

Reformation vs Annihilation: Contextualising Gandhi & Ambedkar on Manual Scavenging in India.

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Abstract:

This paper wants to draw a comparison between Gandhi & Ambedkar on Caste issues with particular focus to manual scavenging in India. Firstly it deals the approach of Gandhi who known in and the outside of India as a reformer worked against untouchability and caste system in India. For instance, he called Untouchables "Harijans" (children of God) although that term is now considered patronising and the term Dalit (*oppressed*) is the more commonly used for these people.

“There is no doubt that Gandhi wants that untouchability to reform but he, at the same time, he was a strong supporter of the caste system. Supporting the caste system, Gandhi believes that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration & to destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social network means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation, which is the soul of the caste system”³.

The hereditary principle is an eternal principle of this system and to change it is to create disorder in society. Whereas Ambedkar as a revivalist; In *The Annihilation of Caste*, for the first time, raised many profound questions concerning caste. First, was to reject the defence of caste based on division of labour and argued that it was not merely a division of work but a division of labourers.

“The former was voluntary and depended upon one's choice and aptitude and, therefore, rewarded efficiency. The latter was involuntary, forced, killed initiative and resulted in job aversion and inefficiency. He argued that caste could not be defended based on purity of blood, though pollution is a hallmark of the caste system. Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu social order was so sharp that Mahatma Gandhi, in *Harijan*, described Ambedkar as a challenge to Hinduism”⁴.

Keywords: Untouchability, Caste, Caste System & Manual Scavenging.

“The world owes a duty to the untouchables as it does to all suppressed people to break their shackles and set them free. The problems of slaves, the Jews and the blacks are nothing in comparison to the problems of Untouchables”.

Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

1. Introduction: Caste system is the bane of Indian society. In no other community, the inequality graded that it gives no opportunity for the oppressed to rise against the oppressor in unison, in no other society it is sanctioned by the religion so that it prevents the freedom of mind to strive for liberation. The Dalits, who are at the lowest rungs of society, are the most oppressed people in India.

“Manual Scavengers are among the most excluded and exploited communities among the Dalit. They are considered to be the lowest in Hindu caste hierarchy and therefore suffer multiple forms of discrimination and social exclusion at the hand of caste Hindus and the functionaries of the state”⁵. They found in almost all cities of India where they sweep the streets and manually engage in carrying night-soil.

“The Dalits (also known as Untouchables, *Harijans*, or Scheduled Castes) have historically been poor, deprived of fundamental human rights, and treated as social inferiors in India. They still face economic, social, cultural, and political discrimination in the name of caste”⁶.

“Centuries of this hidden apartheid that has perpetuated discrimination and denial of their human rights has resulted not only in Dalits representing a disproportionate amount of the poor in India but also in the creation of numerous other obstacles that hinder Dalit’s ability to change their situation”⁷.

2. Manual Scavenging and Scavengers:

Manual scavenging, the act of human removal of excreta from dry pit latrines, is detrimental to environmental, mental, and public health and is a gross violation of human rights.

This practice is prevalent in many parts of India. The method of human waste removal and the construction of dry pit latrines were banned in 1993 and amended in 2013 with the passage of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines Prohibition Act.

“Manual scavengers are the most excluded and exploited communities among Dalits. They are the lowest in Hindu caste hierarchy and therefore suffer from double marginalisation in Hindu caste hierarchy”⁸.

They found in almost all over India engaged in cleaning, sweeping the streets and manually engage in carrying out night-soil.

“Women are the worst victims as they constitute more than eighty per cent of the work force of manual scavengers. Apart from social stigma, work of scavenging is lowly paid, it causes health problems and many manual scavengers have died while cleaning up the sewage”⁹.

Indian society based on the occupation and it is associated with each caste. While higher castes enjoy a wide range of choices in professions, the unclean jobs got associated with lower castes which include sweeping streets, cleaning drains and sewers, removal of human and animal waste, leather processing, raising of pigs and the like.

“As most towns and villages did not have flush latrines, sweepers were manually handling human excreta and carry it on their heads. Leatherwork includes handling of dead animals and removal of their skin and hence, it also viewed unclean. Such jobs are considered not only polluting but are also of low paid which included payment in the form of leftover from the kitchen as well”¹⁰.

“The group of scavengers is placed lowest in the caste-based hierarchy. Its members are bound not only by traditional obligations and customary rules to practice this ubiquitous occupation but mythological sanctions also oblige them to carry night soil physically for disposal. Everyone born in the sub-caste of scavengers destined to take up this subhuman profession”¹¹.

Despite, they are not without some social gradation: some are considered superior to others; the respective origin determines their rank, and the type of work they perform. The lowest place occupied by those who manually clean latrines where scavengers come in direct contact with human excreta. The scavengers cleaning toilets are grossly underpaid, quite often abused and living a life of degradation.

“Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of Untouchability shall be an offence punishable by the law”. - Article 17, Constitution of India.

Untouchability is something one cannot understand unless he/she faced it. For most of the people who write and talk about untouchability (Research Scholars, academicians and Activists), it’s just a word for their purpose.

“Gandhi was the first to recognise the Dalits’ struggles and brought them to the attention of the Indian national government in the 1930s. The concern for Dalits led to a more radical movement led by Dr B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhi viewed the Dalits problem as a social one whereas Dr Ambedkar saw it as a political and economic problem created by upper castes. When Dr Ambedkar became the first law minister he created progressive legal reforms and incorporated these reforms into the Constitution”.¹²

“According to Ambedkar, worse and unparalleled, the Hindu Dharmashastras gave legitimacy to the doctrine of Chaturvana and the caste system. The infamous Manusmriti dehumanised the Shudras and untouchables, ruled the Hindu psyche for centuries and created the greatest obstacle to any serious attempt at eradicating the caste system”.¹³.

This belief of Ambedkar and social practice made him burn the copies of Manusmriti on the occasion of his historical Mahad Satyagraha in 1927 for establishing the right of untouchables to drink the water of the Chawdar tank in Mahad town in Maharashtra.

In *The Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar, probably for the first time, raised many profound questions for caste. First, he rejected the defence of caste based on division of labour and argued that it was not merely a division of work but a division of labourers. The former was voluntary and depended upon one's choice and aptitude and, therefore, rewarded efficiency. The latter was involuntary, forced, killed initiative and resulted in job aversion and inefficiency. He argued that caste could not be defended based on purity of blood, though pollution is a hallmark of the caste system. Ambedkar thus argued that caste had no scientific basis. He painfully maintained that Hindu society was a collection of castes, fixed in watertight compartments with the graded hierarchy that made an associated corporate life virtually impossible.

But most importantly, according to Ambedkar, caste destroyed the concept of ethics and morality. Ambedkar in his work argued that the effect of rank on the ethics of the Hindus is utterly deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity.

“Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. Ambedkar ultimately suggested that inter-caste marriage is the only remedy to destroy caste. In *The Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu social order was so sharp that Mahatma Gandhi, in *Harijan*, described Ambedkar as a challenge to Hinduism”¹⁴.

Ambedkar replied to Gandhi in his usual uncompromising manner. Ambedkar did not spare the socialists or the communists either. He vehemently attacked the communists for their dogmatic approach to caste in treating it as the superstructure and argued that unless they dealt with caste as a primary structural problem, no worthwhile social change, let alone a socialist revolution, was possible.

“Like all other castes, each of the Scheduled Castes looks down upon the neighbouring rank. Even after conversion to religions like Christianity, Islam and Sikhism, converts remain divided on caste lines. One can change religion but not one's caste”¹⁵.

Although even after sixty-two years of independence, India still has close to seven lakhs people working as manual scavengers. It is a real disgrace and insults on our democratic ideals of equity and justice that such a large number of right bearing citizens of this country forced to indulge in the inhuman practice of manual scavenging. Manual scavenging is one of the most extreme forms of caste discrimination and the cooperation of the state in its continuance is an unacceptable human rights violation.

Manual Scavengers are the most excluded and exploited communities among the Dalit. They are considered to be the lowest in Hindu caste hierarchy and, therefore, suffer multiple forms of discrimination and social exclusion by higher castes of Hindus and the functionaries of the state as well as from the other sub-castes among Dalits. They found in almost all cities of India where they sweep the streets and manually engage in carrying night-soil.

Women from these communities are the worst victims as they constitute more than eighty per cent of the workforce of manual scavengers. Apart from the social stigma that they suffer, their work is low paid. Further, it causes various health problems those who engage in this work exposed to the most virulent forms of viral and bacterial infections that affect their skin, eyes, limbs, respiratory and gastrointestinal systems. Vast numbers of manual scavengers have died while cleaning sewage.

“To understand the manual scavengers’ position in Indian society, it is important too, at least briefly, examine the caste system. “Indian population follows a rigid caste system which divides people into a hierarchy that governs the distribution of power, status, and identity in society”.¹⁶

The caste system divided into four distinct classes comprised of (in descending order of superiority) priests, warriors, artisans, and peasants. These four classes are vested with spiritual importance because they all derive from different parts of the Hindu

god, *Brahma*. Below the four castes are the untouchables, also known as Dalits or in Indian legal parlance: Scheduled Castes.

They are officially external to the caste scheme; i.e., they considered to be outcasts and seen as a lower from one of the four Hindu classes. Indian society is divided horizontally and vertically into thousands of castes and sub-castes. Untouchables are no exception.

“The People's Commission on Abolition of Scavenging (1998) reported the use of many other terms for groups performing the task of sweeping and scavenging: *Hela, Hari, Hadi, Bhumali, Halalkhor, Doms, Dumas, Dhanuks, Bansphor, Mazhabi, Mikhair, Thoti, Chachati, Pakay, Relli, Ghasi, Olgana, Zadmalli, Jamphoda* and *Metariya*. Col. Tod described them as *refuse of mankind*. The Gazette of India Extra Ordinary - 9, Part II dated September 20, 1976; Part XV Rajasthan (enforced w.e.f. July 1977) identified 59 scheduled castes in Rajasthan which included scavenging castes known as *Bhangi, Chura, Mehtar, Rukhi, Malkana, Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Balmiki, Kerar, and Zadmall*.”

“A complex web of religious, moral and cultural beliefs and attitudes has, over centuries, created the pervasive view that Dalits are impure or polluted”.¹⁷ “They are considered so inferior to other castes, and so polluting, that they are deemed untouchable”.¹⁸

‘As a result, they are subject to various forms of oppression. For example, one custom prohibits Dalits from “walking public streets lest their ‘polluting’ shadow should fall on an ‘upper-caste’ Hindu.

“While those customs are not necessarily followed everywhere in India today, caste divisions, and their attendant forms of discrimination, continue to prevail. Divisions between Dalits and other castes dominate in housing, marriage, employment, and general social interaction divisions that reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and physical violence”.¹⁹

“Most manual scavengers have little choice in what they do for a living. Like most Indians, manual scavengers live according to the rigid stratification of the caste system”.²⁰

In other words, they dispose of human waste not because they want to, but because they are born into their particular caste. In a society where birth dictates one’s job and livelihood, it is nearly impossible to find other opportunities because of their low education level and stigma attached to them. Manual scavengers are thus victims thrice over: they are shunned by society at large, other sub-castes among Dalits, and additionally made to suffer the severe emotional and physical consequences of their work.

3. Ambedkar and Gandhi on Manual Scavenging:

“During independence movement, Gandhi and Ambedkar took up the issue of manual scavengers from different perspectives. Writings and correspondence of Gandhi suggests that though he was sympathetic to the plight and suffering of Bhangis (a name given to Dalits) by calling himself a *Bhangi* he glorified deplorable work, on the one hand, and on the other hand he protested their legitimate action of strike when knew that sweepers went on strike in Bombay”²¹.

He denounced their move by saying: ‘In spite of my close attachment to sweepers, better because of it; I must expose the coercive methods they are said to have employed. They will thereby be losers in the long run. City folk will not always cowed down. If they were, it would mean the collapse of municipal administration. Coercion cannot but result in the end in chaos. A Bhangi may not give up his work even for a day. And there are many other ways open to him of securing justice. Refusal is a sign of weaknesses.

“On the other hand, Ambedkar was very critical of Gandhian approach and methods to address the problems of untouchables in general and Bhangis in particular. He was more realistic and aware of the limitation of Gandhian tactics to remove plight and sufferings about Bhangis”²².

He supported the strike of sweepers unlike Gandhi. While Gandhi and Ambedkar were sincere for the abolition of untouchability eradication of the practice of manual scavenging, they followed different approach---former was for a change of heart and morality, later was for political praxis, agitation and through legal intervention.

“However, later on, it was realised that even legal mechanism is not enough to do away with evil and, therefore, struggle for the realisation of human dignity and rights of manual scavengers has to be strengthened not only identity line but the class line as well as suggested by Teltumbde”.²³

While some works and studies have discussed and analysed the various sociological and anthropological aspects of manual scavengers; the impact of the law, legal mechanisms and welfare schemes have not dealt with the issue. Many of the works on manual scavengers are of regional autobiographical nature. The official reports are useful for general and first-hand information on demography, development and various factors responsible for the poor delivery of welfare schemes meant for the manual scavengers. The Eleventh Five Years Plan which formally proclaims for the inclusive growth through inclusive policies refers issues of manual scavengers as an agenda of priorities. It noted:

“Among the SCs, persons engaged as manual scavengers need special attention to put an end to the degrading practice of manual scavenging. Despite commitments made to the eradication of the obnoxious and dehumanising practice of handling night soil manually, it continues”.²⁴

“Ambedkar struggled against the Hindu caste structure as he was of the view that this structure has been primarily responsible for committing all sorts of atrocities on the various sections of the society, particularly the weaker sections and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. He was, therefore, against Manusmriti as it gives a blank cheque to the Brahmins to commits all sorts of atrocities on scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and justifies their evil designs”.²⁵

4. Conclusion:

In Indian context we can see that India's democratic institutions thoroughly built over long years of the national movement for independence, with a far-sighted vision and a modern, secular world view, an attempt made to build structures that would balance each other and provide justice to all citizens, within this world-observation constituted not only the legislature, executive and judiciary, but also various autonomous commissions and tribunals and media institutions.

Besides, the scope provided for the functioning of citizens and civil society groups and democratic people's movements. For over three decades, these institutions survived as a framework within which working people could struggle for a better life. The emergence of communal, neo-liberal, and free-market forces have intensified these trends.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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²⁵ Manusmriti: Manusmriti (written also as Manusmriti or Manusmriti) also known as Manava-Dharmasastra is the most controversial work and assumed to be part of the Dharmasastra textual tradition of Hinduism. Generally known in English as the Laws of Manu, it was first translated into English in 1794 by Sir William Jones, judge of the British Supreme Court of Judicature in Calcutta and believed to be biased. The text (according to Hinduism) presents itself as a discourse given by Manu, the progenitor of mankind, to a group of seers, who beseech him to tell them the "law of all the social classes". Manu became the standard point of reference for all future Dharmasastra that followed it. According to Hindu tradition, the Manusmriti records the words of Brahma. By attributing the words to supernatural forces, the text takes on an authoritative tone as a statement on Dharma, in opposition to previous texts in the field, which were more scholarly. The Constitution of India places special emphasis on outlawing caste discrimination, especially the practice of untouchability.