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Gandhian and Ambedkarian perspective over Casteism and importance of Varna a Analysis

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Abstract

Although Gandhi and Ambedkar embrace related perspective on the relation linking sacred orderings of humanity and the form of societal continuation, but they disagree, on the issue concerning what the critical expressions 'caste' and varn refers to. Gandhi wanted to deal with the conventional methods of religious practices and build up a caste and varn that is empowered with the ideology of collective harmony, affection humanity, and compassion. Whereas Ambedkar unapproved the spreading of Buddhism religious and constructed an innovative medium that focused mainly on materialistic than religious conviction. Nevertheless, the main attention of Gandhi and Ambedkar confined to expose the fortifying inclination of spiritual principles. Both managed with diverse thoughts based on the diversity of regionalism that would come into sight from this societal transformation. According to Gandhi, the reawakened socio-religious whole would be structured by an ideal notion of varn wherein exists no haltered between the mutually dependent community. On the contrary Ambedkar's terminology of varn is incorrigibly degraded because of its involvement in the ancestral construction of hierarchy, in order that its service unlikely create enough impetus to split through ingrained structure of subjugation.

Keywords

Ambedkar; Gandhi; Dumont; Varna; Casteism

Introduction

A key feature of the sociocultural landscapes of late colonial India was the imagination of multiple ideas of the nation, against the backdrop of electoral dynamics relating to communal representations for specific groups such as the Muslims. The Gandhi–Ambedkar debates over caste and 'untouchability' reached a flashpoint in 1932 precisely over the question of whether such separate electorates should be granted to the 'untouchables', on the grounds that they were not an integral part of Hindu social frameworks but were a group with a distinct sociopolitical identity. The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar have often been recast, in contemporary India, in terms of sharply polarized contrasts by their respective followers, who vociferously denounce each other's notions of caste and movements aimed at eradicating caste. These disputes have been minutely analysed in the scholarly literature in terms of the

varying understandings of Gandhi and Ambedkar relating to the modernist state, constitutional reforms, nationalism, socialist reconstruction, British imperialism and so on. Our primary aim in this essay is not to review all these debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar, but to highlight how their divergent understandings of the crucial term *varṇa* are integrally related to their conflicting assessments of the sociopolitical dynamics of caste in Hindu social worlds.

While the term *varṇa* appears as early as the *Ṛg Veda*, in the famous 'hymn to the person' (X.90), and later in epic narratives such as the *Mahābhārata*, scriptures such as the *Bhagavad-Gita*and so on, it was reconfigured by socio-religious reform movements such as the Arya Samaj to distinguish it from contemporary notions and practices of caste. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who established the Samaj in 1875, believed that the numerous castes (*jāti*) with hereditary occupations should be replaced by the Vedic fourfold *varṇa* system where an individual's location in a specific *varṇa* would be determined by the wise (*vidvān*) through an examination of the qualities, actions and nature (*guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*) of particular individuals. A highly significant aspect of this proposed reconstruction, for the later Gandhi– Ambedkar disputes, is that it projects an idealized template for social ordering whose implementation, however, was riddled with numerous puzzles. For instance, if an individual's 'nature' (*svabhāva*) was regarded as unchangeable, the *varṇa* scheme would return to the notion of inherited caste duties, but if it were changeable, one's *varṇa* would seemingly alter at different stages of one life and across lives. Thus, Lipner (2010, p.132) has pointed out that 'Dayananda's ideas on reforming caste were hardly practicable, and so it has proved'.

The fundamental point as to whether *varṇa* refers to the contemporary socio-economic differentiations associated with practices of caste (call this *varna*) or to the idealized prototype of mutually interacting and interdependent groups of people (call this *varna*) was at the conceptual heart of the Gandhi–Ambedkar debates over caste. While towards the end of the 1920s, Gandhi began to acknowledge that *varna* was nowhere to be found in Hindu social structures, he resolutely held on to his conviction that *varna* would be the basis of a reconstructed Hinduism at some point in the future. Gandhi increasingly began to distinguish, from the early 1920s, between *varṇa*, on the one hand, and terms such as 'caste system', 'caste' and 'untouchability', on the other hand, arguing that the notions and practices associated with the latter had no place in a thoroughly renovated *varṇa* template. Ambedkar, in contrast, always understood *varṇa* in terms of *varna*, which is why for him attempts such as the Arya Samaj's to speak of *varṇa* and not of enacted caste hierarchies were simply a sleight of hand which did not alter the structural inequalities on the ground. This key semantic divergence was at the basis of another fundamental dispute between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the role of inter-dining and intermarriage in eradicating the structures of caste. While Gandhi's views on this point, as we will see, shifted somewhat between 1920 and 1945, broadly speaking, he argued that these practices were not essential to the cultivation of a democratic spirit. Whom one marries or eats with would be matters of individual choice in the reconstructed *varṇa* system, that is, the future *varna* from which all notions of caste-based superiority and inferiority have been excised. Ambedkar, on other hand, believed that inter-dining and intermarriage were essential to the eradication of the *varṇa* system as it presently exists, that is, *varna*. This shift in temporal registers meant that Ambedkar often thought that Gandhi was obscuring the brutal realities of caste discrimination (*varna*) through the subterfuge of *varṇa* (*varna*), even as Gandhi's projected *varna* itself was rejected by more traditional Hindus. Thus, Gandhi found himself 'viciously attacked' from the two opposed flanks of Hindu socio-religious orthodoxy (members of the *sanatāna dharma* organizations) and leaders of the 'untouchables' such as Ambedkar (Parekh, 1989, p. 228). However, as we will indicate, while Gandhi's sociopolitical vision indeed had certain romantic and anarchist strands, he too was forced to grapple with the realities of *varna* during his numerous addresses and talks, and he highlighted them in his responses to various correspondents (Mukherjee, 1988, pp. 5–7).

The key thesis of this essay is that while Gandhi and Ambedkar hold similar standpoints on the relation between religious orderings of the world and shapes of social existence, they sharply diverge, on certain occasions, regarding the question of what the crucial terms 'caste' and *varṇa* refer to, so that they often seem to be talking past each other. As a 'critical traditionalist', Gandhi sought to cut through various forms of Hindu socio-religious practices which he regarded as latter-day excrescences and develop a Hinduism which is grounded in the values of universal peace, love and benevolence. Ambedkar too rejected aspects of familiar historical varieties of Buddhism such as Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana, and he configured a new path, a Navayana ('neo-Buddhism'): its goals were to be more specifically material than spiritual, and in place of the traditional notion of individual liberation, the emphasis would fall on the establishment of social equality (Tartakov, 2003). However, while both Gandhi and Ambedkar thus sought to uncover the revitalizing impulses of religious ideals, they operated with different imaginations of the type of polity that would emerge from this social reconstruction. For Gandhi, the reinvigorated socio-religious whole would be structured by an ideal notion of *varṇa* in which there would be no conflict, antagonism and discord among the interdependent units. For Ambedkar, in contrast, the vocabulary of *varṇa* was irredeemably corrupted to the core through its enmeshment in millennia-old structures of hierarchy, so that its employment in social imaginations would not be able to generate sufficient momentum to break through entrenched systems of oppression.

Ambedkar and the Fragments of the Nation

Three consistent themes can be isolated from Ambedkar's speeches and writings on caste, particularly from his *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* [henceforth *WCGU*] and his *Annihilation of Caste* [henceforth *AOC*], and from *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* [henceforth *WAS*], which are relevant to understanding his differences with Gandhi on the question of caste and 'untouchability'. First, notwithstanding the Arya Samaj's projection of a social whole comprised of the four *varṇas*, he highlighted the fact that the 'untouchables' are not considered, in the present, by upper caste Hindus as members of a unified organic solidarity. As he argued:

> To tell the Untouchables that they must not act against the Hindus, because they will be acting against their kith and kin, may be understood. But to assume that the Hindus regard the Untouchables as their kith and kin is to set up an illusion. (2009 [1945], p. 37)

The 'untouchables', he noted, are not allowed by caste Hindus to draw water from common wells, own land, keep cattle and so on. He emphasized this point even more poignantly to Gandhi during a meeting in 1931:

> You say I have got a homeland, but still I repeat that I am without it. How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink? No self-respecting Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land. (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol. 17, part I, p. 53)

'While Gandhi sought to distinguish between an ideal system of four mutually cooperating *varṇas*, and regarded the numerous distinctions of caste and ''untouchability'' as latter day excrescences, Ambedkar consistently refused to draw such a distinction.' For him, in fact, the notion of four *varṇas* mutually cooperating in an organic whole (*caturvarṇya*) was itself the basic root of inequality, and the very foundation of the caste system and 'untouchability'. Thus, regarding the question whether the 'untouchables' can regard Gandhi as their friend, Ambedkar responds:

> How can they? It may be that Mr. Gandhi honestly believes that the problem of the Untouchables is a social problem. But how can they believe him to be their friend when he wishes to retain caste [that is, *varṇa*] and abolish Untouchability it being quite clear that Untouchability is only an extended form of caste and that therefore without abolition of caste there is no hope of abolition of Untouchability?

Ambedkar argues that the life of the 'ordinary uneducated Hindu' is based on three prohibitions: against inter-dining, against intermarriage and against touching certain groups of people. While the first two constitute broader caste notions, and the third specifically forms 'untouchability', for the Hindus they all form an integral system. Therefore, 'the idea of hoping to remove untouchability without destroying the caste system is an utter futility. The underlying idea that caste and untouchability are two different things is founded on a fallacy. The two are one and inseparable' (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol. 5, p. 101). Denying any distinctions between practices of caste and 'untouchability' (*varna*), on the one hand, and the template of fourfold *varṇa*, on the other hand, Ambedkar concludes: 'If the idea of caste is a pernicious idea it is entirely because of the viciousness of the idea of *varna*. Both are evil ideas and it matters very little whether one believes in *varna* or in caste' (2009 [1945], p. 278).

Second, Ambedkar's consistent understanding of all terms related to caste—whether *varṇa*, 'untouchability', the caste system and so on—in terms of *varna* was the basis of his insistence on inter-dining and intermarriage as necessary means for the eradication of caste and 'untouchability'. Ambedkar quotes in *WCGU* some of Gandhi's examples through which Gandhi seeks to establish that inter-dining and intermarriage are not necessary to foster national identity. For instance, while children of brothers do not intermarry in India, we would not claim that they have ceased to love one another. Again, some orthodox Vaiṣṇava women do not eat with or drink water from the pot used by other members of the same family, which again does not mean that they are lacking in familial love. Therefore, Gandhi concludes: 'The Caste system cannot be said to be bad because it does not allow inter-dining or intermarriage between different Castes' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 265). However, Ambedkar rejects the analogy between family and caste by arguing that what these cases demonstrate is that provided other means of sustaining love and affection are already available, for instance, the consciousness of belonging to the same family, inter-dining and intermarriage is not required for binding people together. However, in the case of the caste Hindus and the 'untouchables', where such affective bonds are lacking in the first place, inter-dining and intermarriage are 'absolutely essential' for dissolving the notions of 'untouchability' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 276). Ambedkar argues that intermarriage will generate the feeling of 'being kith and kin' across the castes, and 'unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling–the feeling of being aliens–created by caste will not vanish' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 285). While the Congress claims that the 'untouchables' are already a part of the wider Hindu society, the 'untouchables', in fact, remain 'distinct and separate' from the Hindus, for they cannot inter-dine or intermarry with caste Hindus, and their very touch is viewed as ritually polluting. However, if the caste Hindus are able to integrate the lower castes into social fabrics in 'the real and substantial sense of the term assimilation, namely inter-marriage and inter-dining, the Untouchables are always prepared and ready for it' (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol.17, part I, p. 355).

Third, Ambedkar often highlighted the political economy of caste (*varna*) and argued that caste hierarchies were maintained through various forms of socio-economic coercion. He notes that while Hinduism has succeeded in assimilating various external influences, and is thus an 'adaptable religion', 'there is one thing which Hinduism has never been able to do—namely to adjust itself to absorb the Untouchables or to remove the bar of Untouchability'. While many reformers in the past have tried to abolish 'untouchability', they have failed, for the reason that Hindus have much to lose through this abolition, since 240 million of upper caste Hindus seek to employ 60 million of the 'untouchables' as forced labour or as sweepers and scavengers and so on. Therefore, 'untouchability' is not based merely on religious principles but is 'a system of unmitigated economic exploitation…' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], pp. 188–189). The structures of caste sustain not simply a division of labour, which is a feature of many societies, but also a division of labourers into hierarchically structured water-tight compartments (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol.3, p. 67). Consequently, while the 'untouchables' too support the anti-colonial struggle against British imperialism, they are not content with such political liberation, unless India is able to establish a social democracy which is not run by upper caste Hindus in the legislature, the executive and the administration, and which guarantees constitutional safeguards to the 'untouchables' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], pp. 163–165).

Ambedkar therefore consistently emphasized that the everyday spaces of lived Hinduisms are saturated by the Brahmanical principle of 'graded inequality' across the classes, which prohibits the

'untouchables' from entering into educational institutions, acquiring property, occupying positions of authority and so on (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 206). The 'social psychology' of caste Hindus is structured by this principle, which is not incidental to the life of Hindus, for it is the 'official doctrine of Hinduism. It is sacred, and no Hindu can think of doing away with it' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 165). Ambedkar argues that Hindus observe caste practices not because they are 'inhuman or wrong-headed', but because they accept the authority of scriptural texts such as the Manusmṛti concerning inter-dining and intermarriage. Therefore, he exhorts social reformers to '[m]ake every man and woman free from the thraldom of the shastras, cleanse their mind of the pernicious notions founded on the shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and intermarry, without your telling him or her to do so' (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 286–287). The destruction of caste (*varna*), which is a 'stupendous task, well-nigh impossible', involves the rejection of the fundamental religious intuition that the social order has a sacred quality that is imbued with Vedic divine authority (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 289). Distinguishing between 'untouchability' as the overt practice of touch-me-not-ism and the mental disposition which is manifested in forms of social discrimination, he argues that while the former may be disappearing from urban centres, the latter will not vanish 'within a measurable distance of time' in the villages where most Hindus live: 'You cannot untwist a two-thousand-year-twist of the human mind and turn it in the opposite direction' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 188). This ideational transformation, however difficult to achieve, is vital because caste is not simply a physical object constituted of bricks or wires but is rather a state of mind: 'The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change' (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 286).

Gandhi and the Organic Body of the Hindus

A systematic analysis of Gandhi's numerous responses, in *Collected Works* [henceforth *CW]*, to correspondents on the question of caste reveals that he sometimes moves remarkably close to Ambedkar's own views on caste, notwithstanding the crucial difference in their understandings of caste in terms of *varna* and *varna*, respectively. Any survey of Gandhi's views on crucial themes such as caste, politics or religion must, of course, keep in mind Gandhi's own disclaimer that he was not overly concerned with consistency, and that in his search for truth he had often discarded earlier views:

> 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 …. [T]herefore, 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. (29 April 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 55, pp. 60–61)

For one instance of these shifts, we may highlight his support, in the early 1920s, of restrictions against inter-dining and intermarriage, on the grounds that these practices and the eradication of 'untouchability' were two disconnected issues (Nanda, 1985, pp. 18–26). By 1945, however, he had arrived at a more interventionist position, which is indicated in a letter to N. Vyasatirth: 'You must be aware that ordinary marriages no longer have no interest for me. I am interested, if at all, in a caste Hindu marrying a Harijan' (16 November 1945; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 82, p. 86).

Gandhi responds to Ambedkar's *AOC* in the *Harijan* (18 July 1936) by distinguishing between *varṇa* and caste:

> The law of varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling …. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high …. The callings of a Brahmin—spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God …. (included in Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 326)

While it is true that many Brahmins at present have violated the law of *varṇa* by claiming a superior status for themselves, even today there are some true Brahmins who live on alms given to them and who

provide spiritual wisdom to others. Therefore, it would be improper, Gandhi concludes, to reject the law of *varṇa* on the grounds of its violation by some Brahmins who have fallen away from the high ideals of the *varṇa* scheme (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 327). These themes are concisely summarized by Gandhi in 1934 in these terms: 'Varna is intimately, if not indissolubly, connected with birth, and the observance of the law of varna means the following on the part of us all the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty' (Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 59, pp. 63–64). If individuals do not follow the law of *varṇa*, and do not remain content with their hereditary means of livelihood, the result will be social anarchy. The fulfilment of the law, however, will prevent violent conflicts between groups which are marked by the concentration of wealth and arrogance, and groups which are helpless and destitute (1 October 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 56, pp. 47–48).

The basic distinction between *varna* and *varna* structured three key dimensions of Gandhi's understanding of caste. First, Gandhi argues while that caste, grounded in the four divisions which are natural and essential, has preserved Hinduism from social disintegration, it has picked up various excrescences such as 'untouchability'. The *varṇas* are governed by the eternal law of heredity which ensures that members of a certain *varṇa* who do not fulfil the duties specific to it will be reborn into another: 'If Hindus believe, as they must believe, in reincarnation, transmigration, they must know that nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division …' (8 December 1920; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 19, p. 84). Key to Gandhi's understanding of *varṇa* is the doctrine of rebirth—the *varṇa* system

> recognizes the influence of previous lives and of heredity. All are not born with equal powers and similar tendencies. Neither the parents nor the State can measure the intelligence of each child. But there would be no difficulty if each child is prepared for the profession indicated by heredity, environment and the influence of former lives …. (1932; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 50, p. 226)

However, although all individuals do not share the same aptitudes and proclivities, all occupations will be equally respectable in an ideal *varṇāśrama*—whether that of the teacher, lawyer, leather worker, carpenter, scavenger and so on. Such an institution will not be marred by the 'monstrous anomaly' of the first three *varṇas* ruling over the Shudras who have to toil away for the rest. He notes in 1934:

> When, if ever, the ideal state of things … had been reached in India, I do not know. But I do hold that it is the only ideal state that is easy enough to approach and that it is not only for the Hindus but for the whole of humanity. (Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 59, p. 66)

Gandhi argues that this ideal fourfold *varṇa* scheme is recorded in the *Bhagavad-Gita* which teaches that the members of the four *varṇas*, who have distinct *dharmas*, should be treated on an equal basis. The 'untouchables' will receive the same measure of respect as the Brahmins and will not be subject to differential treatment (27 December 1924; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 25, pp. 511–512).

These themes are neatly summarized by Gandhi in 1934:

> Caste, in so far as it is based on untouchability, is an institution of the devil, and we must get rid of it at any cost. But I have explained repeatedly that caste expressed as varnadharma is an eternal law which we may not break except at our own risk …. The law of varṇa was discovered by our ancestors ages ago; and … it has appeared to me a wholly beneficent law. But like many laws and institutions of Nature this law of varṇa has been distorted …. (17 January 1934; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 57, p. 5)

Gandhi therefore called for a reform of the system of *varṇāśrama* through a rejection of all notions of superiority and inferiority which had become attached to the different castes. The original *varṇāśrama* was a mechanism through which Brahmins as well as Shudras performed their duties specific to their *varṇas* and set their minds on the eternal, so that the fulfilment of duties was an instrument of their progress towards liberation (*mokṣa*). The reconstituted *varṇāśrama* will be a system where the children of

scavengers

> may remain scavengers without being or feeling degraded and they will be no more considered untouchables than Brahmins. The fault does not, therefore, lie in recognizing the law of heredity and transmission of qualities from generation to generation, but it lies with the faulty conception of inequality. (13 August 1925; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 28, p. 61)

Gandhi's staunch conviction that varna can be recovered, even though currently all one could see is *varna*, is evident in his response to Ambedkar who had written to Gandhi: 'The outcaste is a bye- product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system.' Gandhi noted that Ambedkar's view is shared by 'many educated Hindus', but asserted that 'untouchability', which is to be destroyed altogether, is a product not of *varṇāśrama* but of distinctions of high and low. He argued that it is as wrong to seek to destroy caste because of its excesses as it would be to destroy a body because it has an ugly growth or crops because they have weeds (11 February 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 261). Therefore, while *varṇāśrama*, as currently practised, is indeed correctly characterized by Ambedkar as the essence of superiority and inferiority, Gandhi remains convinced that when 'the evil of high-and-low-ness' is destroyed, *varṇāśrama* will be 'purged of the very thing for which Dr. Ambedkar abhors it' (18 February 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 336). Even when it is pointed out that Gandhi's authority could be invoked to support various forms of tyrannies based on caste discrimination, especially since in everyday life people do not distinguish between *varṇa* and caste (our *varṇa* and *varṇa*, respectively), Gandhi's commitment to *varṇa* does not waver:

> All these objections have no doubt much force in them. But they are objections such as can be advanced against many corrupted institutions that were once good. A reformer's business is to examine the institution itself and to set about reforming it if its abuses can be separated from it. (17 November 1927; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 35, p. 262)

On a different occasion, when his interlocutors protest: 'Surely, the varna you describe exists only in your imagination!' Gandhi responds: 'That is unfortunately so. I am simply answering your question and showing you the vital difference between caste and varna' (12 January 1934; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 56, p. 429).
Therefore, we should try to reform the degenerate structures without, however, destroying the original: 'And if you believe with me in the idealistic *varnashrama* you will also strive with me to reach that ideal so far as may be' (29 September 1927; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 35, p. 2).

Second, because Gandhi meant by terms such as 'caste' and 'caste system' what we have labelled *varna*, he often argued that the practices of inter-dining and intermarriage are not an integral aspect of the eradication of 'untouchability'. He pointed out that the original notion of *varṇāśrama* was not associated with restrictions on inter-dining and intermarriage, for numerous illustrations of these practices in the Vedas and the Mahabharata indicate that they are not religious observances but are merely social customs (4 March 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 455). People generally marry within their religious group or their geographical location, and the restriction on intermarriage is an 'extension of the same principle. It is a social convenience'. However, while a woman may not wish to marry a certain man because of reasons of temperament, she may not neglect the duty of serving him: 'Marriage is a matter of choice. Service is an obligation that cannot be shirked' (12 March 1925; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 26, pp. 285–286). Because individuals are born into four *varṇas* with specific duties to one another, to repudiate which is to 'disregard the law of heredity', individuals should fulfil their duties without any sense of pride in their special qualities. Therefore, while the *varṇāśrama* system discourages inter-dining and intermarriage, these social restrictions are not based on any notions of superiority (6 October 1921;

Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 21, p. 247). The reconstituted scheme of *varṇa* will not be associated with restrictions on inter-dining and intermarriage, so that 'a Brahmin who marries a Sudra girl or *vice versa* commits no offence against the law of varna' (4 June 1931; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 46, p. 303). Even though in the 'resuscitated varnadharma' intermarriages across the *varnas* will be rare, if a girl were indeed to marry someone from another *varṇa*, she will adopt the *varṇa* of her husband. However, this change of *varṇa* would not imply a slur against anybody or offend anyone's sensitivities since 'the institution of varna in the age of resuscitation would imply absolute social equality of all the four varnas' (12 October 1934; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 59, p. 146). After noting that if a Hindu woman wishes to marry a Muslim for 'good and sufficient reasons', she would not be committing a sin by doing so, Gandhi asks: 'How, then, can we object to a woman marrying a so-called untouchable? … There is no necessary connection between marriage and the varna system' (22 November 1930; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 44, p. 328). That is to say, since all hierarchical asymmetries of caste will have disappeared in a *varna* of the future, inter-dining and intermarriage across the *varṇas* will then simply be matters of an individual's preferences which have no association with 'untouchability':

> The removal of untouchability does never mean destruction of varnashrama dharma which is a very beautiful and beneficial thing and never a bad one … This does not mean that we are to inter-dine and inter-marry amongst each other. You must never forget the distinction between untouchability and varnashrama dharma. (3 May 1925; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 27, p. 10)

Pointing out that he himself viewed inter-dining as a 'desirable and inevitable social reform', Gandhi argued that this question should not confused with the eradication of 'untouchability', which was the removal of the 'social and religious injustice' towards those who are prohibited from using public utilities and accessing spiritual means. He would not feel deprived if nobody accepted food that had been touched by him, but it would indeed be a great deprivation if he could not send his children to school, rent a house in localities open to others or enter into temples (24 November 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 56, p. 273).

Third, for all his resolute commitment to *varna*, Gandhi frequently reminded his audiences and correspondents that it had been overcome by the 'monstrosity' of 'untouchability'. As he put it pithily in 1934: 'According to my definition of varna there is no varna in operation at present in Hinduism' 4 June 1931; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 46, p. 303). He points out that compassion, which is the basis of the Vaiṣṇava way of life, is rarely practised towards the 'untouchables'—the caste Hindus address them contemptuously, offer them only leftover food, prohibit them from using wells or attending schools and so on. He reminds his correspondent that '[t]he British Government, against which you have launched non-cooperation, does not treat us with such contempt' (3 July 1921; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 20, p. 319). Gandhi's dedication to the project of eradicating 'untouchability' is indicated by his claim, on one occasion, that he would let go even of the idealistic *varṇa* system if this were a necessary condition for the removal of 'untouchability': '[i]f *varnashrama* goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear' (24 November 1927; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 35, p. 522). On another occasion, after suggesting that it is 'highly likely' that after 'untouchability' has been excised, there will be nothing objectionable in the system of the four *varṇas*, Gandhi adds: 'If, however, varnashrama even then looks an ugly thing, the whole of Hindu society will fight it' (11 February 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 261). Gandhi's rejection of 'untouchability', and his occasional ambivalence towards an ideal structure of *varṇa*, is grounded in his hermeneutical engagements with Hindu scriptural texts: 'Where is the room for high and low when *moksha* is the ideal, when non-violence is the supreme dharma and we believe in the oneness of the *atman* in all?' (9 September 1928; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 37, p. 253). The union of all humanity through love and non-violence that will be achieved through the eradication of 'untouchability' is grounded in the Advaitic notion of a transcendental unity: 'I believe in the rock-bottom doctrine of Advaita and my interpretation of Advaita excludes totally any idea of superiority at any stage whatsoever' (29 September 1927; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 35, p. 1). Therefore, Gandhi appeals to his audience on one occasion to try to patiently wean away the orthodox from their caste prejudices, so that the 'untouchables' are admitted to temples, schools and public offices. He concludes: 'The *Gita* tells us

that by sincerely meditating on the Lord in one's heart, one can attain *moksha*. Meditation is waiting on God. If waiting on God brings the highest bliss of salvation, how much quicker must it bring removal of untouchability?' (22 January 1925; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 25, pp. 514–515).

Reading across Gandhi and Ambedkar

Our discussion has highlighted the sociopolitical valences of the divergent understandings of *varṇa* between Gandhi and Ambedkar on caste. Whereas Gandhi believed that the excrescence of 'untouchability' could be removed and an ideal scheme of cooperating castes (*varna*) reinstituted, Ambedkar argued that only the abolition of every vestige of caste (*varna*) through inter-dining and intermarriage could lead to true social equality (Krishan, 1997, p. 64). The centrality of the distinction between *varna* and *varna* in this debate is captured by Ambedkar's poignant remark: 'History shows that where ethics and economics come into conflict victory is always with economics' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 190).

Ambedkar vehemently denounced *varna* on the grounds that it was not only impracticable but also it provided a smokescreen behind which *varna* was being reinforced. He points out that while the Arya Samaj speaks of *varṇa* in terms not of birth but of worth (*guṇa*), the Samajists continue to label individuals as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, which are names that have become rigidly associated with certain mental attitudes regarding social hierarchies. Therefore, as long as these categories are employed, even though under *caturvarṇya*, Hindus will continue to think in terms of hierarchical divisions based on birth. Further, the system of *caturvarṇya* cannot be implemented practically because the qualities and attributes of human beings are highly variable, and these cannot be neatly pigeonholed into clearly delineated four natural classes (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 263–267). Whether or not the ideal of guardian and ward was the basis of the *caturvarṇya* system, the relation between the three higher *varṇas* and the Shudras, in practice, is that of master and servant, and this asymmetry is inscribed in texts such as the Manusmṛti with their prohibitions on the Shudras acquiring wealth and education (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 273). Just as when speaking of caste, Ambedkar always meant *varṇa*, and not its idealized prototypes such as *varṇa*, Ambedkar's references to Hinduism too involved the every- day socio-religious restrictions based on texts such as the Manusmṛti, and not transcendental equalities or spiritual harmonies projected in scriptural sources. For instance, he responds to Gandhi's complaint that the texts he has cited are not scripturally authoritative, by arguing that even if these texts are latter interpolations, many Hindus do not make these subtle hermeneutical distinctions and instead believe that the observance of caste duties and 'untouchability' has been commanded by the scriptures (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 335–336). Pointing out that in the everyday life of Hindus, 'religion' refers to a set of commands and prohibitions derived from the Vedic scriptures and commentaries on the *dharma*, he argues that '[r]eligion, in the sense of spiritual principles, truly universal, applicable to all races, to all countries, to all times … does not form the governing part of a Hindu's life' (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 305).

> Thus, Gandhi's claim that the essence of Hinduism is the teaching of one God and the 'bold acceptance of ahimsa as the law of the human family' (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 327) runs headlong into Ambedkar's terse rejoinder: 'The real genius of Hinduism is to divide. This is beyond dispute' (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 180). However, on a rare occasion, Ambedkar did allow the possibility of a Hinduism of the future grounded in the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, which are drawn from the Upaniṣads:

> I am no authority on the subject. But I am told that for such religious principles as will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, it may not be necessary for you [Hindus] to borrow from foreign sources, and that you could draw for such principles on the Upanishads. Whether you could do so without a complete remoulding, a considerable scraping and chipping off from the ore they contain, is more than I can say. (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 311)

Ambedkar finally moved towards Buddhism in 1956, and his reconfiguration of classical Buddhist

themes highlighted the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. According to Ambedkar, unlike other religions which teach God, soul and life after death, the *Dhamma* of Buddhism rejects these beliefs. Rather, Buddhism is based on reason which opposes superstition and supernaturalism (*prajñā*) and preaches love (*karuṇā*) and equality (*samatā*) (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol. 17, part III, p. 515).

Ambedkar was not the only contemporary of Gandhi who rejected his distinction between an idealized *varṇa* template and its excrescences of 'untouchability' (Busi, 1997, p. 222). Sant Ram of the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal* (Forum for the Breakup of Caste), a radical wing of the Arya Samaj, pointed out in a letter to Gandhi that his distinction between caste and *varṇa* was 'too subtle to be grasped by people in general' who maintained their everyday social restrictions regarding commensality and connubiality. Sant Ram notes:

> Hindus are slaves of caste, and do not want to destroy it. So, when you advocate your ideal of imaginary varna-vyavastha, they find justification for clinging to caste …. 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. (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 330–331)

Around this time in Tamil Nadu, Periyar EVR had joined the Indian National Congress in 1919 and actively participated in its non-cooperation movement, and also in the anti-'untouchability' Satyagraha movement at Vaikom in 1924 which aimed to open up to the 'untouchables' the public roads. However, he broke away from the Congress at the Kancheepuram Tamil Nadu Conference in 1925 partly because of Gandhi's defence of the system of *varṇāśramadharma*, where Gandhi condemned 'untouchability' without championing inter-dining and intermarriage across the castes. As S. Saraswathi points out:

> The more Gandhiji referred to *Varṇāshrama* and endeavoured to explain its characteristics as distinct from the then existing system, the greater became the resistance to it. Gandhiji's ideal of *Varṇāshrama* appeared irrelevant to the modern society and even dangerous to their self-interest and self-respect to many who were not high in the *varṇa-jāti* order. (1994, p. 15)

More recently, after referring to the view that Hinduism views individuals as parts of one human family, D. R. Jatava (1997, p. 87) argues that this equality is being proposed merely on a 'metaphysical plane' and does not exist in social reality: 'That cannot be an existential reality, and equality has value only in the actual world'. Therefore, for Gandhi's critics, who consistently operate with *varna*, his defence of an idealized *varṇāśrama* seems to be a deceitful mechanism to maintain upper caste Brahmanical control over Hindu social systems, and even more so because Gandhi tended to associate *varṇa* with hereditary callings. For instance, Ambedkar concluded that Gandhi's *varṇa* was simply a 'different name for caste, for the simple reason that it is the same in essence–namely, pursuit of one's ancestral calling' (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 349). As for Gandhi, he believed that after 'untouchability' was removed, an ideal *varṇāśrama* would be established not in vertical layers but on a 'horizontal plane on which all stand on a footing of equality, doing the services respectively assigned to them' (1 February 1933; Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 258).

The Dialectic of Difference

The debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the multiple meanings of *varṇa* reflect a dialectic—between the attainment of liberation (*mokṣa*) which is beyond all worldly differentiations, and the cultivation of certain this-worldly virtues within the cycles of reincarnation (*saṃsāra*)—that runs through various Hindu theological, cultural and social universes. This dialectic produces a volatile nexus across numerous Hindu sociocultural spaces:

> Human beings have the potentiality to realise, through the pathways of various ethical disciplines, their true

spiritual centre of gravity—whether this is the universal self (*ātman*), or some mode of devotional communion with the Lord Viṣṇu or Śiva, and so on—which is utterly beyond the hierarchical asymmetries of particularistic *dharmic* contexts.

Human beings are currently subject to the processes of *karma* and reincarnation, and their ethical patterns of living are hierarchically situated within socio-religious domains of *dharma* which are marked by particularistic codes, obligations, and duties.

From roughly the third century bce onwards, we find the priestly Brahmanical defenders of Hindu socio-normative living valorizing the notion of *dharma* as the basis of the sacral order of *varṇa-āśrama-dharma*, and their own sociocultural identity as speakers of Vedic Sanskrit. In the social visions of the *Dharmaśāstras*, as long as individuals remain in the two *āśramas* of the celibate student and the householder, the distinctions which are specific to class and gender are to be maintained. The sociocultural exclusions of Brahmanical Hinduism are clearly stated in this corpus: the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (II.2.8) states that it is a vicious error to touch, speak or look at a socio-ritual outcaste (Cāṇḍāla) while the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (18.11–12) records the view that the Śūdras are a cremation ground and one should not recite the Vedas in the presence of a Śūdra (Olivelle, 2000, pp. 25, 89, 77, 425). However, if life within the world is thus regulated by the minutiae of the textures of *varṇa-āśrama-dharma*, the mendicant renunciant has transcended these densely contoured sets of obligations and duties. The emergence of this dialectic—living within the *dharmic* structures of the hierarchical world and progressing to a state beyond its regulative bounds—has to be located historically in the appropriation, by *Dharmaśāstras* such as the Manusmṛti, of asceticism or world renunciation (*saṁnyāsa*) into Brahmanical universes. Initially, the renouncer outlooks were sharply opposed to Vedic sacrificial worldviews, and pitted wilderness against village life, celibacy against marriage and ritual inactivity against ritual performance (Olivelle, 1992, p. 46). Therefore, the exaltation of the world renouncer in some of the early Upaniṣads above all social life, which is ideally regulated by *dharmic* norms, led to a fundamental tension within Vedic lifeworlds which insisted that people should perform specific types of actions. Thus, the *Dharmaśāstra* literature, which seeks to draw the world renouncer back into the fold of social obligations, is full of numerous tensions about the soteriological significance of renunciation. For instance, the Manusmṛti (6.87–90) declares the *āśrama* of the householder to be the best, and the other three *āśramas* are said to converge there. The reason for exalting this *āśrama* is connected to the prohibition on individuals from pursuing liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycles of reincarnation without having first paid the three debts to the ancient sages, the ancestors and the gods (6.35–37). Once they have discharged these debts, they can become wandering mendicants who practise various yogic techniques such as breath control, withdrawal of the senses and others, and become completely free from the world, with the self (*ātman*) as the sole companion and bliss as the goal (6.49).

In other words, by moving across the idealized system of the three *āśramas*, structured by *dharmic* distinctions, the renunciant becomes a sage who is established, in the fourth *āśrama*, in the universal self beyond all distinctions. A survey of classical Vedāntic Hindu universes, from roughly the eight century ce onwards, indicates that they too have operated with a conceptual contrast between an individual's metaphysical identity and an individual's sociological role. The former is the imperishable self (*ātman*) which, whether it is conceptualized as non-dual with the eternal reality, Brahman (thus Advaita Vedānta) or ontologically dependent on Brahman (thus the multiple strands of theistic Vedānta), is beyond all *dharmic* markers of caste, gender and others. The latter, in contrast, is the precisely graduated sociological persona through which the imperishable self is asymmetrically refracted into a hierarchical world of multiplicity. More radically, some of the holy individuals (*sants*) such as Kabir (*c.* 1500 ce)—a pivotal figure in the *bhakti* movements—rejected all notions of scriptural revelations, devotional ritualisms and caste hierarchies, and their ethical views emphasized non-violence, humility, compassion

and reverence for all. At the same time, however, these medieval devotional movements should not be viewed as subaltern uprisings or revolts of the masses, for they usually did not seek to institutionalize radical social egalitarianisms but rather viewed notions of caste (*jāti*) as an obstacle in an individual's spiritual progress (Pande, 1989, p. 98). The operation of the dialectic between the affirmation of spiritual egalitarianism and the shaping of ethical striving by *dharmic* insignia can be noticed in universes as diverse as the Vīraśaivas, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, the Bāuls and others. In his study of some contemporary representations of the medieval Vīraśaivas or Lingāyats, R. J. Zydenbos (1997, p. 535) argues that some of the radically egalitarian motifs associated with them should be attributed not to their 'founder' Bāsava himself but to more recent reformers in Vīraśaiva society. The Vīraśaivas offered possibilities of social equality for those who would live in accordance with Vīraśaiva norms which were broadly continuous with Brahmanical values relating to spiritual progress such as the rejection of the use of intoxicants and the adoption of a vegetarian diet. The Caitanya traditions too have grappled with the translation of the affirmation that Caitanya (1486–1534 ce) was the divinity who descended to the world to rescue women, Śūdras and sinners, into a direct engagement with socio-economic asymmetries. Some strands modelled their social radicalism on readings of the cowherd maidens (*gopī*) in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (*c.*1000 ce) as the supreme devotees precisely because they repudiate their social *dharmic* obligations in response to the call of the enchanting flute music of Kṛṣṇa. By and large, however, the early devotees accepted certain social restrictions relating to *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* such as devotees of different castes not intermarrying or inter-dining with one another. As J. T. O'Connell (1993, pp. 20–21) has noted, the movement in the sixteenth century was not directed towards 'mundane social uplift or liberation from oppressive economic conditions', and the nearest approximation to socio-economic reform was the encouragement of hospitality to fellow Vaiṣṇavas and the offering of alms to people in need. For a rela- tively more straightforward repudiation of all vestiges of the Brahmanical modes of living enshrined in the *Dharmaśāstras*, as well as a rejection of sociological gradualism in place of an emphasis on the here- and-now, we could turn to the songs of the wandering minstrels of Bengal, the Bāuls, which direct the attention of the listener, somewhat in the style of Kabir, to the 'I' which is beyond all distinctions of religious community and caste. J. Openshaw has highlighted the multiple uses of the notion of the 'I' (*āmi*) in the songs of a Bāul, Rāj Khyāpā (1869–1946). The members of his community employ the term *bartamān* ('the living') to refer to themselves and contrast themselves with the followers of ortho- doxy or orthopraxy (*anumān*). Their songs elaborate a distinction between the inner perspective of the 'I', which is free from distinctions of self and other, high and low, pure and impure, and the external perspective which is the world of hierarchy, discrimination and ranking. Rāj adopted a radically icono- clastic stance towards all social hierarchies on the basis of his claim that the interiority and the subjectiv- ity of the 'I' transcend all worldly categories. Here, it is significant that the followers of the *bartamān* path have, according to Openshaw (2005, p. 192), sometimes developed folk versions of Advaita Vedānta and directed their non-dualism towards socio-economic issues:

> I have often heard even uninitiated rural Bengalis, Muslims as well as Hindus, explain 'non-dualism' as non-differentiation and non-discrimination [*advaita*] in a highly radical sense, for example, in terms of lack of possessiveness …. The more conventionally religious would rarely draw such radical corollaries of course.

Conclusion

In the light of the classical Vedāntic-yogic Hindu socio-religious dialectic between an empirical affirmation of socio-ritual hierarchy and its transcendental negation, the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar can be seen as structured by oppositional stances between, on the one hand, a critical revisionist who seeks to abandon the hierarchical layers of *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* and present Hinduism as expressive of the universal *dharma* of non-violence, peace and love, and, on the other hand, a redoubt-

able interlocutor who points out, with deep pathos, that several millennia of Hindu spiritualities have yet failed to break through the stranglehold of caste-based notions, subjectivities and norms. Thus, these debates have been aptly characterized by R. Guha as a conflict between two 'tragic' figures against the wider plots of the anti-colonial struggles. Gandhi, a 'rural romantic' and a 'crypto-anarchist', wanted to reform Hinduism by abolishing 'untouchability' and set up self-governing villages, while Ambedkar admired urban spaces structured by technology and regarded the village as a 'den of iniquity'. While Gandhi was generally suspicious of the state, Ambedkar was a 'steadfast constitutionalist' who sought solutions to social problems through the intervention of the state. Unlike Gandhi who claimed that the Congress represented all Indians, and Dalits too, Ambedkar distinguished between the transfer of power from Britain to India and the organization of the Dalits into a separate bloc to configure their own interests. Guha concludes:

> Here then is the stuff of epic drama, the argument between the Hindu who did most to reform caste and the ex-Hindu who did most to do away with caste altogether. Recent accounts represent it as a fight between a hero and a villain, the writer's caste position generally determining who gets cast as hero, who as villain. In truth both figures should be seen as heroes, albeit tragic ones. (Guha, 2010, p. 33)

Ambedkar himself, on one occasion, referred to the disputes between the 'untouchables' and the upper caste Hindus involved in the eradication of 'untouchability' as structured by a 'tragic' relationship. The text *AOC* is a speech that Ambedkar was invited to deliver in Lahore in 1936 by the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal*. However, when they read the text in advance, in which Ambedkar criticized the Vedas, they requested him to drop this point. Ambedkar refused to do so, and the speech was cancelled. Noting that the course of events had 'ended in a tragedy', Ambedkar queried:

> But what can anyone expect from a relationship so tragic as the relationship between a reforming sect of caste Hindus and the self-respecting sect of Untouchables, where the former have no desire to alienate their orthodox fellows, and the latter have no alternative but to insist upon reform being carried out? (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 204)

The debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar revolved around a theme that would later become a flash- point of academic debate in post-Dumontian understandings of caste: whether caste is to be explained primarily in terms of an ideological structure of hierarchy, or the intersections between religious norms, on the one hand, and control of land, forced labour and physical dominance, on the other hand. According to Dumont, the system of the castes, a hierarchically ordered whole, emphasizes the cooperative interdependence of the castes and enshrines a fundamentally religious vision of wholeness. Thus, in caste society 'everything is directed to the whole … as part and parcel of the necessary order' (Dumont, 1980, p. 107). However, whereas Dumont believed that the socio-economic aspects of Indian society are 'encompassed' by religious values, a number of scholars have argued that the systemic dimensions of caste could not have been propagated simply though the notions of purity and pollution. Rather, one must emphasize, they claim, the institutional frameworks within which such notions operate, and also high- light the economic control that the upper castes have exercised over the lower. In particular, they argue that the Dumontian understanding paints a dehistoricized picture of the diverse sociopolitical contexts within which the moral codes associated with the different castes have been forged and glosses over the various tensions that have accompanied the mobilization of social identities in the subcontinent's political history. While for Dumont, the two poles of the caste spectrum—the Brahmins and the 'untouchables'— are held together by the force of *dharma* which sets out the castes in terms of differential purity and pollution, H. Singh argues that religious (*dharmic*) power is, in fact, not the basis but the legitimizing principle of caste hierarchies. The dependence of the lower castes upon the former for their means of subsistence provides the infrastructure, according to Singh, for the religious legitimation of the caste hierarchy. Therefore, he criticizes as ahistorical certain accounts of the relations between *varṇa* and *jāti* primarily through the ritual aspects of caste, for these do not sufficiently emphasize the forms of exploi- tation and extra-economic coercion

in the social relations of production which maintain the distinctions across the castes. For instance, in the princely states of Rajputana, the coronation of a king was incom- plete even after the ritual ceremony performed by the priest unless the fraternity of the landlords (*thikanedars*), who supplied the king with military and political support, took an oath of allegiance (Singh, 2014, p. 101). Interestingly enough, Dumont himself was aware that his thesis that power

subordinate to status, or the king to the priest, is not always instantiated on the ground and acknowledged this point by suggesting a distinction between ideal system and historical fact: 'In theory, power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood, whereas in fact priesthood submits to power' (Dumont, 1980, pp. 71–72).

These post-Dumontian debates over 'holism' also shaped, as we have seen, the agonistic relationship between Ambedkar and Gandhi, given their divergent locations vis-à-vis the social fabrics of lived Hinduisms (Vakil, 1991, p. 163). As A. Sharma (2013, p. 185) notes: 'Many [former] untouchables who criticize Gandhi do so from outside the pale of Hinduism …. Unlike them, Gandhi was trying to address the issue from within the matrix of Hinduism'. The notion of an organic Hindu community surfaces in certain Gandhian criticisms of Ambedkar's stance as based on a self-centred approach to communitarian living. Commentators on the Gandhi–Ambedkar encounters sometimes set up a Manichaean polarity between the two, casting one of the two in the position of the hero and the other in that of the villain, which obscures the complex issues and presuppositions that structured their debates. For example, K. J. Shah (1977, p. 78) argues that

> Gandhi's concern, unlike Ambedkar's, is with the individual and social good as a whole and not only with some aspects of an individual or only some sections of the community. One might say that Gandhi's approach is a comprehensive approach or a moral approach, whereas Ambedkar's approach is partial, it is selfish in relation to other groups and it is concerned with one's narrow material interests.

However, in the light of our discussion, we can see that the dividing line between Gandhi and Ambedkar should be drawn not between considerations of 'individuality' versus 'sociality', nor between a 'moral' versus an 'egocentric' approach, but between, on the one hand, the adherence to an idealized *varṇāśramadharma* and, on the other hand, the criticism of this entire complex which states that the Gandhian vision of harmonious *varṇas* does not conform to the socio-ritual realities where the 'untouch- ables' are cast off from their upper caste environments through stringent taboos. Thus, Ambedkar's systematic analyses point out the brutalities continually meted out to the fragments of the nation under *varna* and condemned appeals to *varna*$_a$ as upper caste subterfuges. Gandhi, on the other hand, often speaks with the voice of tradition, imagining a *varna* of individuals bound together by bonds of love and non-violence, even as he confessed that his *varna* was nowhere to be found in his times (Limaye, 1995, p. 3). These semantic shifts (*varṇa* without hierarchy in the future versus *varṇa* riven with exclusivities in the present) should be highlighted as we negotiate the shrill denunciations that are often levelled by Gandhians and Ambedkarites at one another.

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