

CONTROVERSY BETWEEN AMBEDKAR AND GANDHI ON CAST AND VARNA: SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

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B.R.Ambedkar, a renowned social reformer and the father of Indian constitution, who sacrificed his whole life to ensure the wellbeing of the whole society in general and the downtrodden people in particular was invited by the *Jat-Pal-Todak Mandal*, an organization of caste Hindu social reformers of Punjab to preside over its Annual Conference which was to be held at Lahore, the headquarters of the Mandal, in 1936. It is important to note that the one and the only aim of the *Jat-Pal-Todak Mandal*, as it is understood by Ambedkar, was to annihilate the Caste System from amongst the Hindus. Ambedkar prepared a long, informative scholarly and thought provoking presidential address. The members of the reception committee of the Mandal went through the speech and came to the conclusion that though the speech as a whole is worthy of being highly certified but some of the passages are detrimental to the purpose of the Mandal. So, Har Bhagwan, on behalf of the Mandal, requested Ambedkar to drop those passages from the speech he prepared to deliver from the presidential chair. But Ambedkar declined to drop even the comma and the semi colon from his speech. As a result the conference was declared postponed since die. Ambedkar thought that owing to the cancellation of the conference people were deprived of the opportunity to know the views of him on the problems imposed by the Caste System in our society. Long before the cancellation of the conference the presidential address prepared by Ambedkar had been printed and the copies of the same were lying on his hand. Therefore, Ambedkar decided to put the printed copies in the market so that people can avail the opportunity to know his views. Like many others Mahatma Gandhi himself also went through the printed presidential address prepared by Ambedkar and came to know the following important views of Ambedkar :-

Ambedkar observed that most of the problems our society suffers from like untouchability, starvation, disintegrity, degradation of morality, oppression etc. are nothing but the corollary of the caste system. This caste system, in turn, is the result of the *Varṇa Vyavasthā*. And *varṇa Vyavasthā* is directly sanctioned by Hindu Scriptures. So, it can be said that caste system too is indirectly sanctioned by the

Hindu Scriptures. As the caste system has ultimately been sanctioned by the Hindu *Śāstras*, it cannot be eradicated without discarding the authority of the Hindu *Śāstras*. In this context it is worthy to note that according to Ambedkar, untouchability also cannot be brushed away without denying the authority of the same as it is an unavoidable corollary of the caste system. Ambedkar held that the Hindus observe caste and untouchability not because they are inhuman but because they are deeply religious. Inhuman behavior of the Hindus are the result of their firm faith inculcated upon their minds by the *Śāstras*. So they will change their attitude and conduct when they will cease to believe in the authority and sanctity of the *Śāstras*. In this context Ambedkar very beautifully says, “Make every man and woman free from the thrall of the *Śāstras*, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so”. So, Ambedkar thought that in observing caste and untouchability the Hindus are not wrong, what is really wrong is nothing but the Hindu religion itself, which is the root cause of all the major problems of Hindu society. So, our society can be made cure from the disease only through the destruction of the faith of the people upon the sanctity and authority of the *Śāstras*.

After reading the presidential address prepared by Ambedkar Gandhiji had a close examination of the same and came to the conclusion that each and every reformer needs to go through his address to be benefited. But at the same time he also pointed-out that it is important to go through his address not because it is not open to objection, but simply because it is open to serious objection. Gandhiji nicely presented the objections in the following way:

- First, Gandhiji said that the texts which Ambedkar quotes to stand his own position mentioned in his address are not authentic and original. So, his position cannot be accepted to be true.
- Second, to realize the spirit of Hindu religion as well as to understand the actual import of it what is necessary is to interpret its *Śāstras* accurately. But Gandhiji says that the learned persons are not the right persons to interpret the *Śāstras*, the right persons to interpret them are only the Saints and Sages. So far as the interpretation and understanding of the Saints and Sages go there is no room for caste and untouchability in Hinduism. Ambedkar is a

learned person no doubt, but he is not a Saint. Consequently, his interpretation and understanding of the Hindu *Sastras* cannot be proper. Gandhiji himself observed that infact Hindu religion has nothing to do with the caste and untouchability. Caste, Gandhiji said, is nothing but a custom, but he frankly admits that he is fully ignorant of its origin. Gandhiji further pointed out that our religion has the room for *Varṇas* and *Āśramas* but they have nothing to do with the caste and untouchability. There is nothing wrong in the *varṇas* and the *Āśramas* which are sanctioned by religion. The law of *Varṇa* says nothing about our rights, it says only about our duties. It prescribes our professions and nothing else. It advises us to follow the callings of our ancestors for our livelihood which is conducive for ensuring the wellbeing of our society. All the callings are equal in status; none of them is superior or inferior. Due performance of them carries same merit before God. So to ascribe superiority or inferiority to any one of them is to violate the very law of *Varṇas*. Likewise, in *Varna* there is no place for untouchability as well.

I am not agreeing with Gandhiji so far as his second objection is concerned. This fact cannot be denied that there are some elements (layers) in religion which lie beyond the reach of our intelligence. But this does not mean that no element in religion can be understood through intelligence. I think whether caste system and untouchability follow from Hindu Religion can very well be understood through intelligence. Well educated persons like Ambedkar are intelligent enough. So, this is not that an educated person is not a right person to understand whether caste system and untouchability follow from Hindu Religion.

In the third argument Gandhiji pointed out that Ambedkar judged Hindu Religion in the light of its worst specimens but not by its best ones. But it is not the proper way to understand any religion. Religion has to be judged not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced. If Hindu religion is judged in the light of the religion professed by Chaitannya, Tukaram, Ramkrishna, Ram Mohan Roy, Debendra Nath Tagore, and Vivekananda and so on, the so called good specimens only then the actual spirit of it can be understood. In this case no one can deny the merit of Hindu Religion.

Ambedkar has beautifully countered each and every aforesaid objection raised by Gandhiji against him. He categorically said that any reader of his speech would understand that Mahatma has entirely missed the issues raised by him. Ambedkar further mentioned that Gandhiji has raised some false allegations which are not issues that actually arise out of what he liked to call his indictment of the Hindus. So, the questions put forth by Gandhiji are fully beside the point and the main argument of the speech was lost upon him.

In order to counter the first argument raised against him Ambedkar frankly admits that he is not the right person to determine which *Śāstras* are actually authentic and original and which are not but all the *Śāstras* or the texts cited by him are in fact, taken from the writings of Tilak. No one will deny the authority of him on the Sanskrit language and on the Hindu *Śāstras*. So, this objection virtually does not stand as because the originality and the authority of the texts cited by Ambedkar have been recognized by Tilak. Even if somebody continues to insist that this objection is valid then the objection actually goes against Tilak but not against Ambedkar.

The reply given by Ambedkar to the first objection, I think, is well grounded. If the books which have been cited by Ambedkar to be authentic are taken from the list made by Bal Gangadhar Tilak then the responsibility is of Tilak, not of Ambedkar.

In reply to the second objection Ambedkar said that according to the Mahatma only the saints and the sages are the right persons to interpret Hindu *Śāstras* and as far as the interpretations of them are concerned there is neither the place of caste system nor the place of untouchability in Hinduism. Here, Ambedkar said that if what the Mahatma observes were true then the saints should have raised their voice against the caste and untouchability prevailing in our society. But no saint has ever been seen to do so. Moreover, they themselves are the staunch believer in the systems of caste and untouchability. Most of the saints used to live and died as members of caste. Ambedkar cited a classic example of Jnyandeo, one of the best specimens of the Hindu religion mentioned by Gandhiji, who was so passionately attached to his status as a Brahmin that when the Brahmins of Paithan would deny him to their fold he moved heaven and earth to establish his status. Here one may cite the case of saint Eknath as an example which goes against the view of Ambedkar. Eknath used to

touch the untouchables and dine with them. So, what is claimed by Ambedkar that none of the saints is seen to touch the untouchables cannot be accepted. But in response to this objection Ambedkar said that saint Eknath did so not because he did not support the cast system and untouchability but because he wanted to show the magic power of the holy river Ganges. He did believe that through the touch of the untouchables one positively be polluted. But that pollution could be washed away by a bath in the sacred river Ganges. Ambedkar further said that even if the saints would have been seen to break the caste system it would not have affect upon the life of the common people, because it is taught that saints should not be followed by common people. It is taught that a saint might break caste but the common people are strictly prohibited to do the same. On the basis of the discussion so far it can be said that it is nothing but a false consolation that there were saints who understands or interprets *śāstras* differently from the learned persons.

So far as the reply to the second objection is concerned I partially agree and partially disagree with Ambedkar. In his second reply Ambedkar said that if, as a matter of fact, caste and untouchability do not follow from Hindu religion and it is truly understood by the saints then they should have raised their voice against the caste and untouchability which gives birth to so many problems in our society. I fully agree with Ambedkar on this point. But I am in doubt about how much Ambedkar's claim that the saints themselves follow the caste system is justified. Dr. Ambedkar, in order to substantiate his own position, cited a classic example of Jnyandeyo who was passionately attached to his status as a Brahmin. But so far as my understanding goes Brahmin is one of the *Varṇas*, not a caste. Chatterjee, Mukherjee, Bannerjee and so on are the instances of caste. So, Jyandeyo claimed for *Varṇas* not for caste. Besides this the objection of Ambedkar that all the saints themselves follow the caste system in their own life cannot be accepted. At least some of the saints like Ramkrishna Deva, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Chaitannya Deva and some other did not follow the same in their own lives. Moreover, they raised objections against the caste system prevailing in our society. So, at least this objection of Ambedkar is not true.

In order to counter the third objection mentioned above Ambedkar said that he himself agreed with every word of the statement that a religion has to be judged not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced. But he pointed out

that this did not dispose of the matter. Here the question comes - why are the numbers of worst specimen so many and the number of the best specimen so few? Ambedkar himself assumed two probable alternative answers to this question. The first answer is that the worst ones by the very nature are so perverse that they are not worthy of being morally educated. And the second answer is that the religious ideal is absolutely wrong which has given a wrong moral twist to the masses and in spite of the wrong ideal the best have become the best just by giving the wrong twist a turn to the right direction. According to Ambedkar, the second answer is the only logical and reasonable answer. In that case the Mahatma's argument that a religion should be judged in the light of its best specimens shows us no solution to the objection raised by Ambedkar.

In the next step Ambedkar showed that Gandhiji himself did not follow in his life what he preached. He said that the Mahatma was a Bania by birth. So his calling is trading. But neither his ancestors nor he himself even touched trading to earn their bread. The forefathers of the Mahatma took ministership as their profession which is a calling meant for the Brahmins. Gandhiji before becoming a Mahatma took law as his callings. Subsequently, abandoning law he became half saint and half politicians. The sons of the Mahatma too did not resort to trading for their livelihood. Ambedkar said of the youngest son of the Mahatma who was a faithful follower of him. He born as a *Vaishya*, got married a Brahmin daughter and took a profession of newspaper magnate. Most surprisingly the Mahatma, Ambedkar said, is not known to have raised any objection against his son for this. This clearly implies that in the name of *Varṇa Vyavasthā* Gandhiji deceived common people. Besides this, Ambedkar pointed out another logical consequence of this theory which is morally indefensible. According to this doctrine one must pursue the calling of his forefather. If so, the one must continue to be a pimp, if his grandfather was a pimp, likewise a woman must continue to be a prostitute because her grandmother was a prostitute. Is it not a morally indispensable position? I think the observation made by Ambedkar here is appropriate. As long as the proverb, "*Apani ācāri dharma apare sekhāo*" - is concerned Gandhiji's teaching to follow *Varṇaśrama dharma* has lost its moral strength.

The real Brahmins who are living on alms freely given to them, who are otherwise called hereditary Brahmin priest, according to Mahatma, are carrier of the spiritual treasurers. But Ambedkar drew our attention to the dark side of the hereditary *Brāhmin* Priest. He says that a Brahmin can be a priest to Vishnu, to Shiva, to Buddha, to Kali, who are the God of love, the God of destruction, the greatest teacher of mankind teaching the noblest doctrine of love, the Goddess having regular sacrifice of an animal to satisfy her thirst for blood respectively. Likewise, he can be a priest to so many Gods and Goddesses having antagonistic attributes. No honest man can be a devotee to all of them. But here it is said that this is due to the catholicity and spirit of toleration, the greatest virtue of Hindu religion that one *Brāhmin* can be a priest of so many Gods and Goddesses having opposite characters. But Ambedkar sharply reacted to this reply and said that toleration here is nothing but another name for insincerity. In that case a person must be deemed to be bankrupt of all spiritual treasures. A person pursues such a calling simply because it is ancestral, and for nothing else. One cannot have any love and faith upon such a calling. It is nothing but a mechanical process handed down from father to son barring conservation of virtue.

Ambedkar said that there was a time when the Mahatma was a full-blooded and blue-blooded *Sanatani* Hindu and a blind supporter of caste system. He defended it with the vigor of the orthodox and strongly opposed the inter-dining, inter-drinking and inter-marrying. He had a firm conviction that restraint about inter-dinning etc. helps a lot in cultivating will-power and conservation of certain social virtues. Now he is greatly changed. No more he believes in the caste system. He admits that caste is harmful both to spiritual and national growth. Keeping this in view someone may think that the Mahatma has made much progress as he now believes only in *varṇa* but not in caste. But Dr. Ambedkar does not agree with them. He says that *varṇa* as it is understood by Gandhiji is nothing but caste. He actually confuses one for another. Ambedkar says, “The essence of Vedic conception of *varṇa* is the pursuit of a calling which is appropriate to one’s natural aptitude. The essence of the Mahatma’s conception of *varṇa* is the pursuit of ancestral calling irrespective of natural aptitude”. So as defined by the Mahatma, *varṇa* actually is nothing but another name for caste simply because the essence of both of them is one and the same, i.e pursuit

of ancestral calling. Actually *varṇa* and caste are distinct as chalk and cheese. *Varna* advocates determining ones calling on the basis of one's worth irrespective of ones birth and caste, on the other, cast advocates to do the same on the basis of one's birth irrespective of one's worth. So, the Mahatma, in fact, advocates the caste system in the name of *Varṇa Vyavasthā*. Ambedkar says that the Mahatma has no definite and clear conception about the distinction between *varṇa* and caste and about the necessity of either for the conservation of Hinduism. Does he regard *varṇa* as the essence of Hinduism? In reply to this question Ambedkar says that it is not possible to give any categorical answer. The readers of his article on "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment" will reply in the negative. But the readers of his article in reply to Shanta Ram will respond affirmatively. In putting the objection against Sant Ram Ambedkar says that how can a Muslim remain one if he rejects the *Quran*, or a Christian remain as Christian if he rejects the *Bible*? Here Ambedkar beautifully raises an objection against Gandhiji following the same reason. He says that if caste and *varṇa* are convertible terms and if *varṇa* is an integral part of Hinduism then how does the Mahatma claims himself as a Hindu as he rejects caste which is nothing but *varṇa*? Ambedkar here puts some objections – why this prevarication? Why does the Mahatma hedge? Has he failed to realize the truth? Or does the politician stand in the way of the Saint? Ambedkar assumes two alternative answers to these questions. One answer is – it may be due to his childlike temperament. And the second answer is – it may be due to the double role played by the Mahatma. His dubious role is the role of the Mahatma and a politician. He wants to spiritualize politics. A politician wants to deceive the society as he believes that a society cannot bear the whole truth and he must not speak the whole truth as it is bad for his politics. The Mahatma is always supporting the caste and *varṇa* due to the fact that if he opposes them he may lose his place in politics. It is not so important to note that which one exactly is the source of this confusion, what is worthy to note here is that by preaching caste in the name of *varṇa* he deceives himself and the others as well.

I think the objection that has been raised here by B.R. Ambedkar against Gandhiji is most important. Ambedkar says that Gandhiji, in fact, hopelessly fails to understand the distinction between *varṇa* and caste. According to Gandhiji both *varṇa* and caste propose to follow the calling of our ancestors'. But Ambedkar says

that this is not the case at all. *Varṇa* proposes to follow the calling which is suitable to our worth irrespective of birth. Caste proposes to follow the callings of our forefathers on the basis of birth irrespective of our worth. The significance of this objection of Ambedkar is far-reaching. Gandhiji strongly recommends for *varṇa*. He says that each and every person should follow the *Varṇa Vyavasthā* as there is nothing wrong in it rather it ensures the wellbeing of our society. But caste, Gandhiji observes, should be annihilated for it gives birth to so many problems in our society. If Gandhiji really confuses *varṇa* for caste then the advice to follow the *Varṇa Vyavasthā* amounts to advice to follow the caste system and to advice to annihilate the caste is the same as to advice to annihilate the *Varṇa Vyavasthā*. So, Gandhiji suffers from serious contradiction. Therefore, the question comes - does Gandhiji really confuse *varṇa* for caste? I think a close scrutiny should be made on this point.

Apparently the distinction between caste and *varṇa* is crystal clear. Caste is determined on the basis of birth but *varṇa* is determined on the basis of worth. Here so far as the caste is concerned there is no problem but problem crops up in the case of *varṇa*. Is the process of being *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Shudra* according to one's worth automatic or is it regulated? The first alternative cannot be true. Had it been automatic then saying of *Varṇa Vyavasthā* and advising to follow the same in *Śāstra* would have been meaningless. In that case there would have been no difference between *Varṇa Vyavasthā* of Hinduism and the absence of the same in other religious systems of the world. This implies that the second alternative is true. But here the question arises - who will regulate the system? Will it be regulated by human being or by God? If the first alternative is accepted then a number of problems will arise. We know that to err is human. So, there is every possibility that a man may commit the mistake in assessing the worth of a person. Secondly, the chance of manipulation cannot be overcome. The verdict of the authority concerned may not be obeyed by all. So, there is also the chance of chaos and anarchy. All these problems can be overcome if the second alternative is taken to be true. In *Śāstra* like the *Śrīmad Bhagavat Gītā* and the *Vedas* it is clearly mentioned that God Himself regulates the system of *varṇas*. In *Gītā* it is said, “*Cāturvarṇam mayā śṛṣṭam guṇa karma vibhāgasā*”. It means four *varṇas* have been created by God Himself on the basis of worth (*guṇa* and *karma*). But it is absurd to maintain that God comes to us physically

and regulate *Varṇa Vyavasthā*. How does the He regulate the *Varṇa Vyavasthā* then? The only rational answer, I think, is that He regulates this system through the law of *Karma*. Following the worth of *karma* performed by a particular person God determines the birth of that person. More clearly to say on the basis of merit of *karma* performed by a person God determines whether he will take his birth in a Brahmin family or a *Shudra* family. So following the law of *karma* God regulates one's birth and thereby He indirectly regulates one's *varṇa* too. If one takes his birth in a Brahmin family then he becomes Brahman by *varṇa* but if he takes his birth in a *Sudra* family then he turns into *Sudra* by *varṇa*. Thus it is seen that birth turns into an identifying mark for both of the caste and *varṇa*. So, in that case both caste and *varṇa* propose one to follow the callings of one's forefathers. Thus it is seen that there is nothing wrong in the observation of Gandhiji. If this is the case then how can caste be distinguished from *varṇa*? In reply it can be said that in the case of caste birth stands both for identifying mark and defining characteristics but in the case of *varṇa* birth stands only for identifying mark but not for defining characteristics. Besides this Caste is the creation of the ill intention of some people living in our society, but *varṇa* is the creation of the Good will of God.

If we agree with the above observation of Gandhiji then some problems inevitably crop up. According to the foregoing explanation the under given cycle follows - From *karma* follows birth, from birth follows *varṇa* and from *varṇa* again follows *karma*. This cycle continues endlessly. In that case a Brahmin will remain a Brahman and a *Shudra* will continue to be a *Shudra* forever. If so then a *Shudra* can never enter into the territory of a *Brāhmaṇa* and vice-versa. But this does not accommodate with the spirit of the *Śāstra*. When Srikrishṇa in *Gītā* says, “*śvadharme nidhanam śreya paradharma bhayāvahī*” then it implies that the fact is otherwise. It implies that the *Śāstra* inspires one to make an upliftment in the sphere of *varṇa*. One who belongs to the *varṇa* called *Shudra* should try his best to enter into the territory of *Kṣatriya* or *Brāhmanas*. In *Śāstra* we came across some instances of some persons who took their birth in lower *varṇas* but became capable of attaining higher *varṇas* owing to their worth, i.e. *guṇa* and *karma* in the same life. The Saint Visvamitra is the living example of this case. The name Prahallada is also well known who took his

birth in the family of *Rākṣasa* but became the renounced *Bhakta* of God. So, the position of M.K. Gandhi mentioned above is not supported by Hindu *Śāstras* too.

Had the observation of Gandhiji been true Vishvamitra could not have been a *Brāhmaṇa* who was *Kṣatriya* by birth? So, it needs to re-examine. I think, in the above explanation given to substantiate the position of Gandhiji one important point has been ignored. In the *Śrīmad Bhāgavat Gitā*, Krishna categorically mentions the criterion for creating four *varṇas*. This criterion consists of two units – one is *guṇa* and the other is *karma*. In the earlier explanation *guṇa* which, perhaps is given the priority in the *Gitā*, has been ignored. So, *varṇa* determining factors are two – *guṇa* and *karma*. One may take one's birth in a *Shudra*-family but his *guṇa* may not be *Shudra*-like, his *guṇa* may be *Brāhmaṇa*-like. In that case though one is *Shudra* by birth but the calling he has to follow is not the calling of a *Shudra* but the calling of a *Brāhmaṇa*. Vishvamitra for example, was *Kṣatriya* by birth but as his *guṇa* was *Brāhmaṇa*-like he became *Brāhmaṇa* and followed the callings of a *Brāhmaṇa*. So, one's birth or one's callings of forefathers has nothing to do with the calling of a person. Thus it is shown that the observation of Gandhiji that *varṇa* proposes one to follow the callings of one's ancestors is not acceptable. So far as our observation is concerned, here deviation comes from the *guṇa*. One can come out of the traditional circle due to the new *guṇa*.

If we have a close look into the spirit of the *Śāstra* then it can be understood that the deviation may be taken place due to *karma* even. When in *Gitā* Sri Krishna says, “*Svadharme nidhanam sreya Paradharmā Bhayāvahī*” it implies that if a *Shudra* follows and performs his *Svadharmā* that is the calling of his forefathers as perfectly as possible then that *karma* will lead him to take his birth in the upper *varṇa* that is in *Kṣatriya* or *Brāhmaṇa varṇa* in his next life. And in that case the view of Gandhiji cannot be countered like the above way.

A pertinent question arises - when Sri Krishna says to Arjuna, “*Cāturvarṇa mayā sristam guṇa karma bhivāgasa*” then what does it actually mean? Does it mean that the classification into four *varṇas* are being made by God through birth, if so, then why? If the classification is made on the basis of the *karma* performed by one in the previous birth, then what is the problem? If the same classification is made on the basis of the *guṇa* and *karma* that is the natural aptitude and capacity of the persons of

their present birth, is it not more scientific and logical? The instance of Vishvamitra and Prahallada substantiate this position. Besides this the spirit of *caitanya charitamṛta* also supports the same view – “*Kivā vipro kivā nyasī śūdro kane noi/jei kṛṣṇa tattvabettvā sei guru hoi!*”

References

1. B.R. Ambedkar: *Annihilation of Caste*.
2. Kivā vipro kivā nyasī śūdro kane noi/ jei kṛṣṇa tattvabettvā sei guru hoi// (sri sri Caittanya caritāmṛta, madhyalīlā, aṣṭam pariccheda, p.213
3. *śreyān svadharmā biguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt/Svadharme nidhanam śreyah paradharmā bhayāvahaḥ!* (*Srimadbhagavat Gītā*, tṛtīya adhyāya, śloka 35)
4. *Cāturvarṇammayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarmavibhāgaśh/ tasya kartāramapi mām vidhyakartārām avyam!* (*śrimadbhagbad Gītā*, caturtha adhyāya , śloka 13)