



The Gandhi- Ambedkar Caste Debates: A Critical Reading of the Varṇa Discourse

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Abstract

This article critically examines the Gandhi-Ambedkar debates on caste and varṇa, focusing on their differing interpretations during late colonial India's sociopolitical transformations. Centred around the 1932 dispute over separate electorates for 'untouchables', the debates reveal fundamental disagreements on the nature and reform of caste. B.R. Ambedkar, viewing untouchables as a distinct group excluded from Hindu society, rejected varṇa as inseparable from oppressive caste practices (varṇapoc), advocating its annihilation through radical measures like inter-dining and intermarriage. He saw caste as a system of economic exploitation and social hierarchy, incompatible with equality, ultimately embracing Navayana Buddhism for rational, egalitarian principles. Conversely, M.K. Gandhi distinguished between an idealised varṇa (varṇaide) and its corrupted form, believing Hinduism could be reformed by purifying varṇa to eliminate untouchability while preserving social harmony through hereditary duties. Gandhi's approach, rooted in spiritual persuasion and karmic rebirth, emphasised moral reform over structural change, clashing with Ambedkar's demand for social revolution. The article analyses these perspectives by examining Ambedkar's works, such as *Annihilation of Caste*, alongside Gandhi's evolving views, which highlight their philosophical and practical implications. It highlights the profound tension between tradition and radical change by situating the debates within colonial reform movements, such as the Arya Samaj's merit-based varṇa. The study reveals how their conflicting views on caste's eradication and another for its reformation shaped India's social justice discourse, offering insights into persistent caste inequalities.



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1. Introduction

Caste is a multifaceted phenomenon appearing culturally, economically, politically, and ideologically in history (Giri, 2024). According to Dhanda (2024), a Hindu is allegedly governed by caste affinity rather than "standing by virtue," as Ambedkar alleged. She asserts that Gandhi may have intended to comment on the Gita to reject caste and reinterpret varṇa to abolish untouchability. Gandhi attempted (Kadam, 2023) to revitalise Hinduism by surpassing caste systems and promoting universal values, whereas Ambedkar argued that the concept had become enshrined in hierarchical structures, thereby losing its transformative potential. Ambedkar stated (Singh, 2025) that Congress and Gandhi had little interest in improving Untouchables' life conditions. Giri (2024) asserts that

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Ambedkar advocated for the eradication of caste. His proposal requires the abolition of caste privileges, hierarchy, and their legitimization by the Sastras, which can assist individuals in "sharing and participating in a common activity so that the same emotions are aroused in him that animate the others" (Ambedkar, 2002 [1936], p. 268). According to Ambedkar, "The caste system has impeded the Hindus from achieving a society with a unified life and a sense of self" (2002 [1936], pp. 268), as it prevents everyday activity. Even if Gandhi had fully supported Ambedkar and aligned with him without any arguments about the caste system, the majority of Indian society and intellectuals would still have supported the caste system, as they were deeply invested in it for purposes of domination and political gain, similar to how they currently exploit it for vote banks and emotional appeal. This argument becomes sensible because Gandhi's appeal for a vernacular medium of instruction in education has failed today, though he was (Vishnu et al., 2025) not in favour; the colonial educational system has caused brain fog and put an undue strain upon the nerves of our children, made them crammers and imitators, unfitted them for original work and thought, and disabled them from filtrating their learning to the family or the masses.

According to Baru (2018), an important aspect of late colonial India's sociocultural landscapes was the nation's vision of various concepts set against the electoral dynamics surrounding communal representation for certain communities, such as Muslims. He further adds that in 1932, the Gandhi-Ambedkar debates over caste and "untouchability" reached a climax over the question of whether the "untouchables" should have their own electorate, as they were a distinct sociopolitical group rather than an integral part of Hindu social structures. Gandhi's and Ambedkar's disagreements have often been reframed in modern-day India as starkly opposed viewpoints by their respective supporters, who loudly condemn one another's caste theories and caste-eradication campaigns. These disagreements have been thoroughly examined in academic literature in light of Gandhi and Ambedkar's differing perspectives on the modernist state, constitutional changes, nationalism, socialist reconstruction, British imperialism, and other topics. The primary objective of this article is not to examine the disputes between Gandhi and Ambedkar but to emphasise how their differing interpretations of the essential word *varṇa* are fundamentally connected to their opposing evaluations of the sociopolitical processes of caste within Hindu societies.

Adding more, he (Baru, 2018) states that the term "*varṇa*" was twisted by socio-religious reform movements like the Arya Samaj to differentiate it from modern caste concepts and practices, even though it first appeared in the *Rig Veda*, the well-known "hymn to the person" (X.90), epic stories like the *Mahābhārata*, and scriptures like the *Bhagavad-gītā*. When Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded the Samaj in 1875, he thought that the many castes (*jāti*) with inherited professions should be replaced by the Vedic fourfold *varṇa* system, in which the wise (*vidvān*) would look at the traits, deeds, and nature (*guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*) of specific individuals to determine where they belong in a particular *varṇa*. The fact that this suggested rebuilding presents an idealised model for social order—one whose execution was fraught with many conundrums—is a crucial component of the later Gandhi-Ambedkar conflicts. For example, the *varṇa* system would revert to the idea of inherited caste obligations if an individual's "nature" (*svabhāva*) were considered unchanging. But if it were variable, one's *varṇa* would change at different times in life. Lipner (2010, p. 132) asserts that 'Dayananda's concepts for caste transformation were mostly impractical, as has been shown.' For instance, if a person's "nature" (*svabhāva*) were seen to be constant, the *varṇa* system would return to the concept of inherited caste duties. Lipner (2010, p. 132) states, "Dayananda's concepts for caste transformation were mostly impractical, as has been shown."

The central question in Gandhi Ambedkar's caste debates was whether *varṇa* referred to the idealised model of mutually interacting and interdependent groups of people (call this *varṇa*ide) or to the socioeconomic differentiations associated with caste practices in the modern era (call this *varṇa*poc). By the late 1920s, Gandhi saw *varṇa*ide was absent from Hindu social institutions; nonetheless, he steadfastly maintained his belief that *varṇa*ide would serve as the foundation for a reformed Hinduism. In the early 1920s, Gandhi began to increasingly differentiate between *varṇa* and terms such as "caste system", "caste", and "untouchability". He contended that the perceptions and practices associated with the latter had no place in a thoroughly renovated *varṇa* template. Ambedkar, on the other hand, always saw *varṇa* in terms of *varṇa*poc. For this reason, he believed that efforts by groups like the Arya Samaj to discuss *varṇa* rather than actual caste hierarchy were only a ploy that did not change the structural injustices that existed on the ground. The role of inter-dining and intermarriage in eradicating caste structures was the subject of another fundamental dispute between Gandhi and Ambedkar, which was rooted in this key semantic divergence. Gandhi's perspectives on this matter varied between 1920 and 1945; however, he generally maintained that these practices were not imperative for developing a democratic spirit. Choosing whom to marry or dine with would be a personal decision under the reformed *varṇa* system, eliminating all caste-based superiority and inferiority concepts.

On the other hand, Ambedkar thought inter-dining and marrying were crucial to eliminating the varṇa system as it now stands, or varṇapoc. This alteration in temporal frameworks led Ambedkar to believe that Gandhi was concealing the harsh truths of caste discrimination (varṇapoc) behind the guise of varṇa (varṇaide), even though more orthodox Hindus rejected Gandhi's envisioned varṇaide. Consequently, Gandhi faced 'vicious attacks' from two opposing sides: Hindu socio-religious conservatism, represented by members of the sanatāna dharma organisations, and leaders of the 'untouchables', such as Ambedkar (Parekh, 1989, p. 228). Nonetheless, as we will demonstrate, although Gandhi's sociopolitical vision contained elements of romanticism and anarchism, he was compelled to confront the realities of varṇapoc during his numerous speeches and discussions, which he emphasised in his replies to various correspondents (Mukherjee, 1988, pp. 5–7).

The primary view of this essay is that Gandhi and Ambedkar share similar perspectives on the relationship between religious orderings of the world and the forms of social existence. However, they exhibit a significant distinction in their interpretations of the critical terms "caste" and "varṇa," resulting in their frequent appearance when speaking over one another. Gandhi aspired to establish a Hinduism based on world peace, love, and kindness by challenging many Hindu socio-religious traditions that he considered antiquated. Ambedkar also disapproved of elements of well-known historical forms of Buddhism like Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana. Instead, he created a new path known as Navayana, or "neo-Buddhism", which had more material than spiritual objectives and placed more emphasis on establishing social equality than the traditional idea of individual liberation (Tartakov, 2003). Although both Gandhi and Ambedkar sought to uncover the revitalising forces of religious beliefs, they had differing views on the type of governance that would emerge from this social reconstruction. According to Gandhi, the ideal concept of varṇa would organise the revitalised socio-religious whole, preventing conflict, hostility, and discord among the interdependent elements. In contrast, Ambedkar believed that the vocabulary of Varṇa was profoundly corrupted by its entanglement in centuries-old hierarchical structures, making it impossible for its use in social imaginations to create enough momentum to overthrow long-standing oppressive systems.

2. Divergent Ideologies of Gandhi and Ambedkar

A central theme of late colonial India's sociocultural environment was the construction of various visions of the nation, particularly within the context of electoral politics concerning communal representation. The debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi over caste and 'untouchability' reached a significant turning point in 1932, centring around the proposal for separate electorates for 'untouchables'. Ambedkar argued that the 'untouchables' constituted a distinct socio-political group outside the traditional Hindu framework, while Gandhi fiercely opposed this division, perceiving it as a threat to Hindu unity. Contemporary discussions often portray these debates as a stark confrontation between two opposed worldviews, with followers on both sides emphasising their differences over caste and its reform (Duncan, 2022).

In this article, the focus is not to revisit all facets of the Ambedkar-Gandhi disputes, which have been extensively analysed in terms of nationalism, constitutional reform, imperialism, and social reconstruction, to explore how their conflicting interpretations of *varṇa* shaped their understandings of caste and social order. The term *varṇa*, first appearing in ancient texts like the *Rig Veda* and later elaborated in works such as the *Mahābhārata* and *Bhagavad-gītā*, was redefined during the colonial era by movements like the Arya Samaj (Alanzi, 2022). Dayananda Saraswati envisioned a revival of the Vedic *varṇa* ideal, proposing a merit-based allocation of social roles determined by individuals' qualities and actions (*guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*), rather than hereditary caste (*jāti*). However, as Lipner aptly noted, "Dayananda's ideas on reforming caste were hardly practicable, and so it has proved" (Lipner, 2010, p.132).

Ambedkar fundamentally interpreted *varṇa* in terms of the real, oppressive caste system (*varṇapoc*), and was deeply critical of any idealised portrayal that obscured lived hierarchies. He viewed attempts, like the Arya Samaj's attempts to separate *varṇa* from caste hierarchy, as misleading rhetorical strategies that did little to dismantle entrenched social inequalities. For Ambedkar, the idea of *varṇa* could not be salvaged or reformed; its historical entanglement with oppression rendered it an unsuitable foundation for any vision of social justice. Therefore, in his view, practices such as inter-dining and intermarriage were essential instruments for breaking down caste barriers, as they struck directly at the rituals and norms that sustained caste distinctions (Mandal, 2012).

Conversely, Gandhi's interpretation of *varṇa* evolved significantly over time. In the early 1920s, Gandhi increasingly differentiated between the idealised *varṇa* (*varṇaide*) and the actual caste system (*varṇapoc*). He acknowledged that *varṇaide*, a model of mutually respectful and interdependent groups, had become deeply

corrupted, yet he retained faith that Hinduism could be reconstructed upon this ideal. For Gandhi, abolishing untouchability and caste-based discrimination was crucial, but he did not consider intermarriage or communal dining as necessary preconditions for cultivating a democratic spirit. Individual choice would prevail in these domains within a rejuvenated Hindu society (Kolge, 2018).

This divergence also shaped their broader visions of religious and social transformation. Gandhi, characterised as a 'critical traditionalist', sought to strip away the distortions of Hinduism and reinvigorate it around principles of universal love, peace, and harmony. His ideal polity imagined a conflict-free society organised through *varṇa* distinctions purified of hierarchical prejudice. In contrast, Ambedkar believed that the very vocabulary of *varṇa* was too historically contaminated to serve as a foundation for equality. He advocated for a new religious path-*Navayana* or 'neo-Buddhism' - that emphasised material welfare and collective social liberation over spiritual salvation, breaking decisively from traditional Buddhist sects like Theravāda or Mahāyāna (Tartakov, 2003).

Thus, despite their shared goal of using religious ideals to reshape society, Ambedkar and Gandhi spoke often at cross purposes, fundamentally disagreeing on what terms like 'caste' and *varṇa* referred to. This gap in understanding was not merely semantic but reflected more profound divergences about the possibilities and limits of social reform. While Gandhi envisioned a reconstructed Hindu order purged of untouchability and based on reformed *varṇa* ideals, Ambedkar saw such frameworks as incapable of delivering true social emancipation (Kumar, 1985). As Parekh observes, Gandhi was "viciously attacked" by orthodox Hindus and leaders like Ambedkar (Parekh, 1989, p. 228), highlighting the immense complexity and contested legacy of their debates.

2.1 Ambedkar's perspective on the nation and nationalism

In revisiting the caste debates between Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, it becomes essential to foreground Ambedkar's perspective to understand the critical divergence in their respective approaches to caste, untouchability, and the *varṇa* system. Ambedkar, through his major works such as *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (WCGU), *Annihilation of Caste* (AOC), and *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (WAS), articulated three key themes that laid the foundation for his critique of Gandhi and the Hindu social order.

First, Ambedkar emphasised that, contrary to the Arya Samaj's claims of a harmonious *varṇa*-based society, the 'untouchables' were excluded from the organic whole of Hindu solidarity. He pointed out the lived reality of segregation, where the untouchables were denied fundamental rights such as access to water, ownership of land, or the keeping of cattle (Gligor, 2011). His sharp interrogation of Gandhi during their 1931 meeting made this point vivid: "You say I have got a homeland, but still I repeat that I am without it. How can I call this land my homeland and this religion my own, when we are treated worse than animals and can't get water? No self-respecting Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land" (Ambedkar, 1979-2003, vol. 17, part I, p. 53). For Ambedkar, the mere conceptual separation of caste from untouchability, as Gandhi proposed, was untenable. The foundation of the four-fold *varṇa* structure was, for him, inseparable from the practices of untouchability (Gupta & Gupta, 2022). Ambedkar persistently argued that caste and untouchability were not distinct phenomena but manifestations of the same ideology. He declared, "The idea of hoping to remove untouchability without destroying the caste system is an utter futility. The assumption that caste and untouchability are distinct is based on a fallacy. The two are inseparable" (Ambedkar, 1979-2003, vol. 5, p. 101). Hence, Ambedkar's refusal to separate the notion of caste (*varṇapoc*) from untouchability led him to conclude that *varṇa* and caste were intrinsically evil and equally responsible for social oppression (Marotirao, 2023).

Second, Ambedkar's critique was rooted in his insistence on inter-dining and intermarriage as essential steps toward dismantling caste. Gandhi had argued that the absence of such practices did not necessarily imply a lack of affection within a family, citing examples like brothers' children not marrying each other or orthodox Vaishnava women not sharing food utensils. Gandhi thus concluded that "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). Ambedkar, however, rejected these familial analogies, emphasising that, unlike families where pre-existing bonds ensured solidarity, caste divisions were built on estrangement and discrimination. So, without natural emotional connections between caste Hindus and the untouchables, sharing meals and marrying each other became "essential" to break down deep-rooted ideas of impurity and separation. Ambedkar believed that only through intermarriage could the feeling of kinship across castes develop, without which the divisive sense of alienness would persist. Despite the Congress Party's claim that untouchables were part of the Hindu community, Ambedkar pointed out that in real social practice, untouchables remained distinctly separate. He also said that for

real integration to happen, caste Hindus needed to include untouchables by truly sharing things like marriage and meals, and that untouchables would respond positively if these gestures were sincere.

Third, Ambedkar identified the economic underpinnings of the caste system. He argued that caste was a religious ideology and a mechanism of economic exploitation. While absorbing external influences with adaptability, Hindu society remained rigid in preserving untouchability because the socio-economic privileges of upper castes depended on maintaining the status quo. Reform efforts failed because caste Hindus had too much to lose—the labour of untouchables, such as sweepers, scavengers, and menial workers, was crucial to the economic structure. Thus, Ambedkar described untouchability not simply as a religious prejudice but as "a system of unmitigated economic exploitation..." (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], pp. 188-189). Furthermore, Ambedkar argued that the caste system entrenched not just a division of labour, common to many societies, but a graded division of labourers arranged in a hierarchical, oppressive order. While important, the call for political independence from British colonial rule was inadequate if it did not simultaneously ensure social democracy for untouchables with constitutional guarantees to protect their rights (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], pp. 163-165).

In contrast, Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability differed fundamentally. Gandhi distinguished between the ancient varṇa ideal and the modern caste system, seeing the former as a benign division of duties based on individual qualities rather than birth. He regarded untouchability as a corruption that had crept into the varṇa system and needed elimination, but he did not view varṇa itself as inherently oppressive. Gandhi believed the caste system could be reformed by reviving its original spiritual basis of service and mutual respect without dismantling the varṇa structure altogether (Saran, 2007).

Moreover, Gandhi's method emphasised moral and spiritual persuasion rather than legislative or radical social transformation. While he accepted that the untouchables, or Harijans as he called them, had suffered deep injustices, he maintained that transformation should come through self-purification of the caste Hindus and voluntary social reforms. He did not support the demand for separate electorates for untouchables, fearing that such political segregation would fracture Hindu unity (Gould, 2005).

Where Ambedkar demanded legal safeguards, annihilation of caste structures, and social revolution, Gandhi trusted in the moral awakening of society through individual and collective penance. At the same time, both leaders were committed to ending untouchability; their strategies, philosophies, and ultimate visions for Indian society diverged sharply (Jaffrelot, 2006).

2.2 Gandhi and the Organic Body of the Hindus

The critical engagement between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi on the issue of caste has been pivotal in shaping the discourse on social justice in India. In his incisive critique, Ambedkar argued that caste is an inescapable evil embedded in the Hindu social order. His sharp observation that "*the outcast is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes*" (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 326) underscores his fundamental belief: caste cannot be reformed; it must be annihilated. Ambedkar maintained that caste, irrespective of its idealisation as *varṇa*, had degenerated into an oppressive system that perpetuated discrimination and social exclusion.

Ambedkar systematically dismantled the notion that *varṇa* and caste could be distinguished in practice. For him, the degradation experienced by the 'untouchables' and the lower castes was not a perversion of the *varṇa* system but its inevitable consequence. Therefore, Ambedkar refused to endorse any framework that sought to revive or sanitise *varṇa*. In his famous *Annihilation of Caste*, he critiqued Hindu reformers who believed that the caste system could be made more humane by removing untouchability while retaining the structure of *varṇa*. Instead, Ambedkar called for a complete overhaul of Hindu society's moral foundations, advocating the destruction of caste itself (Kumar, 2023).

In contrast, Gandhi's engagement with caste was marked by an attempt to salvage and reconstruct the ancient ideal of *varṇa*. Gandhi acknowledged that, as practiced, the caste had become corrupt, characterised by untouchability and a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority. However, he distinguished between the pure system of *varṇa* (*varṇa*ide) and the corrupted caste system (*varṇapoc*). Gandhi believed that the true essence of *varṇa* lay in the organisation of society based on hereditary occupations without any notion of social superiority (Kolge, 2018).

Gandhi's vision of *varṇa* was rooted in a belief in society's spiritual and social harmony. He asserted that, in its ideal form, *varṇa* assigned duties based on one's inherited qualities and environment, without implying the superiority of any occupation. According to Gandhi, "*The law of varṇa teaches us that we have each one of us to*

earn our bread by following the ancestral calling... 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).

Gandhi's approach emphasised that the decay of *varṇa* into rigid, oppressive caste hierarchies was a historical corruption, not an inherent flaw of the system itself. He repeatedly asserted that while untouchability must be eradicated at any cost, the law of *varṇa* should be reformed, not destroyed. Gandhi believed that observing hereditary duties, practiced without pride or prejudice, could prevent social anarchy, which results from unregulated competition and conflict (Barman, 2024).

His understanding of *varṇa* was deeply connected with the doctrine of rebirth. Gandhi maintained that one's hereditary profession reflected one's past deeds and spiritual evolution. He believed that rebirth adjusted the moral and social balance: if an individual did not perform the duties of their birth properly, they would be reborn in a different *varṇa*. Thus, the caste one was born into was not a punishment but a consequence of karmic law, aimed at spiritual progress (Mitra, 2020).

Nevertheless, Gandhi's distinction between *varṇa* and caste did not go unchallenged. Ambedkar, along with many other reformers, argued that no such distinction was maintained in practical society. The lived experiences of caste were ones of oppression, stigma, and systemic inequality. From Ambedkar's perspective, Gandhi's idealisation of *varṇa* was impractical and insufficient to address the deep-rooted injustices of the caste order (Hiwrale, 2020).

Despite their sharp disagreements, Gandhi's later writings show that he moved closer to Ambedkar's concerns in some respects. By the 1940s, Gandhi had begun advocating for inter-caste marriages and supported abolishing untouchability. His letter to N. Vyasatirth in 1945 reflects this change: *"You must be aware that ordinary marriages no longer have any interest for me. I am interested, if at all, in a caste Hindu marrying a Harijan"* (Gandhi, 1958-1994, vol. 82, p. 86).

However, Gandhi's reforms remained within the framework of *varṇa*, while Ambedkar called for its complete annihilation. Gandhi likened the efforts to destroy caste because of its excesses to destroying a body because of an ugly growth. For him, the task was to remove the aberrations, not the structure itself. In contrast, Ambedkar perceived caste as structurally flawed – no amount of reform could redeem a system that inherently divided humanity into hierarchical categories (Shaista & Rumica, 2021).

Gandhi's defence of *varṇa* was not merely conservative nostalgia; it reflected his broader philosophical commitment to social order, duty, and spiritual growth. However, his attempt to separate *varṇa* from caste was ultimately seen as inadequate by Ambedkar, who viewed the caste system as a moral blight requiring complete eradication for true social justice (Sampath, 2020).

3. Reading across Gandhi and Ambedkar

In the discourse on caste and *varṇa*, Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi emerge as two of the most prominent yet fundamentally divergent voices. A closer examination of their perspectives reveals a sharp disagreement about the diagnosis of India's social ills and the nature and future of Hindu society itself.

Ambedkar's critique of the caste system was uncompromising. He argued that the very structure of Hindu society was steeped in inequality and that the differentiation between an idealised *varṇa* system (*varṇa*ide) and its corrupted form (*varṇa*poc) was a strategy to sustain caste oppression. For Ambedkar, eradicating caste required more than superficial reforms; it demanded profound social change through practices like inter-dining and intermarriage (Krishan, 1997, p. 64). He astutely noted, "History shows that where ethics and economics come into conflict, victory is always with economics" (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 190), underlining the deep entrenchment of caste practices within the material conditions of Hindu society.

Ambedkar criticised the notion that *varṇa* could be based on qualities (*guṇa*) rather than birth, as reformist groups like Arya Samaj suggested. He pointed out that caste identities persisted rigidly despite such claims, reinforcing social hierarchies. Categorising individuals into the groups of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras perpetuated an attitude that valued hereditary status more than individual worth. Moreover, he questioned the practicality of the fourfold division (*caturvarṇa*), arguing that human abilities and dispositions are too diverse to fit neatly into rigid categories (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 263-267).

Ambedkar also addressed the lived reality of Hinduism. He contended that ordinary Hindus did not make nuanced scriptural distinctions but followed everyday practices rooted in caste prejudice. Even if some scriptures were later interpolations, Ambedkar observed, most Hindus viewed religious commands as unchangeable divine mandates (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 335-336). For most Hindus, "religion" meant a set of rules derived from

scriptures, not universal spiritual principles. In this context, he starkly declared, "The real genius of Hinduism is to divide. This fact is beyond dispute" (Ambedkar, 2009 [1945], p. 180).

However, Ambedkar maintained a hope for the transformation of Hinduism. He acknowledged that the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity could perhaps be drawn from the Upaniṣads, albeit with significant reinterpretation (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 311). Ultimately, however, his disenchantment led him to Buddhism. In Buddhism, Ambedkar found a rational, egalitarian alternative that rejected ideas like the soul and life after death. Buddhism, he argued, was rooted in reason (*prajñā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and equality (*saṃatā*) (Ambedkar, 1979–2003, vol. 17, part III, p. 515).

Ambedkar's contemporaries shared his scepticism toward Gandhi's attempts to separate *varṇa* from caste. Sant Ram of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal criticised Gandhi's conceptual distinction as too abstract to influence the daily practices of caste-based discrimination. As Sant Ram wrote to Gandhi, Hindus remained slaves to caste, and advocating an idealised *varṇa* only justified perpetuating caste distinctions (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], pp. 330–331). Similarly, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy in Tamil Nadu opposed Gandhi's approach, believing that Gandhi's defence of *Varṇāśramadharma* continued marginalising lower castes (Saraswathi, 1994, p. 15).

Turning to Gandhi's perspective, it is evident that his approach to *varṇa* was idealistic yet rooted in tradition. Gandhi saw the system of *varṇāśrama* as a framework for social harmony rather than oppression. He believed the evil of 'untouchability' could be eradicated while preserving a purified form of *varṇa*, where different groups performed their societal duties without a hierarchy of dignity. Gandhi insisted that after removing untouchability, society could be organised horizontally rather than vertically, with each *varṇa* performing services for the collective good (Gandhi, 1958–1994, vol. 53, p. 258).

However, Gandhi's critics argued that this vision was detached from ground realities. For them, Gandhi's *varṇa* was synonymous with hereditary professions, which inherently preserved caste divisions. Ambedkar, for instance, concluded that Gandhi's *varṇa* was merely another name for caste because it centred on the "pursuit of one's ancestral calling" (Ambedkar, 2014 [1936], p. 349).

Furthermore, Gandhi's idealistic interpretations of Hinduism, emphasising unity, *ahimsa* (non-violence), and universal brotherhood, were seen as existing only on a metaphysical level. Scholars like D.R. Jatava (1997, p. 87) pointed out that while Hinduism might preach metaphysical equality, social reality remained steeped in caste-based discrimination. Thus, Gandhi's critics found his vision both insufficient and misleading, arguing that without dismantling *varṇāśrama* itself, genuine social equality could not be achieved.

The divergence between Ambedkar and Gandhi was not merely a matter of degree but of fundamental orientation. Ambedkar viewed Hinduism, as it was practiced, as inherently divisive and unjust, whereas Gandhi saw within it the seeds of a universal moral order capable of reform. Where Ambedkar moved away from Hinduism towards Buddhism as a rational and democratic faith, Gandhi sought to redeem Hinduism from within, reinterpreting its traditions through the lens of love, non-violence, and service (T & S, 2024).

This deep disagreement between Ambedkar and Gandhi highlights a bigger conflict within Hindu tradition: the struggle between seeking liberation (*mokṣha*), which goes beyond social differences, and fulfilling social duties (*dharma*), which has historically supported hierarchies through *varṇa* and caste. Historically, Brahmanical Hinduism has hesitated between these two poles, on one hand valorising world-renunciation as the path to self-realisation and on the other defending *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* as the sacral order underpinning society (Olivelle, 2000).

In this broader historical and theological context, Ambedkar's radical call to annihilate caste appears as a bold rejection of Hinduism's accommodation with social inequality. While deeply ethical and spiritual, Gandhi's approach sought to harmonise tradition with reform but ultimately failed to confront the full force of the caste's embeddedness in religious and social life (Yadav, Dasgupta, & Kumar, 2021).

4. Conclusion

The Ambedkar-Gandhi debates remain relevant in contemporary India, where caste shapes social, economic, and political realities. Ambedkar's radical call to annihilate caste resonates in ongoing struggles against systemic discrimination, evident in persistent Dalit marginalisation, unequal access to resources, and caste-based violence. His emphasis on inter-dining, intermarriage, and the economic underpinnings of caste points out the need for structural interventions—legal protections, affirmative action, and social integration—to dismantle entrenched hierarchies. Movements like the Bhim Army and Dalit literature echo Ambedkar's vision, demanding equality and dignity beyond superficial reforms. Conversely, while limited by its idealism, Gandhi's reformist approach finds echoes in initiatives promoting inter-caste harmony and moral persuasion, such as community dialogues and anti-

discrimination campaigns. However, his varna-based framework struggles against the reality of caste's rigidity, as seen in resistance to reservation policies and upper-caste backlash.

Today, the debates frame critical discussions on social justice, with Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism inspiring alternative spiritualities that prioritise equality, while Gandhi's non-violent ethos informs civil society's efforts. The tension between their visions – revolution versus reform – mirrors contemporary policy dilemmas: whether to pursue incremental change or systemic overhaul. As India grapples with modernisation and caste persistence, the debates underscore the urgency of addressing caste not merely as a cultural leftover but as a dynamic system of power. They challenge policymakers, activists, and scholars to confront caste's intersections with class, gender, and religion, ensuring that equality is a constitutional promise and a lived reality. The Ambedkar-Gandhi dialogue thus remains a vital lens for navigating India's path towards true social liberation.

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