient to call a high assembly of prominent churches and their leadership to chalk out a concrete strategy to particularly to promote the interests of secular religious rights of their dalit brethren. It is to be borne in mind Gandhi has gone around the country spending almost a year of life in early mid thirties to launch a vigorous campaign to promote and integrate the suppressed classes with the high caste dominant Hindu society. Similar strategy needs to be evolved on the part of prominent churches and their leaders.

There is very widespread educational network in the form of seminaries, schools, colleges and other institutions which could provide very solid base for such vigorous campaign. The people heading these institutions constitute high echelon and elite sections of the Christian society. The first step on their part would be to bring all those who have been left behind in terms of education and take some steps to even give some preferential treatment in the forms of scholarship, special coaching and other similar measures. There is great linkage between the heads of these institutions churches and the priests. If all of them join hands together a lot could be achieved for the promotion of deprived sections of Christian society that was missing in the Hindu society and Gandhi could not have that kind of support which the Christian society privileged to have. It is hoped that through such a sustained effort we can remove stain of caste discrimination from the Indian Church.

Notes and References

1. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20031117_ad-limina-india.html
2. The emphasis is added by the author.
3. <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-pope-live-pope-francis-an-argentine-meets-world-2013mar13-story.html>
4. http://www.askacatholic.com/_WebPostings/Answers/attachments/IndianBishopsMemorandumToTheVatican.pdf
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. <http://www.lastampa.it/2014/12/10/vaticaninsider/eng/world-news/indias-church-and-the-dalits-an-open-wound-pMkS32fwKyyGxAQEY4SA3O/pagina.html>
8. http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/08/11/indian_church_marks_%E2%80%98black_day%E2%80%99_for_dalits_/1330239
9. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/Acknowledgement-of-bias-raises-hope-for-Dalit-Christians/article16895188.ece>
10. *Ibid.*
11. See Arundhati Roy's Introduction, "The Doctor and The Saint" in B. R Ambedkar, *Annihilation of the Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014).
12. For details see <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Mahatma-Gandhi-was-a-casteist-Arundhati-Roy-says/articleshow/38580172.cms>

<http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/Gandhi-Looked-Down-upon-Dalits-Says-Arundhati-Roy/2014/07/18/article2335605.ece>
13. The video and text of Arundhati Roy's Mahatma Ayankali Lecture was posted in a website on August 4, 2014 See the link. <http://counterview.org/2014/08/04/the-story-of-mahat>

ma-gandhi-we-are-taught-in-school-and-we-are-made-to-believe-is-a-lie-and-its-time-we-faced-up-to-it/ See also Suresh Jnaneswaran “Missing the woods for the trees: Gandhiji and Arundhati Roy’s polemic” *Mainstream*, Vol. LII, No 41, October 4, 2014, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article5223.html>

14. Rajmohan Gandhi “Independence and Social Justice: The Ambedkar–Gandhi Debate”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 11, 2015, Vol. L, No .5.
15. Arundhati Roy “All the World’s a Half Built Dam” *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 20, 2015, Vol. L, No.25.
16. *Young India*, 4-5-'21.
17. The storm in my caste over my foreign voyage was still brewing. It had divided the caste into two camps, one of which immediately re-admitted me, while the other was bent on keeping me out. To please the former my brother took me to Nasik before going to Rajkot, gave me a bath in the sacred river and, on reaching Rajkot, gave a caste dinner. I did not like all this. But my brother's love for me was boundless, and my devotion to him was in proportion to it, and so I mechanically acted as he wished, taking his will to be law. The trouble about re-admission to the caste was thus practically over.

I never tried to seek admission to the section that had refused it. Nor did I feel even mental resentment against any of the headmen of that section. Some of these regarded me with dislike, but I scrupulously avoided hurting their feelings. I fully respected the caste regulations about ex-communication. According to these, none of my relations, including my father-in-law and mother-in-law, and even my sister and brother-in-law, could entertain me; and I would not so much as drink water at their houses. They were prepared secretly to evade the prohibition, but it went against the grain with me to do a thing in secret that I would not do in public.

The result of my scrupulous conduct was that I never had occasion to be troubled by the caste; nay, I have experienced nothing but affection and generosity from the general body of the section that still regards me as ex-communicated. They have even helped me in my work, without ever expecting me to do anything for the caste. It is my conviction that all these good things are due to my non-resistance. Had I agitated for being admitted to the caste, had I attempted to divide it into more camps, had I provoked the caste men, they would surely have retaliated, and instead of steering clear of the storm, I should on arrival from England, have found myself in a whirlpool of agitation, and perhaps a party to dissimulation.

18. But the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the *Gita*. The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloke too,' delighted me beyond measure and put me in mind of Shamal Bhatt's 'For a bowl of water, give a goodly meal' etc. My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, the *Light of Asia* and the Sermon on the Mount.
19. M. K. Gandhi *An Autobiography or the Story of My experiments with Truth*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2010), op.cit. p.143.
20. *Ibid* . p.255.
21. *Ibid*, op.cit. p.206.
22. *Ibid*.
23. <http://www.gandhiashramsabarmati.org/en/about-gandhi-ashram-menu/ashram-observances.html>
24. *Young India*, 4-5-1921.
25. *Young India*, 13-10-1921.

26. *Young India*, 20-10-1927.
27. "He [Dr. Ambedkar] told Gandhiji that, 'You had been of immense help to me and have made more efforts to understand me than your followers.' Dr. Ambedkar said that it appeared to him that there was more in common between him and Gandhiji than between him and others." See Mukut Behari Verma, *History of Harijan Sevak Sangh – 1932 to 1968*, (Delhi: Harijan Sevak Sangh 1971), p.46.
28. *Ibid.* p.53.
29. *Harijan*, 26-8-1933.
30. "The other day a friend suggested to me that the word, 'Harijan' (man of God) be substituted for the word *Antyaja* (the last-born) that is being used for 'untouchables'. It was a word used by the great saint Narasinha Mehta, who by the by belonged to the Nagar Brahmana community and who defied the whole community by claiming the 'untouchables' as his own. I am delighted to adopt that word which is sanctified by having been used by such a great saint but it has for me a deeper meaning than you may imagine. The 'untouchable' to me, is compared to us, really a *Harijan* - a man of God, and we are *Durjan* (men of evil). For whilst the 'untouchable' has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the shortcomings and faults that we lay at the door of these 'untouchables'. It is still open to us to be *Harijan* ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sin against them."

Young India, 6-8-1931.

"Harijan means 'a man of God'. All the religions of the world describe God pre-eminently as the Friend of the friendless, Help of the helpless and Protector of the weak. The rest of the world apart, in India who can be more friendless, helpless or weaker than the forty million or more Hindus of India who are classified as 'untouchables'? If,

therefore, anybody of people can be fitly described as men of God, they are surely these helpless, friendless and despised people. Hence, in the pages of *Navajivan*, I have always adopted *Harijan* as the name signifying ‘untouchables’. Not that the change of name brings about any change of status, but one may at least be spared the use of a term which is itself one of reproach. When Caste Hindus have of their own inner conviction and, therefore, voluntarily, got rid of the present-day untouchability, we shall all be called *Harijans*; for, according to my humble opinion, Caste Hindus will then have found favour with God and may therefore, be fitly described as His men.”

Harijan, 11-2-1933.

31. *Harijan*, 29-4-1933.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Harijan*, 16-2-1934.
34. *Harijan*, August 15, 1936
35. *Harijan*, August 15, 1936
36. Arundhati Roy “All the World’s a Half Built Dam” *Economic and Political Weekly*, op.cit., pp.166-67.
37. *Harijan*, 28-11- 1936.
38. M. K. Gandhi Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2005), p.8.
39. Gandhi, M. K. Five Questions By A Harijan M. L. A. In *CWGMG* 76:314 (July 19, 1942).
https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/cwmg_volume_thumb_view/NzY=#page/354/mode/2up
40. See Gandhi’s “Foreword “dated May 31, 1945 in *Varnavyavastha*.
41. *Harijan*, 31-3-1946.
42. Narayan Desai, *My Life is my Message III Satyapath (1930-1940)*. Trans. Tridip Suhrud (New Delhi, Orient Black Swan, 2009), p.197.

Appendix- I
A Vindication of Caste
M. K. Gandhi

Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment

I

The readers will recall the fact that Dr. Ambedkar was to have presided last May at the annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore. But the conference itself was cancelled because Dr. Ambedkar's address was found by the Reception Committee to be unacceptable. How far a Reception Committee is justified in rejecting a President of its choice because of his address that may be objectionable to it is open to question. The Committee knew Dr. Ambedkar's views on caste and the Hindu scriptures. They knew also that he had in unequivocal terms decided to give up Hinduism. Nothing less than the address that Dr. Ambedkar had prepared was to be expected from him. The committee appears to have deprived the public of an opportunity of listening to the original views of a man, who has carved out for himself a unique position in society. Whatever label he wears in future, Dr. Ambedkar is not the man to allow himself to be forgotten.

Dr. Ambedkar was not going to be beaten by the Reception Committee. He has answered their rejection of him by publishing the address at his own expense. He has priced it at 8 annas, I would suggest a reduction to 2 annas or at least 4 annas. No reformer can ignore the address. The orthodox will gain by reading it. This is not to say that the address is not open to objection. It has to be read only because it is open to serious objection. Dr. Ambedkar is a challenge to Hinduism. Brought up as a Hindu, educated by a Hindu potentate, he has become

so disgusted with the so-called Savarna Hindus for the treatment that he and his people have received at their hands that he proposes to leave not only them but the very religion that is his and their common heritage. He has transferred to that religion, his disgust against a part of its professors.

But this is not to be wondered at. After all, one can only judge a system or an institution by the conduct of its representatives. What is more, Dr. Ambedkar found that the vast majority of Savarna Hindus had not only conducted themselves inhumanly against those of their fellow religionists, whom they classed as untouchables, but they had based their conduct on the authority of their scriptures, and when he began to search them he had found ample warrant for their beliefs in untouchability and all its implications. The author of the address has quoted chapter and verse in proof of his three-fold indictment-inhuman conduct itself, the unabashed justification for it on the part of the perpetrators, and the subsequent discovery that the justification was warranted by their scriptures.

No Hindu who prizes his faith above life itself can afford to underrate the importance of this indictment. Dr. Ambedkar is not alone in his disgust. He is its most uncompromising exponent and one of the ablest among them. He is certainly the most irreconcilable among them. Thank God, in the front rank of the leaders, he is singularly alone and as yet but a representative of a very small minority. But what he says is voiced with more or less vehemence by many leaders belonging to the depressed classes. Only the latter, for instance Rao Bahadur M. C. Rajah and Dewan Bahadur Srinivasan, not only do not threaten to give up Hinduism but find enough warmth in it to compensate for the shameful persecution to which the vast mass of Harijans are exposed.

But the fact of many leaders remaining in the Hindu fold is no warrant for disregarding what Dr. Ambedkar has to say.

The Savarnas have to correct their belief and their conduct. Above all those who are by their learning and influence among the Savarnas have to give an authoritative interpretation of the scriptures. The questions that Dr. Ambedkar's indictment suggest are :

- (1) What are the scriptures ?
- (2) Are all the printed texts to be regarded as an integral part of them or is any part of them to be rejected as unauthorised interpolation ?
- (3) What is the answer of such accepted and expurgated scriptures on the question of untouchability, caste, equality of status, inter-dining and intermarriages ? (These have been all examined by Dr. Ambedkar in his address.)

I must reserve for the next issue my own answer to these questions and a statement of the (at least some) manifest flaws in Dr. Ambedkar's thesis.

Harijan, July 11, 1936

II

The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Smritis* and *Puranas* including Ramayana and Mahabharata are the Hindu Scriptures. Nor is this a finite list. Every age or even generation has added to the list. It follows, therefore, that everything printed or even found handwritten is not scripture. The *Smritis* for instance-contain much that can never be accepted as the word of God. Thus many of the texts that Dr. Ambedkar quotes from the *Smritis* cannot be accepted as authentic. The scriptures, properly so-called, can only be concerned with eternal varieties and must appeal to any conscience *i.e.* any heart whose eyes of understanding are opened. Nothing can be accepted as the word

of God which cannot be tested by reason or be capable of being spiritually experienced. And even when you have an expurgated edition of the scriptures, you will need their interpretation. Who is the best interpreter? Not learned men surely. Learning there must be. But religion does not live it. It lives in the experiences of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings. When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come.

Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger. But I do know that it is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. *Varna* and *Ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *Varna* teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. It necessarily has reference to callings that are conducive to the welfare of humanity and to no other. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status. The callings of a Brahmin-spiritual teacher-and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man. Both were entitled to their livelihood and no more. Indeed one traces even now in the villages the faint lines of this healthy operation of the law. Living in Segaon with its population of 600, I do not find a great disparity between the earnings of different tradesmen including Brahmins. I find too that real Brahmins are to be found even in these degenerate days who are living on alms freely given to them and are giving freely of what they have of spiritual treasures. It would be wrong and improper to judge the law of *Varna* by its caricature in the lives of men who profess to belong to a *Varna*, whilst

they openly commit a breach of its only operative rule. Arrogation of a superior status by and of the *Varna* over another is a denial of the law. And there is nothing in the law of *Varna* to warrant a belief in untouchability. (The essence of Hinduism is contained in its enunciation of one and only God as Truth and its bold acceptance of Ahimsa as the law of the human family.)

I am aware that my interpretation of Hinduism will be disputed by many besides Dr. Ambedkar. That does not affect my position. It is an interpretation by which I have lived for nearly half a century and according to which I have endeavoured to the best of my ability to regulate my life.

In my opinion the profound mistake that Dr. Ambedkar has made in his address is to pick out the texts of doubtful authenticity and value and the state of degraded Hindus who are no fit specimens of the faith they so woefully misrepresent. Judged by the standard applied by Dr. Ambedkar, every known living faith will probably fail.

In his able address, the learned Doctor has over proved his case. Can a religion that was professed by Chaitanya, Jnyandeo, Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar, Ramkrishan Paramahansa, RajaRam Mohan Roy, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Vivekanand and host of others who might be easily mentioned, so utterly devoid of merit as is made out in Dr. Ambedkar's address? A religion has to be judged not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced. For that and that alone can be used as the standard to aspire to, if not to improve upon.

Harijan, July 18, 1936

III

Varna Versus Caste

Shri Sant Ramji of the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal* of Lahore wants me to publish the following: "I have read your remarks about Dr. Ambedkar and the *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal*, Lahore. In that connection I beg to submit as follows:

"We did not invite Dr. Ambedkar to preside over our conference because he belonged to the Depressed Classes, for we do not distinguish between a touchable and an untouchable Hindu. On the contrary our choice fell on him simply because his diagnosis of the fatal disease of the Hindu community was the same as ours, *i.e.* he too was of the opinion that caste system was the root cause of the disruption and downfall of the Hindus. The subject of the Doctor's thesis for Doctorate being caste system, he has studied the subject thoroughly. Now the object of our conference was to persuade the Hindus to annihilate castes but the advice of a non-Hindu in social and religious matters can have no effect on them. The Doctor in the supplementary portion of his address insisted on saying that that was his last speech as a Hindu, which was irrelevant as well as pernicious to the interests of the conference. So we requested him to expunge that sentence for he could easily say the same thing on any other occasion. But he refused and we saw no utility in making merely a show of our function. In spite of all this, I cannot help praising his address which is, as far as I know, the most learned thesis on the subject and worth translating into every vernacular of India.

Moreover, I want to bring to your notice that your philosophical difference between Caste and *Varna* is too subtle to be grasped by people in general, because for all practical purposes in the Hindu society Caste and *Varna* are one and the same thing, for the function of both of them is one and the

same *i.e.* to restrict inter-caste marriages and inter-dining. Your theory of *Varnavyavastha* is impracticable in this age and there is no hope of its revival in the near future. But Hindus are slaves of caste and do not want to destroy it. So when you advocate your ideal of imaginary *Varnavyavastha* they find justification for clinging to caste. Thus you are doing a great disservice to social reform by advocating your imaginary utility of division of *Varnas*, for it creates hindrance in our way. To try to remove untouchability without striking at the root of *Varnavyavastha* is simply to treat the outward symptoms of a disease or to draw a line on the surface of water. As in the heart of their hearts *dvijas* do not want to give social equality to the so-called touchable and untouchable Shudras, so they refuse to break caste, and give liberal donations for the removal of untouchability, simply to evade the issue. To seek the help of the *Shastras* for the removal of untouchability and caste is simply to wash mud with mud."

The last paragraph of the letter surely cancels the first. If the Mandal rejects the help of the *Shastras*, they do exactly what Dr. Ambedkar does, *i.e.* cease to be Hindus. How then can they object to Dr. Ambedkar's address merely because he said that that was his last speech as a Hindu? The position appears to be wholly untenable especially when the Mandal, for which Shri Sant Ram claims to speak, applauds the whole argument of Dr. Ambedkar's address.

But it is pertinent to ask what the Mandal believes if it rejects the *Shastras*. 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 how a person who rejects Caste *i.e.* *Varna* can call himself a Hindu.

Shri Sant Ram likens the *Shastras* to mud. Dr. Ambedkar has not, so far as I remember, given any such picturesque name to the *Shastras*. I have certainly meant when I have said that if *Shastras* support the existing untouchability I should cease to call myself a Hindu. Similarly, if the *Shastras* support caste as we know it today in all its hideousness, I may not call myself or remain a Hindu since I have no scruples about interdining or intermarriage. I need not repeat my position regarding *Shastras* and their interpretation. I venture to suggest to Shri Sant Ram that it is the only rational and correct and morally defensible position and it has ample warrant in Hindu tradition.

Harijan, August 15, 1936

Appendix - II

A Reply to the Mahatma by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

I appreciate greatly the honour done me by the Mahatma in taking notice in his Harijan of the speech on Caste which I had prepared for the JatPat Todak Mandal. From a perusal of his review of my speech it is clear that the Mahatma completely dissents from the views I have expressed on the subject of Caste. I am not in the habit of entering into controversy with my opponents unless there are special reasons which compel me to act otherwise. Had my opponent been some mean and obscure person I would not have pursued him. But my opponent being the Mahatma himself I feel I must attempt to meet the case to the contrary which he has sought to put forth. While I appreciate the honour he has done me, I must confess to a sense of surprise on finding that of all the persons the Mahatma should accuse me of a desire to seek publicity as he seems to do when he suggests that in publishing the undelivered speech my object was to see that I was not "forgotten". Whatever the Mahatma may choose to say my object in publishing the speech was to provoke the Hindus to think and take stock of their position. I have never hankered for publicity and if I may say so, I have more of it than I wish or need. But supposing it was out of the motive of gaining publicity that I printed the speech who could cast a stone at me? Surely not those, who like the Mahatma live in glass houses.

II

Motive apart, what has the Mahatma to say on the question raised by me in the speech? First of all any one who reads my speech will realize that the Mahatma has entirely missed the issues raised by me and that the issues he has raised

are not the issues that arise out of what he is pleased to call my indictment of the Hindus. The principal points which I have tried to make out in my speech may be catalogued as follows : (1) That caste has ruined the Hindus ; (2) That the reorganization of the Hindu society on the basis of *Chaturvarnya* is impossible because the *Varnavyastha* is like a leaky pot or like a man running at the nose. It is incapable of sustaining itself by its own virtue and has an inherent tendency to degenerate into a caste system unless there is a legal sanction behind it which can be enforced against every one transgressing his *Varna* ; (3) That the reorganization of the Hindu Society on the basis of *Chaturvarnya* is harmful, because the effect of the *Varnavyavastha* is to degrade the masses by denying them opportunity to acquire knowledge and to emasculate them by denying them the right to be armed ; (4) That the Hindu society must be reorganized on a religious basis which would recognise the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity ; (5) That in order to achieve this object the sense of religious sanctity behind Caste and *Varna* must be destroyed ; (6) That the sanctity of Caste and *Varna* can be destroyed only by discarding the divine authority of the *Shastras*. It will be noticed that the questions raised by the Mahatma are absolutely beside the point and show that the main argument of the speech was lost upon him.

III

Let me examine the substance of the points made by the Mahatma. The first point made by the Mahatma is that the texts cited by me are not authentic. I confess I am no authority on this matter. But I should like to state that the texts cited by me are all taken from the writings of the late Mr. Tilak who was a recognised authority on the Sanskrit language and on the Hindu *Shastras*. His second point is that these *Shastras* should

be interpreted not by the learned but the saints and that, as the saints have understood them, the *Shastras* do not support Caste and Untouchability. As regards the first point what I like to ask the Mahatma is what does it avail to any one if the texts are interpolations and if they have been differently interpreted by the saints? The masses do not make any distinction between texts which are genuine and texts which are interpolations. The masses do not know what the texts are. They are too illiterate to know the contents of the *Shastras*. They have believed what they have been told and what they have been told is that the *Shastras* do enjoin as a religious duty the observance of Caste and Untouchability.

With regard to the saints, one must admit that howsoever different and elevating their teachings may have been as compared to those of the merely learned they have been lamentably ineffective. They have been ineffective for two reasons. Firstly, none of the saints ever attacked the Caste System. On the contrary, they were staunch believers in the System of Castes. Most of them lived and died as members of the castes which they respectively belonged. So passionately attached was Jnyandeo to his status as a Brahmin that when the Brahmins of Paithan would not admit him to their fold he moved heaven and earth to get his status as a Brahmin recognized by the Brahmin fraternity. And even the saint Eknath who now figures in the film "Dharmatma" as a hero for having shown courage to touch the untouchables and dine with them, did so not because he was opposed to Caste and Untouchability but because he felt that the pollution caused thereby could be washed away by a bath in the sacred waters of the river Ganges. The saints have never according to my study carried on a campaign against Caste and Untouchability. They were not concerned with the struggle between men. They were concerned with the relation between man and God. They did not preach that all men were equal.

They preached that all men were equal, in the eyes of God a very different and a very innocuous proposition which nobody can find difficult to preach or dangerous to believe in. The second reason why the teachings of the saints proved ineffective was because the masses have been taught that a saint might break Caste but the common man must not. A saint therefore never became an example to follow. He always remained a pious man to be honoured. That the masses have remained staunch believers in Caste and Untouchability shows that the pious lives and noble sermons of the saints have had no effect on their life and conduct as against the teachings of the *Shastras*. Thus it can be a matter of no consolation that there were saints or that there is a Mahatma who understands the *Shastras* differently from the learned few or ignorant many. That the masses hold different view of the *Shastras* is fact which should and must be reckoned with. How is that to be dealt with except by denouncing the authority of the *Shastras*, which continue to govern their conduct, is a question which the Mahatma has not considered. But whatever the plan the Mahatma puts forth as an effective means to free the masses from the teachings of the *Shastras*, he must accept that the pious life led by one good Samaritan may be very elevating to himself but in India, with the attitude the common man has to saints and to Mahatmas—to honour but not to follow—one cannot make much out of it.

IV

The third point made by the Mahatma is that a religion professed by Chaitanya, Jnyandeo, Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar, Ramkrishna Paramahansa etc. cannot be devoid of merit as is made out by me and that a religion has to be judged not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced. I agree with every word of this statement. But I do not quite understand what the Mahatma wishes to prove thereby. That religion

should be judged not by its worst specimens but by its best is true enough but does it dispose of the matter? I say it does not. The question still remains-why the worst number so many and the best so few? To my mind there are two conceivable answers to this question : (1) That the worst by reason of some original perversity of theirs are morally uneducable and are therefore incapable of making the remotest approach to the religious ideal. Or (2) That the religious ideal is a wholly wrong ideal which has given a wrong moral twist to the lives of the many and that the best have become best in spite of the wrong ideal-in fact by giving to the wrong twist a turn in the right direction. Of these two explanations I am not prepared to accept the first and I am sure that even the Mahatma will not insist upon the contrary. To my mind the second is the only logical and reasonable explanation unless the Mahatma has a third alternative to explain why the worst are so many and the best so few. If the second is the only explanation then obviously the argument of the Mahatma that a religion should be judged by its best followers carries us nowhere except to pity the lot of the many who have gone wrong because they have been made to worship wrong ideals.

V

The argument of the Mahatma that Hinduism would be tolerable if only many were to follow the example of the saints is fallacious for another reason. By citing the names of such illustrious persons as Chaitanya etc. what the Mahatma seems to me to suggest in its broadest and simplest form is that Hindu society can be made tolerable and even happy without any fundamental change in its structure if all the high caste Hindus can be persuaded to follow a high standard of morality in their dealings with the low caste Hindus. I am totally opposed to this kind of ideology. I can respect those of the caste Hindus who try to realize a high social ideal in their life. Without such men

India would be an uglier and a less happy place to live in than it is. But nonetheless anyone who relies on an attempt to turn the members of the caste Hindus into better men by improving their personal character is in my judgment wasting his energy and bugging an illusion. Can personal character make the maker of armaments a good man, *i.e.* a man who will sell shells that will not burst and gas that will not poison? If it cannot, how can you accept personal character to make a man loaded with the consciousness of Caste, a good man, *i.e.* a man who would treat his fellows as his friends and equals? To be true to himself he must deal with his fellows either as a superior or inferior according as the case may be; at any rate, differently from his own caste fellows. He can never be expected to deal with his fellows as his kinsmen and equals. As a matter of fact, a Hindu does treat all those who are not of his Caste as though they were aliens, who could be discriminated against with impunity and against whom any fraud or trick may be practised without shame. *This is to say that there can be a better or a worse Hindu. But a good Hindu there cannot be.* This is so not because there is anything wrong with his personal character. In fact what is wrong is the entire basis of his relationship to his fellows. The best of men cannot be moral if the basis of relationship between them and their fellows is fundamentally a wrong relationship. To a slave his master may be better or worse. But there cannot be a good master. A good man cannot be a master and a master cannot be a good man. The same applies to the relationship between high caste and low caste. To a low caste man a high caste man can be better or worse as compared to other high caste men. A high caste man cannot be a good man in so far as he must have a low caste man to distinguish him as high caste man. It cannot be good to a low caste man to be conscious that there is a high caste man above him. I have argued in my speech that a society based on *Varna* or Caste is a society which is based on a wrong

relationship. I had hoped that the Mahatma would attempt to demolish my argument. But instead of doing that he has merely reiterated his belief in *Chaturvarnya* without disclosing the ground on which it is based.

VI

Does the Mahatma practise what he preaches? One does not like to make personal reference in an argument which is general in its application. But when one preaches a doctrine and holds it as a dogma there is a curiosity to know how far he practises what he preaches. It may be that his failure to practise is due to the ideal being too high to be attainable; it may be that his failure to practise is due to the innate hypocrisy of the man. In any case he exposes his conduct to examination and I must not be blamed if I asked how far has the Mahatma attempted to realize his ideal in his own case. The Mahatma is a *Bania* by birth. His ancestors had abandoned trading in favour of ministership which is a calling of the Brahmins. In his own life, before he became a Mahatma, when occasion came for him to choose his career he preferred law to scales. On abandoning law he became half saint and half politician. He has never touched trading which is his ancestral calling. His youngest son-I take one who is a faithful follower of his father-born a *Vaishya* has married a Brahmin's daughter and has chosen to serve a newspaper magnate. The Mahatma is not known to have condemned him for not following his ancestral calling. It may be wrong and uncharitable to judge an ideal by its worst specimens. But surely the Mahatma as a specimen has no better and if he even fails to realize the ideal then the ideal must be an impossible ideal quite opposed to the practical instincts of man. Students of Carlyle know that he often spoke on a subject before he thought about it. I wonder whether such has not been the case with the Mahatma in regard to the subject matter of Caste. Otherwise certain questions which occur to me would

not have escaped him. When can a calling be deemed to have become an ancestral calling so as to make it binding on a man? Must man follow his ancestral calling even if it does not suit his capacities, even when it has ceased to be profitable? Must a man live by his ancestral calling even if he finds it to be immoral? If every one must pursue his ancestral calling then it must follow that a man must continue to be a pimp because his grandfather was a pimp and a woman must continue to be a prostitute because her grandmother was a prostitute. Is the Mahatma prepared to accept the logical conclusion of his doctrine? To me his ideal of following one's ancestral calling is not only an impossible and impractical ideal, but it is also morally an indefensible ideal.

VII

The Mahatma sees great virtue in a Brahmin remaining a Brahmin all his life. Leaving aside the fact there are many Brahmins who do not like to remain Brahmins all their lives. What can we say about those Brahmins who have clung to their ancestral calling of priesthood? Do they do so from any faith in the virtue of the principle of ancestral calling or do they do so from motives of filthy lucre? The Mahatma does not seem to concern himself with such queries. He is satisfied that these are "real Brahmins who are living on alms freely given to them and giving freely what they have of spiritual treasures". This is how a hereditary Brahmin priest appears to the Mahatma—a carrier of spiritual treasures. But another portrait of the hereditary Brahmin can also be drawn. A Brahmin can be a priest to Vishnu—the God of Love. He can be a priest to Shankar—the God of Destruction. He can be a priest at Buddha Gaya worshipping Buddha—the greatest teacher of mankind who taught the noblest doctrine of Love. He also can be a priest to Kali, the Goddess, who must have a daily sacrifice of an animal to satisfy her thirst for blood; He will be

a priest of the temple of Rama-the *Kshatriya* God! He will also be a priest of the Temple of Parshuram, the God who took *Avatar* to destroy the *Kshatriyas* ! He can be a priest to *Bramha*, the Creator of the world. He can be a priest to a *Pir* whose God Allah will not brook the claim of *Bramha* to share his spiritual dominion over the world ! No one can say that this is a picture which is not true to life. If this is a true picture one does not know what to say of this capacity to bear loyalties to Gods and Goddesses whose attributes are so antagonistic that no honest man can be a devotee to all of them. The Hindus rely upon this extraordinary phenomenon as evidence of the greatest virtue of their religion-namely its catholicity, its spirit of toleration. As against this facile view, it can be urged that what is toleration and catholicity may be really nothing more creditable than indifference or flaccid latitudinarianism. These two attitudes are hard to distinguish in their outer seeming. But they are so vitally unlike in their real quality that no one who examines them closely can mistake one for the other. That a man is ready to render homage to many Gods and Goddesses may be cited as evidence of his tolerant spirit. But can it not also be evidence of insincerity born of a desire to serve the times? I am sure that this toleration is merely insincerity. If this view is well founded, one may ask what spiritual treasure can there be with a person who is ready to be a priest and a devotee to any deity which it serves his purpose to worship and to adore? Not only must such a person be deemed to be bankrupt of all spiritual treasures but for him to practice so elevating a profession as that of a priest simply because it is ancestral, without faith, without belief, merely as a mechanical process handed down from father to son, is not a conservation of virtue; it is really the prostitution of a noble profession which is no other than the service of religion.

VIII

Why does the Mahatma cling to the theory of every one following his or her ancestral calling? He gives his reasons nowhere. But there must be some reason although he does not care to avow it. Years ago writing on "Caste *versus* Class" in his *Young India* he argued that Caste System was better than Class System on the ground that caste was the best possible adjustment of social stability. If that be the reason why the Mahatma clings to the theory of every one following his or her ancestral calling, then he is clinging to a false view of social life. Everybody wants social stability and some adjustment must be made in the relationship between individuals and classes in order that stability may be had. But two things, I am sure nobody wants. One thing nobody wants is static relationship, something that is unalterable, something that is fixed for all times. Stability is wanted but not at the cost of change when change is imperative. Second thing nobody wants is mere adjustment. Adjustment is wanted but not at the sacrifice of social justice. Can it be said that the adjustment of social relationship on the basis of caste *i.e.* on the basis of each to his hereditary calling avoids these two evils? I am convinced that it does not. Far from being the best possible adjustment I have no doubt that it is of the worst possible kind inasmuch as it offends against both the canons of social adjustment—namely fluidity and equity.

IX

Some might think that the Mahatma has made much progress inasmuch as he now only believes in *Varna* and does not believe in Caste. It is true that there was a time when the Mahatma was a full-blooded and a blue-blooded *Sanatani Hindu*. He believed in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures and therefore

in *avatars* and rebirth. He believed in Caste and defended it with the vigour of the orthodox. He condemned the cry for inter-dining, inter-drinking and inter-marrying and argued that restraints about inter-dining to a great extent "helped the cultivation of will-power and the conservation of certain social virtue". It is good that he has repudiated this sanctimonious nonsense and admitted that caste "is harmful both to spiritual and national growth," and may be, his son's marriage outside his caste has had something to do with this change of view. But has the Mahatma really progressed? What is the nature of the *Varna* for which the Mahatma stands? Is it the *Vedic* conception as commonly understood and preached by Swami Dayanaad Saraswati and his followers, the *Arya Samajists*? The essence of the *Vedic* conception of *Varna* is the pursuit of a calling which is appropriate to one's natural aptitude. The essence of the Mahatma's conception of *Varna* is the pursuit of ancestral calling irrespective of natural aptitude. What is the difference between Caste and *Varna* as understood by the Mahatma? I find none. As defined by the Mahatma, *Varna* becomes merely a different name for Caste for the simple reason that it is the same in essence—namely pursuit of ancestral calling. Far from making progress the Mahatma has suffered retrogression. By putting this interpretation upon the *Vedic* conception of *Varna* he has really made ridiculous what was sublime. While I reject the *Vedic Varnavyavastha* for reasons given in the speech I must admit that the *Vedic* theory of *Varna* as interpreted by Swami Dayanand and some others is a sensible and an inoffensive thing. It did not admit birth as a determining factor in fixing the place of an individual in society. It only recognized worth. The Mahatma's view of *Varna* not only makes nonsense of the *Vedic Varna* but it makes it an abominable thing. *Varna* and Caste are two very different concepts. *Varna* is based on the principle of each according to

his worth-while Caste is based on the principle of each according to his birth. The two are as distinct as chalk is from cheese. In fact there is an antithesis between the two. If the Mahatma believes as he does in every one following his or her ancestral calling, then most certainly he is advocating the Caste System and that in calling it the *Varna* System he is not only guilty of terminological inexactitude, but he is causing confusion worse confounded. I am sure that all his confusion is due to the fact that the Mahatma has no definite and clear conception as to what is *Varna* and what is Caste and as to the necessity of either for the conservation of Hinduism. He has said and one hopes that he will not find some mystic reason to change his view that caste is not the essence of Hinduism. Does he regard *Varna* as the essence of Hinduism? One cannot as yet give any categorical answer. Readers of his article on "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment" will answer "No". In that article he does not say that the dogma of *Varna* is an essential part of the creed of Hinduism. Far from making *Varna* the essence of Hinduism he says "the essence of Hinduism is contained in its enunciation of one and only God as Truth and its bold acceptance of *Ahimsa* as the law of the human family" But the readers of his article in reply to Mr. Sant Ram will say "Yes". In that article he says "How can a Muslim remain one if he rejects the *Quran*, or a Christian remain as 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 how a person who rejects Caste, *i.e.* *Varna* can call himself a Hindu? "Why this prevarication? Why does the Mahatma hedge? Whom does he want to please? Has the saint failed to sense the truth? Or does the politician stand in the way of the Saint? The real reason why the Mahatma is suffering from this confusion is probably to be traced to two sources. The first is the temperament of the Mahatma. He has almost in everything the

simplicity of the child with the child's capacity for self-deception. Like a child he can believe in anything he wants to believe. We must therefore wait till such time as it pleases the Mahatma to abandon his faith in *Varna* as it has pleased him to abandon his faith in Caste. The second source of confusion is the double role which the Mahatma wants to play-of a Mahatma and a Politician. As a Mahatma he may be trying to spiritualize Politics. Whether he has succeeded in it or not Politics have certainly commercialized him. A politician must know that Society cannot bear the whole truth and that he must not speak the whole truth; if he is speaking the whole truth it is bad for his politics. The reason why the Mahatma is always supporting Caste and *Varna* is because he is afraid that if he opposed them he will lose his place in politics. Whatever may be the source of this confusion the Mahatma must be told that he is deceiving himself and also deceiving the people by preaching Caste under the name of *Varna*.

X

The Mahatma says that the standards I have applied to test Hindus and Hinduism are too severe and that judged by those standards every known living faith will probably fail. The complaint that my standards are high may be true. But the question is not whether they are high or whether they are low. The question is whether they are the right standards to apply. A People and their Religion must be judged by social standards based on social ethics. No other standard would have any meaning if religion is held to be a necessary good for the well-being of the people. Now I maintain that the standards I have applied to test Hindus and Hinduism are the most appropriate standards and that I know of none that are better. The conclusion that every known religion would fail if tested by my standards may be true. But this fact should not give the Mahatma as the champion of Hindus and Hinduism a ground

for comfort any more than the existence of one madman should give comfort to another madman or the existence of one criminal should give comfort to another criminal. I like to assure the Mahatma that it is not the mere failure of the Hindus and Hinduism which has produced in me the feelings of disgust and contempt with which I am charged. I realize that the world is a very imperfect world and any one who wants to live in it must bear with its imperfections. But while I am prepared to bear with the imperfections and shortcomings of the society in which I may be destined to labour, I feel I should not consent to live in a society which cherishes wrong ideals or a society which having right ideals will not consent to bring its social life in conformity with those ideals. If I am disgusted with Hindus and Hinduism it is because I am convinced that they cherish wrong ideals and live a wrong social life. My quarrel with Hindus and Hinduism is not over the imperfections of their social conduct. It is much more fundamental. It is over their ideals.

XI

Hindu society seems to me to stand in need of a moral regeneration which it is dangerous to postpone. And the question is who can determine and control this moral regeneration? Obviously only those who have undergone an intellectual regeneration and those who are honest enough to have the courage of their convictions born of intellectual emancipation. Judged by this standard the Hindu leaders who count are in my opinion quite unfit for the task. It is impossible to say that they have undergone the preliminary intellectual regeneration. If they had undergone an intellectual regeneration they would neither delude themselves in the simple way of the untaught multitude nor would they take advantage of the primitive ignorance of others as one sees them doing. Notwithstanding the crumbling state of Hindu society these

leaders will nevertheless unblushingly appeal to ideals of the past which have in every way ceased to have any connection with the present ; which however suitable they might have been in the days of their origin have now become a warning rather than a guide. They still have a mystic respect for the earlier forms which make them disinclined-nay opposed to any examination of the foundations of their Society. The Hindu masses are of course incredibly heedless in the formation of their beliefs. But so are the Hindu leaders. And what is worse is that. These Hindu leaders become filled with an illicit passion for their beliefs when any one proposes to rob them of their companionship. The Mahatma is no exception. The Mahatma appears not to believe in thinking He prefers to follow the saints. Like a conservative with his reverence for consecrated notions he is afraid that if he once starts thinking, many ideals and institutions to which he clings will be doomed. One must sympathize with him. For every act of independent thinking puts some portion of apparently stable world in peril. But it is equally true that dependence on saints cannot lead us to know the truth. The saints are after all only human beings and as Lord Balfour said, "the human mind is no more a truth finding apparatus than the snout of a pig". In so far as he does think, to me he really appears to be prostituting his intelligence to find reasons for supporting this archaic social structure of the Hindus. He is the most influential apologist of it and therefore the worst enemy of the Hindus.

Unlike the Mahatma there are Hindu leaders who are not content merely to believe and follow. They dare to think, and act in, accordance with the result of their thinking. But unfortunately they are either a dishonest lot or an indifferent lot when it comes to the question of giving right guidance to the mass of the people. Almost every Brahmin has transgressed the rule of Caste. The number of Brahmins who sell shoes is far greater than those who practise priesthood. Not

only have the Brahmins given up their ancestral calling of priesthood for trading but they have entered trades which, are prohibited to them by the *Shastras*. Yet how many Brahmins who break Caste every day will preach against Caste and against the *Shastras*? For one honest Brahmin preaching against Caste and *Shastras* because his practical instinct and moral conscience cannot support a conviction in them, there are hundreds who break Caste and trample upon the *Shastras* every day but who are the most fanatic upholders of the theory of Caste and the sanctity of the *Shastras*. Why this duplicity? Because they feel that if the masses are emancipated from the yoke of Caste they would be a menace to the power and prestige of the Brahmins as a class. The dishonesty of this intellectual class who would deny the masses the fruits of their thinking is a most disgraceful phenomenon.

The Hindus in the words of Mathew Arnold are “wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born”. What are they to do? The Mahatma to whom they appeal for guidance does not believe in thinking and can therefore give no guidance which can be said to stand the test of experience. The intellectual classes to whom the masses look for guidance are either too dishonest or too indifferent to educate them in the right direction. We are indeed witnesses to a great tragedy. In the face of this tragedy all one can do is to lament and say—such be thy Leaders, O! Hindus.

Source:

<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/02.Annihilation%20of%20Caste.htm#a01>

Appendix -III
The Ideal *Bhangi*
M. K. Gandhi

The ideal *Bhangi* of my conception would be a Brahmin par excellence, possibly even excel him. It is possible to envisage the existence of a *Bhangi* without a Brahmin. But without the former the latter could not be. It is the *Bhangi* who enables society to live. A *Bhangi* does for society what a mother does for her baby. A mother washes her baby of the dirt and insures his health. Even so the *Bhangi* protects and safeguards the health of the entire community by maintaining sanitation for it. The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the *Bhangi's* that of the body of society. But there is a difference in practice; the Brahmin generally does not live up to his duty, the *Bhangi* does, willy-nilly no doubt. Society is sustained by several services. The *Bhangi* constitutes the foundation of all services.

And yet our woebegone Indian society has branded the *Bhangi* as a social pariah, set him down at the bottom of the scale, held him fit only to receive kicks and abuse, a creature who must subsist on the leavings of the caste people and dwell on the dung-heap. He is without a friend, his very name has become a term of reproach. This is shocking. It is perhaps useless to seek the why and wherefore of it. I certainly am unaware of the origin of the inhuman conduct, but I know this much that by looking down upon the *Bhangi*, we Hindus, have deserved the contempt of the whole world. Our villages have today become seats of dirt and insanitation and the villagers come to an early and untimely death. If only we had given due recognition to the status of the *Bhangi* as equal to that of a Brahmin as in fact and justice he deserves, our villages today no less than their inhabitants would have looked a picture of cleanliness and order. We would have to a large extent been

free from the ravages of a host of diseases which directly spring from our uncleanness and lack of sanitary habits. I therefore make bold to state without any manner of hesitation or doubt that not till the invidious distinction between the Brahmin and the *Bhangi* is removed will our society enjoy health, prosperity and peace, and be happy.

What qualities should such an honoured servant of society exemplify in his person? In my opinion an ideal *Bhangi* should have a thorough knowledge of the principles of sanitation. He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting nightsoil and urine into manure. But that is not all. My ideal *Bhangi* would know the quality of night soil and urine.

He would keep a close watch on these and give a timely warning to the individual concerned. Thus he will give a timely notice of the results of his examination of the excreta. That presupposes a scientific knowledge of the requirements of his profession. He would likewise be an authority on the subject of disposal of night-soil in small villages as well as big cities and his advice and guidance in the matter would be sought for and freely given to society. It goes without saying that he would have the usual learning necessary for reaching the standard here laid down for his profession. Such an ideal *Bhangi*, while deriving his livelihood from his occupation, would approach it only as a sacred duty. In other words, he would not dream of amassing wealth out of it. He would consider himself responsible for the proper removal and disposal of all the dirt and night soil within the area which he serves and regard the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition within the same as the *summum bonum* of his existence.

Harijan, November 28, 1936

The present work is a revised version of a lecture delivered in a Symposium on Caste-based Discrimination in the Indian Church organized by Carolian Theological Forum, St. Charles Seminary, Nagpur on October 2, 2017. This work is divided into three parts. The first part of the study analyses the issue of caste discriminations in the Indian Church. The second part describes Gandhi's fight against caste discriminations for restoring human dignity. It reviews all major writings as well as actions of Gandhi on these issues to understand Gandhi's mind and his actual practice. This analysis gives the reader a clear picture of all the issues involved in respect of Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability. What Christians can learn from Gandhi's strategy against caste discrimination is summarised in the last part of the study. Some important writings of Gandhi and Ambedkar are given in the appendices to have clear understanding of their viewpoints. It is hoped that the present work would further stimulate introspection, reflection and deliberation on the theme and finally to root out this evil practice from the Christian community and from the Indian society at large.



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