Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface
...when shall the twain meet?

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Gandhian and Ambedkarian discourses are not antithetical. Both are concerned with the issue of emancipation. At present when the legitimacy of the emancipatory discourse is being challenged and the dominant discourse upholds capitalism, it is all the more essential to broaden the scope of Gandhian and Ambedkarian discourses.

Gandhi and Ambedkar would have agreed as many issues as they would have disagreed upon. They could not find much ground for co-operation and collaboration. In popular perception - and in the perception of many of their followers too - they remained opponents. Both indulged in verbal duels in order to expose the weaknesses of each other's thought and actions. This legacy could never be abandoned by the Ambedkaitie political movement even after the 1950s. The disappearance of both personalities from the social scene, and a change in the political context have not altered the standardised positioning of the two as each other's enemies. Against this background it is proposed to enquire into the differences in the discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Two general points may be noted before we proceed to a discussion of the relationship between the Gandhian discourse and the Ambedkarian discourse. Movements for social transformation are based on emancipatory ideologies. At the present juncture in the Indian society we find that movements for social transformation are weak and localised. Further, the dominant discourse today does not believe in the project of emancipation. In this context it becomes necessary to tap the possibilities of realignment of emancipatory ideologies. It would be inadvisable to be persuaded by the exclusivist claims of any ideology to the project of emancipation.

Secondly, personality clashes need not be the decisive factor in the assessment of thought. Also, we need to accept that immediate political interests of Gandhi and Ambedkar clashed. Ambedkar began his political career as leader of the untouchables and continued to claim to be the authentic spokesperson of the untouchables. If so, why should there be internal differentiation and hierarchical separation among the touchable castes? Gandhi would argue that untouchability stands for everything ugly in the caste system and therefore, it must go instantly. Extending this logic he could further claim that untouchability could be fully and finally removed only when caste-consciousness is removed. Removal of untouchability would thus symbolically bury the caste system. In the light of development of Gandhi’s views on the caste issue, there is no doubt about Gandhi’s ultimate preparedness to abolish caste. And yet, caste question does not become the core of Gandhi’s discourse.

Consequently, Gandhi did not extend the scope of satyagraha to caste and caste-based inequality. Gandhi extended support to temple entry movements but did not allow such movements to occupy centre-stage in his movement. Similarly, Gandhi undertook fast to convince the Hindus of the sinfulness of practising untouchability and exhorted people to abolish the practice. But the philosophy of satyagraha does not adequately answer the question of tackling injustices perpetrated by one’s own society and sanctioned by religion. Satyagraha as a political weapon is adequately demonstrated by Gandhi’s thought and practice. But it satyagraha is to become a moral purifier what kind of a struggle is necessary against untouchability and caste? In the case of untouchability, Gandhi could argue that the responsibility of removing untouchability lies with the caste Hindus. Hence the reference to sin and penance. However, as Ambedkar put it squarely, untouchability exists as a stigma on the body of the untouchables. As the ones suffering from injustice, how should the untouchables fight against their plight in the Gandhian framework? Even if they were to offer satyagraha, how could this act prick the conscience of caste Hindus who were under the ideological spell of religious sanction to caste and who were getting material advantages from the caste-based order?

Apart from practising untouchability, the caste society presents a number of other possible sites of injustice where different caste groups may be located in antagonistic situations. Gandhi’s discourse does not direct intellectual attention and political energies to the question of waging struggle against the caste system and more importantly against caste groups deriving advantages from the caste system, instead, Gandhi tends to search possible areas of co-operation and integration of castes. Therefore, he refuses to recognise caste divisions even at the analytical level.

Gandhi’s constant appeals to caste Hindus not to practise untouchability clearly indicate his awareness that one section of the society was being treated unjustly by another; it was...
not a 'personal' relationship but a group relationship. Inspite of this division of society at the empirical level, Gandhi refused to concede separate political identity to untouchables through separate electorates. He would allow 'reservation of seats' but the representational character of those elected through reserved seats would not be 'communal', i.e., not as representatives of untouchables but as representatives of the general electorate. Gandhi's relative neglect of developing satyagraha against caste probably derived from this position of not recognising the political nature of social divisions.

Although he uses the term 'harijan' for untouchable 'brethren', Gandhi stoutly refused to recognise that caste-based divisions could actually be analytical categories for understanding the complex network of structures of injustice in the Hindu society. Ambedkar draws the distinction between untouchables and caste Hindus; he also suggests the possibility of using the categories of savarna and avarna where the latter would include untouchables and tribals, aborigines, etc. Before him, Phule visualised the categorisation in terms of 'dvij' status shudra-atishudra and 'trivarniks'. The logic behind such categorisation is to locate the main contradiction in the caste-ridden society, either as varna or as 'dvij' status. While Gandhi would accept the empirical reality of caste, he was not prepared to posit in it the ideological basis of anti-caste struggle. Hence, his insistence on identifying the untouchables as part of the Hindu fold. The relative unimportance of caste question in the Gandhian discourse is prominently expressed in the writings of almost all Gandhian intellectuals who tend to virtually exclude the issue of caste from their expositions of Gandhism.

**BANE OF CAPITALISM**

The Gandhian discourse evolved through and along with his struggle against racism and colonialism. These struggles amply acquainted him with the evil side of western society. Yet, Gandhi was not trapped in formulating anti-west nationalism. He realised that the malady of the west lay in the peculiar production process. The modern process of production led to commodification and consequent degradation of human character. Therefore, Gandhi directed his attention to the modern lifestyle and the artificial generation of false materiality. The transformation of human beings into consumers from producers was the main step in the degeneration of human society.

In this sense the Gandhian discourse can be squarely situated in the context of the problematique of capitalism. Although Gandhi rarely attacked capitalism directly, his analysis of modern civilisation unmistakably indicted capitalism. His assessment of the exploitative nature of modern process of production, dehumanising effects of consumerism and his overall assessment of the modern society do not make sense unless understood as analysis of the capitalist social order. Similarly, were not Gandhi demolishing the claims of capitalism, he would not have given so much prominence to the 'Daridranarayan'. His entire project hinges upon the juxtaposition between 'Daridranarayan' and the satanical nature of capitalist enterprise. Gandhi's advocacy of a simple life, insistence on abnegation of wants, and swadeshi must be seen as counterpoints to crass materiality and instrumental interdependence nurtured by capitalism. In this sense, Gandhi's swadeshi calls for redefinition of the scope of material development and an outright rejection of capitalism as the instrument of development. It must be borne in mind that Gandhi was not opposed to modern civilisation per se but as a social order based on capitalism.

Where does Ambedkar stand in relation to this Gandhian position, regarding capitalism and modern civilisation? Two points are striking in this context. Firstly, for the most part of his political career, Ambedkar did not employ his expertise in economics to his political agenda. Secondly, his early economic treatises do not substantially depart from the ideological position and standard wisdom prevalent in economics during his time.

It may be said that the main concern of Ambedkar was to understand sociologically the operation of caste system and to understand the socio-religious justifications of the same. His political struggles, too, occurred on very different terrain from the economic. Thus, though he was aware of the economic aspects of caste system he chose to concentrate on the social, cultural, religious and political aspects of caste. Besides, Ambedkar's writings manifest a constant vacillation on his part as far as assessment of modern capitalist economy is concerned. For one thing, he was not persuaded by the soundness of communist economics. For another, Ambedkar was wary of any alternative that would tend to glorify or justify a semblance of the 'old order' in which caste occupied a pivotal role. Thus, autonomous village communities, small industry, mutual dependence, etc, were not appreciated by him for fear of indirectly furthering caste interests. He might have looked upon forces of modernity as cutting at the root of caste society and therefore was not convinced of the 'evils' involved in modernity.

And yet it would be wrong to believe that Ambedkar upheld capitalism uncritically. Not only was he critical of many aspects of capitalist economy, Ambedkar was even prepared to reject it for a more egalitarian and democratic system of production. Ambedkar has noted the political fallout of capitalism, viz, sham democracy. He was not averse to a search for alternative economic system although he did not devote his energies to this project. Thus, Ambedkar would have no hesitation in either taking up economic issues to the centre-stage of popular struggles or in developing a critique of capitalism. But his emphasis on caste question gave an impression that he had no sympathy for radical economic agenda. Unfortunately, this resulted in many of his followers literally seeing 'red' at the mention of economic issues! This has led to a false dichotomisation between caste question and economic question. Ambedkar's speeches and Marathi writings suggest that he did not subscribe to such dichotomisation. He was aware of the threat to liberty, equality and fraternity not only from brahminism but from capitalism also.

**PERSPECTIVES ON TRADITION**

It is interesting to see how Gandhi and Ambedkar negotiate with tradition. Gandhi engages in a creative dialogue with tradition. He tries to find out the element of truth in tradition and emphasises it. In many cases he attaches new meanings to traditional symbols. He gives an impression that he is asking for nothing new in substance, but for the continuation of the 'old' tradition. The secret of Gandhi's ability to arouse revolutionary potential among the masses lies partly in this method of not claiming anything revolutionary, and in the appeal to the conscience of the masses through tradition. For this purpose, he not only chose popular traditional symbols but those symbols which have been associated with truth and justice. Assuming the role of interpreter of our 'great tradition' Gandhi takes the liberty of developing his own normative framework on the basis of tradition.

Ambedkar, on the other hand, was in search of the ideology of exploitation. He felt that tradition was this ideology. Injustice based on caste could not have continued unless it was legitimised by tradition. He also believed that the tradition of Hindu society was dominated by brahminical interests. As such, he could not ignore the role of tradition in situating caste as a moral code of Hindu society. This prompted Ambedkar to take a critical view of the entire Hindu (brahminical) tradition. It is also possible that Ambedkar realised the role of tradition in the contemporary context. All reform was stalled throughout the 19th century in the name of 'our great tradition' and its correctness. Thus, it was not tradition but forces upholding tradition that must have made Ambedkar a staunch critic of tradition. Yet did he really forsake tradition in its entirety? Much of Ambedkar's critical attack on tradition was either directed against glorification of brahminical tradition. It is possible to argue that Ambedkar was engaged in demolishing the tradition of brahminism and rejected the vedic ideological tradition. But he was not rejecting all traditions or else how could he search in that same tradition the path of the dharma? Nor was he opposed to liberating traditions in the form of different sects. He was complaining against a lack of adequate emancipatory space within the traditional framework.

Tradition in an unequal society will always be caught between crossfire. Inequality will be cogently placed as part of tradition and
tradition will be glorified as 'anadi', 'sanatan' and infallible. The same heritage will be sought to be condemned for all sins of the society. Gandhi, sensing the emotional power of tradition, appropriated it in order to save it from chauvinist glorifications. But even an appropriation of tradition requires a strong critique. Such critique is a constant reminder that tradition may have the potential of aligning with forces which perpetuate inequality. An all-round criticism of tradition further sensitises us to the fact that in many cases tradition actually gives credence to the system of exploitation. In other words, the supporters of inequality are always comfortable under the aegis of tradition. Thus, appropriation of tradition and employing it for purposes of building a just society requires a strong will to reject large parts of tradition and situating tradition in a different context from the one historically associated with it. In this sense, Ambedkar's critical assessment of tradition provides a useful counterpart to the Gandhian attempt of appropriating tradition. And the Gandhian project too, does not presuppose an uncritical appropriation of all tradition.

MEETING GROUND

In a very general sense both Gandhi and Ambedkar strived to visualise a community based on justice and fraternity. The Gandhian discourse identifies the elements of community in the form of love, non-violence, dignity of human life and dignity of physical labour and a non-exploitative process of production symbolised by rejection of greed. From the vantage point of this vision of the community, Gandhian discourse makes an assessment of colonial and capitalist reality. It develops a trenchant critique of modernity. The Ambedkarian discourse unfolds in a different manner. It commences from the critical evaluation of Indian social reality. Therefore, it concentrates on Hindu social order, its religious ideology and Hindu tradition. Thus, Ambedkar's discourse takes the form of critique of Hindu religion and society. Ambedkar was constantly aware of the need to situate this critique on a solid basis of communitarian vision. Although liberty, equality and fraternity beckoned him constantly, Ambedkar transcends liberalism and socialism to finally arrive at the conception of the dhamma.

The difference in the structures of their discourses notwithstanding, Gandhi and Ambedkar thus came to share similar visions. Both believed that social transformation could come about only by social action. Therefore, they relied heavily on mobilising people against injustice. Social action perceived by Gandhi and Ambedkar was democratic; it was in the form of popular struggles. Gandhi many times appeared to be favouring compromises and avoiding 'conflict'. Ambedkar, too, is seen by many (even his followers) as a supporter of non-agonistical politics. But the core of their politics as well as their position on social action leave us in no doubt that Gandhi and Ambedkar not only pursued popular struggles but also valued struggles as essential and enriching. They did not visualise removal of injustice without struggles and without popular participation. Further, Gandhi and Ambedkar would have no difficulty in agreeing upon the value of non-violence.

The discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar respect the materiality of human life. Fulfilment of material needs, and a stable and enriched material life are seen by both as forming the basis of human activity. Therefore, they would not deny the legitimacy of the goal of providing material basis to society. Moreover, Gandhi and Ambedkar have a striking similarity in their views on morality. They believe moral values to be eternal and necessary for co-ordinating material social life.

At the root of this similarity is the common conception of secular religion. This conception rejected all rituals, bypassed the question of existence of god and other world, and brought morality to the centre-stage of discussion of religion. It is not a mere coincidence that both Gandhi and Ambedkar should be treated as heretic by religious orthodoxies of Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Both claim that religion and scriptures need to be understood in the light of conscience and morality. Wherever scriptures contradict conscience, religion demands that conscience should be followed. In this sense they were sceptical not only about scriptures, but 'priestly authorities' deciding the meaning of scriptures. This view cut at the root of any notion of an organised, closed religion. Gandhi and Ambedkar shift religion from the realm of metaphysics and situate it onto the terrain of secular matters such as truth, compassion, love, conscience, social responsibility and enlightened sense of morality. Understood thus, Gandhi's 'sanatan dharma' and Ambedkar's dhamma do not confine to individual and private pursuits of good life but operate as the moral framework for social action. Religion becomes secular and part of the 'public' sphere. When the so-called religious people were busy counting numbers, Gandhi and Ambedkar tried to turn religiosity of common man into a force for social transformation.

Struggle for truth and non-violence has to incorporate caste struggle because caste is a structure of violence and injustice. Just as Gandhi denounces the satanic culture of the west, Gandhism can be a denunciation of caste-based injustice. Gandhi does not forbid the use of soul-force against the satanic tendencies in one's own society. If contempo­raneous Gandhism fights shy of caste struggles, it has lost the core of Gandhi's discourse. The restrictive interpretation of Gandhi will have to be rejected in favour of a creative interpretation. Non-recognition of categories like shudra-atishudra does not form the core of Gandhism. In fact, use of a term like 'dardiranarayan' presupposes readiness to understand social reality on the basis of exploitative relations. Therefore, political mapping of social forces on caste basis can be incorporated into Gandhian discourse. Gandhi's strong rejection of religious authority behind untouchability, his later views on intercaste marriage, his non-orthodox interpretation on varna in early years and loss of interest in varna in later years, and the constant exhortation to become 'shudra', - to engage in physical labour - all point to the possibility that caste question can form legitimate concern of the Gandhian discourse. It should be of some interest that Gandhi does not eulogise the 'trivarniks' or their roles while constantly upholding dignity of labour. His sanatan dharma is characteristically uninfluenced by brahminism.

Similarly, Ambedkar's position on capitalism and modernity can be extended and re-interpreted. He located the primary source of exploitation in the caste system in the Indian context. But he never disputed the expansive character of capitalism. His espousal of socialism (eg, Independent Labour Party) and state socialism apart, he tended to take the view that concentration of wealth and exploitation gave rise to 'dukkha'. His conception of dhamma makes it clear that Ambedkar made a distinction between material well-being and insatiable lust. This is the ground on which critique of modernist life can be figured within his discourse. It is true that Ambedkar's rejection of tradition and traditional life-style appears to be modernistic. But it must be conceded that Ambedkar had to take into consideration immediate interests of untouchables. Thus, his plea to move to cities need not be understood as a modernist project. Also, Gandhi's espousal of village life should not be seen as justification of existing village life. Grounding Ambedkar's interpretation in his conception of dhamma can open up the possibility of bridging the distance between Gandhi and Ambedkar.

The discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar were not antithetical. Therefore, it is possible to think in terms of common concerns and potential grounds for dialogue between the two discourses. Further, both Gandhi and Ambedkar were concerned with the question of emancipation. As such, a broadening of the scope of their discourses is all the more essential. As mentioned earlier, at the present moment, legitimacy of emancipatory project is being challenged. The dominant discourse today tends to underplay the caste question and legitimises capitalism. In contrast the movements of social transformation appear to be fragmented or stagnant. The theoretical strength required to meet this challenge can be gained partly by building bridges between the two rich discourses of our times.

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