



Some analytical comments  
on the dialogue (1931-1947) between  
Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar,  
and on its lingering effect upon Ambedkar in the 1950s

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3 October 2020

It is an honor for me to contribute in this way to MGM University's Gandhiji-celebrations. As you may know, this university emerged just last year from a set of colleges which had originally been hosted – ever since 1980 – by BAMU. And I for my own part have a lot of affection for BAMU, because I had the privilege of serving there as a Visiting Professor for three years.

In this talk I will pay tribute to the fruitful though sometimes troubled and yet entirely nonviolent dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar. That dialogue was a mutual search for truth, in which the brilliance of Ambedkar's critical analysis in 1936 of what was mistaken in Gandhi's notions back in those days in regard to caste showed clearly (to Gandhi and maybe to some other important people in India as well) that Ambedkar would be the right man to draft the Constitution of the Republic of India – and then, Ambedkar included in the Constitution a set of so-called "Directive Principles" which were mostly taken from some of what Gandhi had contributed to the 1930 Purna-Swaraj Resolution, and which were based implicitly on the Gandhian precept that India might one day learn the lesson

of "the nonviolence of the strong". It's very unusual indeed for a written constitution to contain a substantial section of "non-judicial" precepts – that is, precepts which the government is explicitly prohibited from trying to enforce by punishing citizens who disobey or ignore them. It's not the kind of thing you do when you pass a law or issue a judgement in court; it is, instead, part of the reason why Nehru said, when Gandhi died, that "a thousand years later, that light would be seen in this country, and the world would see it". I think that what Nehru meant was that people would tend to understand, more and more in the next few centuries, the importance of Gandhi's way of seeing things.

There are plenty of other historically interesting facets of the interactions between Gandhi and Ambedkar, but I think that this one – this matter of Ambedkar including a set of Directive Principles in the Constitution of India – is one of the most important long-term ways in which they influenced each other. It seems to me that that Constitution is probably better than it would have been if practically anyone other than Ambedkar had been put in charge of drafting, and I also happen to think that the Directive Principles may prove to have been, in the long term, an extremely valuable part of it.

I don't mean to imply that Gandhi was somehow a "perfect man" and that this rubbed off on Ambedkar. No: Gandhi was a person who could make mistakes like we all can (and sometimes they were 'Himalayan' mistakes; he said so himself). He *was*, however, a *genuine* seeker after truth, and so he changed his mind about various things from time to time.

A great big change of that kind was in his opinion of the caste system. In the 1920s and '30s he advocated that the caste system be reformed in certain ways – mainly by abolishing Untouchability (he wanted the Untouchables to become respectable Shudras) and by abolishing child marriages or, at least, permitting childless young widows to remarry – but he also felt, in the 1920s and '30s, that with some good reforms along such lines the caste system ought to be maintained. I think he had more than one reason for feeling that way about it. He was afraid of bad spiritual and social consequences resulting from an entirely money-based economy, which he considered to be the most likely alternative. He regarded the caste system, with its stronger sense of duties than of liberties, as being characteristic of an Asian culture spiritually superior to that of the West. He felt no enthusiasm for the competitive aspect of capitalist society (as in the USA), nor for the revolutionary aspect of communist society as in the USSR; he wanted social

changes in India to take place gradually by universal consent rather than by one group feeling forced by another. And, in fact, he *believed* in the doctrine of transmigration and successive reincarnations of the soul, and he hoped that his own soul might progress, by means of good karma in its current life, up to brahmin-hood in its next rebirth (he said this, explicitly, to one of sons in a letter of 1909) and then up to taking in that future life the final further step of achieving moksha (which, as everyone who has read the preface to his autobiography knows, was his wish when he wrote it in the mid-1920s).

Gandhi had never believed, for one minute, in Untouchability (he had a very sharp argument with his wife about that in 1898), but he did believe, in the 1920s, that it was important for Hindus to “follow the hereditary profession”, and that “prohibition of intermarriage” with anyone of a different varna was “necessary for a rapid evolution of the soul” (in its progress toward eventual moksha).

But then in the 1940s Gandhi became “a social revolutionist” (that was his own term for it) advocating intermarriage between Brahmins and Untouchables in order to do away entirely (“root and branch”, he said) with the caste system. This radical change in his view of the matter was due mainly to the influence of Ambedkar in the 1930s and '40s

(and also to the influence, in the mid-1940s, of a certain Brahmin-born opponent of the caste system, named Gora, whose integrity Gandhi respected just as much as he did Ambedkar's).

Gandhi's former views had been based on some deeply held precepts, and so his path to advocating eradication of the entire caste system was not simple and direct. I documented that change in detail in a paper written in the 1990s (it was published by the University of Kerala, and then the National Gandhi Museum published in 1998 a Hindi translation of it), and four years ago I gave a public lecture about it at BAMU which was applauded because I showed in vivid detail how diligently Ambedkar had out-argued Gandhi in 1936. In that 1936 exchange of views between the two of them, Gandhi tended to write in haste, since he was involved in a lot of other matters as well, whereas Ambedkar sat down and composed very carefully a solid and, where appropriate, delightfully witty (but nonetheless always courteous) essay devastating Gandhi's arguments.

It seems quite clear to me that when Gandhi realized that he had been mistaken and that Ambedkar not only had been right but also had analyzed the issues very diligently, Gandhi not only began to change radically his own view of the caste system, but also –

this next fact is not proven 100% with documents, but the balance of the historical evidence weighs a lot in favor of it – was instrumental in arranging for Ambedkar to be put in charge of drafting the Constitution of the Republic.

Those two great men had first met in 1931 in Bombay, in preparation for the London “Round Table Conference” of that year. Historians have said, evidently on the basis of an account by someone who wasn’t actually there that initial meeting between the two of them, that it went sour, because Gandhi allegedly made a remark which Ambedkar regarded as insulting to Untouchables. However, the leading modern historian of 20th-century India, Ramachandra Guha, has, in his biography of Gandhi, cited a hitherto unnoticed historical source indicating that the meeting was cordial throughout. If we accept this latter hypothesis, then we may suppose that the difficulties between Gandhi and Ambedkar would have begun a little later, in England, where Gandhi, alert as he was to the British divide-and-rule tactics, took to saying that he, Gandhi, was the sole representative of all the poverty-stricken people in India. He knew that their welfare was not really a concern of most of the British imperialists, and he regarded Congress as the only effective anti-imperial force in India. But Ambedkar naturally did not take kindly to being put aside, and was not inclined to trust the Congress landowners’ intentions toward the

Untouchables. Then, back in India, Gandhi's "Epic Fast" of 1932 pressed Ambedkar into negotiating with him an alternative to separate electorates for the Untouchables. The alternative was fair, however, and the Pune Pact included a theoretical commitment by high-caste people to foreswear Untouchability. In a letter of 1933 to Gandhi, Ambedkar addressed him as "Dear Mahatmaji", albeit as "M.K. Gandhi Esq." in the postal address:

Damodar Hall, Parel,  
Bombay No. 12,  
Dated, 12th February 1933.

Dear Mahatmaji,

I am sure you must have received for your Harijan through the Associated Press a copy of the statement which I have issued defining the attitude of the Depressed Classes in regard to the question of Temple Entry. I am also sending herewith another copy of the same directly for your information.

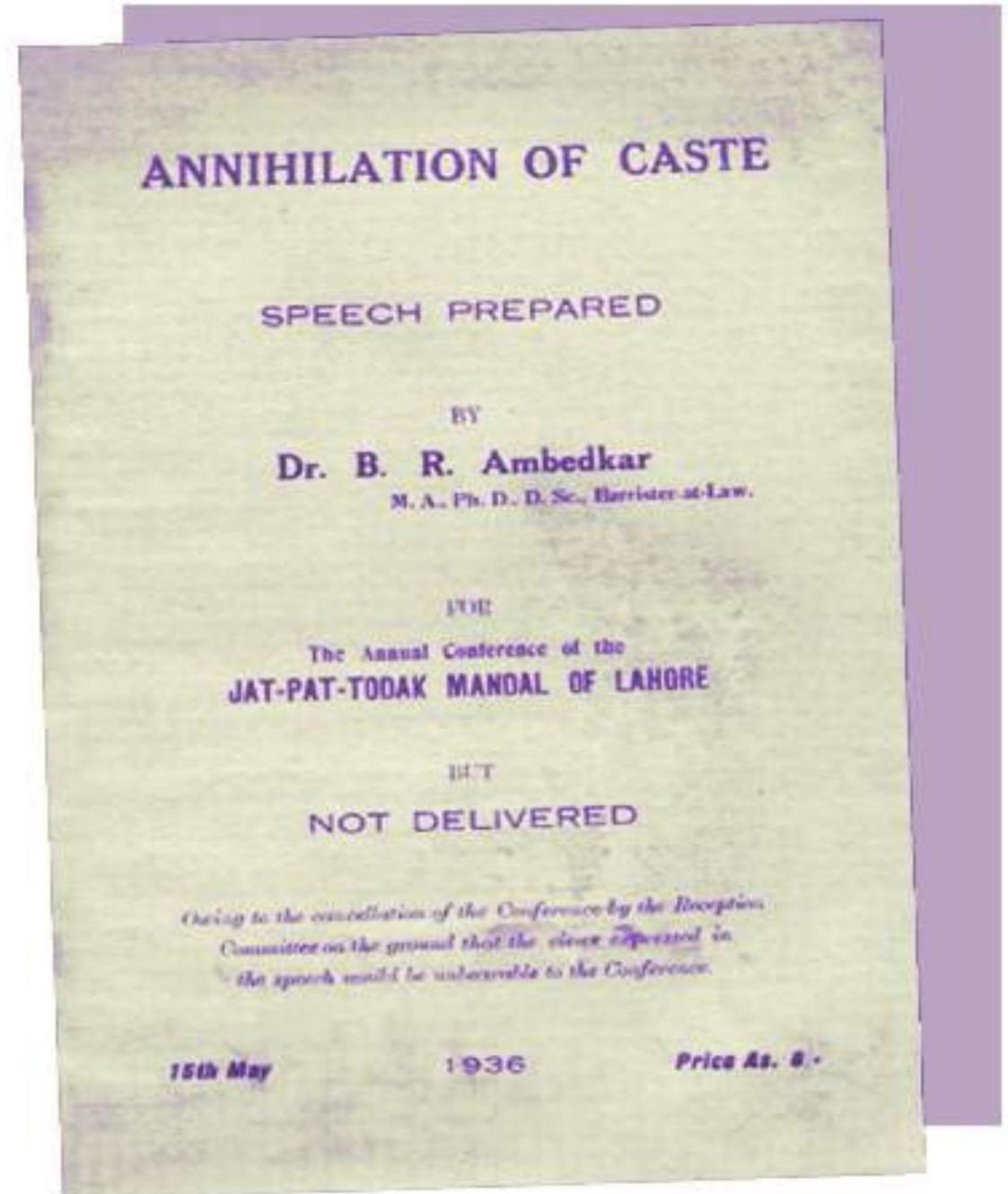
Yours sincerely



To

M. K. Gandhi Esq.,  
Yerawada Jail,  
P o o n a.

Ambedkar knew a lot more than Gandhi did about the history of the caste system. The quality of that knowledge was first displayed in an essay, entitled “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, which he wrote in New York at Columbia University in 1916 and which is (in my humble opinion) still today worth reading. He also wrote a good deal in the 1930s about caste; and in 1935 and '36, the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal invited and then disinvited Ambedkar to address them. Here is the title page of his own publication, issued on 15th May 1936, of the text which the Mandal had found unacceptable:



Gandhi promptly invited Ambedkar to outline his views in Gandhi's weekly newspaper, *Harijan*. Ambedkar declined, but Gandhi described them in *Harijan* anyway, and also published (this was now in July of 1936, in two issues of the newspaper) some respectful comments of his own – in which he went so far as to say, however, that Dr Ambedkar had, in his argument, made a “profound mistake” (but then Gandhi in that same paragraph described not just one but two different such alleged mistakes; he was writing too fast). This gave Ambedkar occasion to respond with a long and carefully composed, virtuoso display of academic and barrister-like argument, showing that some of Gandhi's views were mistaken.

The effect on Gandhi of that criticism was strengthened by the appeal of a relatively simple argument put forth by a Brahmin-born atheist, named Gora, whom Gandhi admired because Gora had, upon deciding that certain basic Hindu doctrines were incorrect, thrown away his Brahmin thread and dedicated himself for years to educating and encouraging Untouchables. Gora believed that those folks deserved no more to be looked down on than he as a Brahmin had deserved to be looked up to. From Gandhi's point of view, Gora had in effect become truly a great Brahmin teacher (to be admired as such by Gandhi the Bania), by deliberately throwing away the ritual thread around his

neck (at the cost of being ostracized) and dedicating himself to the eradication of the caste system and of every kind of unfairness caused by it.

When Gora in 1946 suggested to his 18-year-old daughter, his eldest child, that she let her parents select, for her to marry, a young Harijan of suitable age and character, Gandhi told Gora (in a letter): “Though there is a resemblance between your thought and practice and mine superficially, I must own that yours is far superior to mine.” Gandhi planned to conduct the wedding ceremony himself, in the name of “Truth”; he vowed never again to approve of any marriage between two Hindus unless one of them was high-caste and the other one a Harijan; he personally interviewed and brought to Sevagram the young lady’s betrothed, told him, “You should become like Ambedkar; you should work for the removal of Untouchability *and* of caste; Untouchability must go, at any cost”, and he put him in charge of the kitchen so that everyone would be taking meals prepared by a Harijan (with assistance from a team of various other ashramites).

Gora’s view of the caste system was very straightforward. He said: “This thorn bush is in our path. It is useless to argue about who put it there, why, and when; the whole thing is against the interest of the people and we must simply remove it.”

What did Gandhi mean, however, by telling Gora's son-on-law-to-be that Untouchability had to be eradicated "*at any cost*"? I think he meant that the caste system had been providing a hedge against the pitfalls of capitalism. Gandhi had recently published an essay saying, not only that "our internal quarrels" (that is, quarrels among Hindus) could "come to an end" by abolishing caste and varna, but also that "A man should consider himself not the owner of his property, but its trustee ... for the service of society. He will accept only that much for himself as he has earned with his [own physical 'bread'-]labour. If that happens, no one will be poor and no one rich. ... This is the swaraj of my dreams. I yearn for that. I want to live for the attainment of it. I am devoting every breath of my life to that effort."

And yet Ambedkar in his very well-documented book of 1945, entitled *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, included, as the title indicated would be the case, some angry remarks about Gandhi. I think one reason for this was that when Ambedkar had, in a letter of March 31st 1944 to Gandhi, said: "If you are [as] anxious to solve the Hindu-Untouchable problem as you are to solve the Hindu-Muslim problem, I shall be glad to formulate points on which a settlement is necessary" – when Ambedkar said that, Gandhi's response had emphasized some differences of opinion between

them. He said that the “Hindu-Muslim question” had been for him a lifelong concern and there had even been a time when he had thought that when that question was resolved, India’s political troubles would be over; experience had taught him that this was only partly true; he had meanwhile always abhorred Untouchability but had tended to regard abolishing it as a matter of religious and social reform rather than an issue of great political importance; he had learned (“to my cost”, he said, “to my cost”) that he and Ambedkar had different views on “this very important question”, as well as viewing the “broad politics” of the country from different angles; he would love to find a meeting-ground with Ambedkar on both of those questions (that is, on “broad politics” as well as on how to abolish Untouchability) and to see Ambedkar as a colleague and co-worker, but he had to admit that he had “failed to come nearer” to Ambedkar. He said that if Ambedkar could show him a way to a common ground between them, he would like to see it, but that he must meanwhile reconcile himself to the “present unfortunate difference” between them.

I think we can, with the advantage of historical hindsight, see this as having been in effect an invitation to Ambedkar, on the one hand, to set out his views in his great book of 1945, and then, on the other hand, to take a leading role in designing the Govern-

ment of the Republic. It was in this latter way that political collaboration between Gandhi and Ambedkar persisted into the 1950s notwithstanding the lack of personal warmth between them after the early 1930s. Ambedkar, in his painstaking work of writing the first draft of the Constitution and then of guiding the document through the procedures of the Constituent Assembly, performed a great service to all of India, and not just to the Untouchables.

That's mainly what I had in mind to focus on in this talk. But let me add three additional remarks.

The first is that Ambedkar, on at least one occasion later on, suggested that the Constitution wasn't very good after all and that his work on it had, in effect, amounted to hackwork. My take on this is that it reflects more on Ambedkar's relations with Nehru and Congress than on his relations with Gandhi. I also happen to think that the Constitution was, on the whole, remarkably well designed, given the very difficult circumstances under which it was negotiated. (I think the biggest defect in it was that the precept of universal primary and secondary schooling was in the "Directive Principles" section

rather than in the “Fundamental Rights” section. The Communists in China did far better in that particular regard – with big-time economic consequences.)

My second observation (in this last part of my talk) is that Ambedkar in 1956 not only changed his religious identity but also, in the last section of a comparative study of Buddha and Marx (which he never quite completed), cited Buddhist scripture to the effect that among the main preconditions for a successful way of life would be the blessings of “virtuous conduct”, “liberality” and “wisdom”. He said that “liberality” would consist, first of all, in “living with [the] mind freed from the taint of avarice”, whereas “wisdom” would likewise consist of avoiding greed and avarice (as well as certain other vices such as “ill will”, “sloth”, and “distraction and flurry”). He thus, after focusing for many years on the wrongs of the caste system, began, after his conversion to Buddhism, to see clearly why a socio-economic system based implicitly on glorifying greed (though supposedly based on liberty, equality and patriotic fraternity) would also be wrong. Yet this remained for him, as abolition of the caste system had been for Gandhi, a matter of religious and social reform rather than an issue of major political importance.

Ambedkar did not foresee humankind's disastrous relation, now in the 21st century, to the rest of Nature on the planet; but the vices which he warned against in that last essay of his are the very same ones that have now begun to cause devastating problems which will pretty soon become, alas, worse than our current social problems (Hello, Donald Trump!) – and which yet may exacerbate our social problems so much as to prevent the kind of cooperation that will be needed if humankind is to survive the current mass extinction, on our planet, of biological species. It will be a terrific challenge for humankind to survive the mass extinction.

Gandhi was more advanced than Ambedkar in regard to these ecological issues. He said, in 1928: “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom [he meant the UK] is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 millions [such as India was, back in those days] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts. Unless the capitalists of India help to avert that tragedy by becoming trustees of the welfare of the masses ... they will end either by destroying the masses or being destroyed by them.”

That's what Gandhi said in 1928, and yet I think that he never, not even in his worst nightmares, imagined how vast the role of ecological changes would become in that threatening scenario in only 100 or 150 years. I hope our students may cope with it better than my generation has done.