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Synthesising the Gandhi–Ambedkar–Narayanaguru–Marx Visions for Dalit Liberation*

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Abstract
This article suggests how the Gandhi–Ambedkar–Narayanaguru–Marx visions can be synthesised in support of the movement for the liberation and empowerment of India’s dalits. It brings out the beginnings and evolution of Gandhiji’s sensitivity and opposition to ‘untouchability’. His perception of ‘untouchability’ was initially limited to ‘touch-me-not-ism’, but deepened after his contact with Narayanaguru and Narayanaguru-inspired movements and, most crucially, his contact and encounters with Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. The article traces the Gandhiji–Babasaheb divergences, the Yeravda convergence and their other interesting convergences, and the unfortunate post-Yeravda re-emergence of divergence. These divergences have been effectively resolved in the Constitution adopting the Ambedkarite approach of dalit development and empowerment. The stage has arrived when, instead of dwelling on past antagonisms, it will be productive to synthesise and utilise the visions of these two titans as well as Narayanaguru and Marx in understanding and furthering the supremely important project of liberating and empowering the oppressed masses of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Backward Classes (BCs) through specific and comprehensive economic, educational, social and protective programmes; a dalit-centred human rights project; and sensitisation and mobilisation of dalit and non-dalit civil society.

The Centenary of the earliest work of Mahatma Gandhi, Hind Swaraj (Gandhi, 1938), which predates his recognition as ‘Mahatma’ is an appropriate occasion to

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recollect in tranquility his concept of *swaraj* in relation to dalits, its relevance to the present critical phase of the movement for dalit liberation and empowerment and how far these ideas, synthesised with the ideas and visions of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Narayanaguru and Marx, can be forged into a powerful instrument to take this movement to a higher stage of effectiveness. For this purpose, I have looked not only into *Hind Swaraj* but also into the entire gamut of Gandhiji’s writings, preachings and work as can be seen from his autobiography and collected works, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar’s writings and speeches and Narayanaguru and Marxist literatures.

In Gandhiji’s *Hind Swaraj* there is no direct reference to the large section of the people of India whom we now refer to as dalits or Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Backward Classes (BCs) or any of the names for these people in vogue at that time. This is comparable to the fact that even though he wrote about handloom and the spinning wheel in *Hind Swaraj* as a panacea for the growing pauperism of the people of India, he candidly admits that he had not seen a handloom or a spinning wheel at that time or even in 1914 when he returned to India (Gandhi, 1927/2009, Part V, Chapter XXXIX, p. 450). In his speeches, lectures and letters after he returned to India in 1914, he explains his concept of *swaraj* in the context of the victims of ‘untouchability’.

**Gandhiji’s Early Sensitisation against ‘Untouchability’**

His earliest references to those whom we now know as SCs indicate that he was aware of their existence but from the point of view of an urban resident. During a six-month visit to India in 1896 from South Africa, where he had been since 1893, he volunteered to work on a committee to help the sanitation department in Rajkot to prevent plague which had broken out in Bombay. The committee had to inspect ‘untouchable’ quarters also. Gandhiji records that only one member of the committee was ready to accompany him to the ‘untouchable’ quarters. Gandhiji also says that this was the first visit in his life to such a locality. This initial contact seems to have planted in his mind an association between the SCs and the scavenging profession, even though those engaged in that profession constitute only a small percentage of the total population of SCs and even of the specific castes to which such persons belong; the bulk of the SCs being agricultural labourers and petty peasants, a fact which had not been noticed by him at that time, and even later when he became aware that there were peasants among them, he was not aware that they were largely landless agricultural labourers.

Later, Gandhiji mentioned that his awareness of and attitude against ‘untouchability’ took shape much earlier when he was hardly twelve years old. He recalls in his address as President of the Suppressed Classes Conference held in Ahmedabad on 13 April 1921, a scavenger named Ukha, an untouchable, used to clean latrines in his house. He details the tussles between him and his parents about...
physical contact with Ukha. He points out that ever since he reached the years of discretion, he firmly held uncompromising views against ‘untouchability’ and in favour of equal rights for ‘untouchables’ in access to public schools, temples, wells etc.\(^4\)

Gandhiji noticed the invidiousness of ‘untouchability’ and the segregation of ‘untouchables’ in towns and villages. He refers to them as ‘some of the classes which render us the greatest social service, but we Hindus chose to regard as “untouchables”’ and they are ‘relegated to the remote quarters of a town or village called in Gujarati Dhedvado,…’.\(^5\) This residential discriminatory situation continues in Gujarat as in the rest of India to this day except that the name Dhedvado is substituted by the euphemism of Rajvado.

He compares them to the Jews in Christian Europe and to Indians as a whole in South Africa.\(^6\) The first comparison is not quite appropriate because there was a racial aspect and a religious aspect to the treatment of the Jews. The situation of the SCs is different in these respects. Dr Ambedkar has correctly brought out the distinction between the isolation of the Jews in Europe and the compulsory segregation of ‘untouchables’ in India (Ambedkar, 1989).

Gandhiji found that Indians as a whole had become ‘the untouchables of South Africa’. They were referred to as ‘coolies’, a term which had a contemptuous connotation meaning ‘what a Pariah or an untouchable means to us’. Their localities known as coolie locations were similar to the ghettos of the Jews or the Dhedvados back home.\(^7\)

**Gandhiji’s Apartheid Experience and its Reflection on his Anti-untouchability Sentiments and Perceptions**

Referring to the contemptuous refusal of an English hair-cutter in Pretoria to cut his hair, Gandhiji connects this with the Indian caste and ‘untouchability’ situation with his observation that ‘we do not allow barbers to serve our untouchable brethren’.\(^8\)

Gandhiji considered the travails of Indians in South Africa to be a retribution for the practice of ‘untouchability’ in India. Gandhiji recorded his abomination of ‘untouchability’ in the following words: ‘Hindu defects were pressingly visible to me. If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or an excrescence.’\(^9\) Here is perhaps the first instance of Gandhiji’s famous formulation of ‘untouchability’ being an excrescence and not part of Hinduism, to which he returns again and again during his campaign against ‘untouchability’ after his return to India and taking over the leadership of the Congress. In a speech at Ahmedabad on 5 June 1916 reported in Gujarati on 11 June 1916, he pointed out that the whites in South Africa used to ask him during his campaigns what right Indians had to demand better treatment from them when Indians were ‘guilty of ill-treating the untouchables among us’.\(^10\)
Gandhiji often used the concept of retribution and retributive justice to bring home to caste Hindus the inequity of ‘untouchability’. In a speech of 16 February 1916, reported in *The Indian Review* of February 1916, he referred to ‘untouchability’ as ‘a curse that has come to us’. So long as it remains with us, he felt that ‘every affliction that we labour under in this sacred land is a fit and proper punishment for this great and indelible crime that we are committing’. In his article in *Young India* dated 27 October 1920, he pointed out as follows: ‘That we have become the “pariahs of the Empire” is, in Gokhale’s language, the retributive justice meted out to us by a just God … should not we the Hindus wash our bloodstained hands before we ask the English to wash theirs?’

Gandhiji was conscious of the adverse consequence of ‘untouchability’ to India as a nation. In his speech at a conference on 18 March 1916 reported in the *Vedic Magazine* of April–May, 1916, he agreed with the opinion of Sir Sankaran Nair that ‘we had lost India through inequity to the Untouchables’.

Admission of ‘Untouchable’ Family in Gandhiji’s Satyagraha Ashram

On his return to India in 1914 after twenty-one years of stay in South Africa from 1893, he founded the Satyagraha Ashram in 1915 in Ahmedabad where he now settled down. The issue of ‘untouchability’ continued to exercise him. He made it clear to his friends that he would ‘take the first opportunity of admitting an untouchable candidate to the Ashram if he was otherwise worthy’. A few months after the Ashram was established, an ‘untouchable’ family referred to Gandhiji by Amritlal Thakkar (to whom Gandhiji entrusted the All India Anti-Untouchability League/Harijan Sevak Sangh set up after the Yeravda Pact and became respectfully known as Thakkar Baba) was admitted. It consisted of Dudabhai, his wife Danibehn and their baby daughter Lakshmi. The attitude of helpers in and financial contributors to the Ashram towards this family was negative. The significance of the admission of this family was, to Gandhi, a proclamation to the world that the Ashram would not countenance ‘untouchability’. But a conclusion that he drew from the fact that the expenses of the Ashram were mostly met by very orthodox Hindus was a ‘clear indication that Untouchability is shaken to its foundation’ looks over-optimistic even from today’s point of view. He says that there were many other proofs supporting his conclusion but does not mention what these proofs were, except the fact that good Hindus do not scruple to help an Ashram where Gandhiji and his companions went to the length of dining with ‘untouchables’ which according to him was no small proof. No objective observer of Indian society even as of today, with all the changes that have taken place in almost a century after this episode, would endorse Gandhiji’s over-optimism.
Pre-Gandhi Social Justice Movements—Social Context of Gandhiji’s post-South Africa India

The India that Gandhiji returned to from South Africa had undergone significant changes. The half-century prior to his return was a period which saw significant movements of people whom we now know as SCs and BCs. Egalitarian social movements, many of them reformist, and two of them even revolutionary [namely, those of Basaveswara (1134–96) in Karnataka and Sankardeb (1449–1569) in Assam], were a feature of Indian civilisation during even ancient and medieval times. I have described this elsewhere in an earlier paper of 1994 (Krishnan, 1994). The half-century prior to Gandhiji’s return was marked by significant social movements and events like the Breast Cloth Movement of the then ‘untouchable’ Channar women (same as Kerala’s Ezhava and Tamil Nadu’s Nadar, both listed now as BCs) launched in 1853 by wearing the upper cloth, in defiance of age-old custom; the Sartorial Reforms Act, 1859 of Travancore (now mostly part of Kerala) vesting in such *Avarna* women the right to wear the upper cloth; the first recorded case of admission of a boy of the Mahar caste (now listed as a SC) of Dharwar (then in the Bombay Presidency and now in Karnataka); the upper caste resistance to it; widespread violence against ‘untouchable’ children going to school; the reformist and revolutionary efforts of social and socio-religious leaders like Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1827–90) in Maharashtra, Sree Narayanaguru (1856–1928) and Shri Ayyankali (1863–1941) in Kerala; and the responses of reformist princely state rulers like Chhatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur (1874–1922), Krishna Raja Wodayar (reigned 1902–40) of Mysore and Sayaji Rao Gaekwad (1863–1939) of Baroda, all of which contributed to the creation of awareness of rights among the downtrodden.

The slowly quickening tempo of the movement for social justice also found political expression early in the 20th century in resolutions of the Indian National Congress and of pro-Congress groups and of the non-Brahmin Party in 1917, in which one can see the seeds of the demand for reservation and/or separate electorates. Opposition to ‘untouchability’ and disabilities imposed on the ‘untouchables’ or depressed classes also found expression in these resolutions.

Opening of the Gandhi Chapter in the Congress

It was in an India in which the problems, aspirations, demands and sentiments of the depressed classes had thus begun to be expressed in socio-political terms that Gandhiji entered Indian politics in 1919, soon after his return from South Africa, and then took charge of the Indian National Congress, converting it from ‘a gathering of intellectuals’, as Dr Ambedkar described the pre-Gandhi Congress, passing resolutions and doing no more, described by Swami Vivekananda as a ‘weeping Assembly’, into ‘a mass organization’, as Dr Ambedkar described the Congress.
after Gandhiji’s assumption of leadership (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 16), which adopted the policy of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, courting jail in the process.

**Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad—Gandhiji’s Introduction to Problems of Peasantry and Industrial labour**

When Gandhiji entered the scene, his exposure to and knowledge of the Indian peasantry and the depressed classes were limited. His visit to and stay in Champaran in 1917 and his role in ameliorating the conditions of the tenants there, who belonged to castes now included among ‘Socially and Educationally Backward Classes’ (BCs), gave him a deep insight into the life and struggles of India’s peasantry.16 This insight was sharpened by the Kheda Satyagraha in Gujarat for relief in payment of revenue on account of widespread failure of crops. The Kheda experience came soon after Champaran, along with the strike of textile labourers of Ahmedabad which gave him a close insight into industrial labour.

**Commencement of Gandhiji’s Political Campaign against Untouchability**

At this stage Gandhiji began to address the issue of abolition of ‘untouchability’ as a necessary part of *swaraj*. One of his earliest references to this issue was in the *Young India* dated 27 October 1920 in which he exhorted the ‘untouchables’ to join the great national movement. In that article he enumerated three courses open to the ‘downtrodden members of the nation’, namely, the SCs or ‘suppressed classes’, the term used by him in that article following Swami Vivekananda in preference to the term depressed classes. The first was to take ‘the assistance of the slave-owning government’. The second was ‘rejection of Hinduism and wholesale conversion to Islam or Christianity’. He ruled out conversion because ‘religion is a matter of heart’. He also advised them against resorting to the course of seeking the help of ‘the slave-owning government’, as by doing so ‘they will be used for suppressing their kith and kin’ and thereby ‘instead of being sinned against, they will themselves be the sinners’. Therefore, Gandhiji argued that the right course that remains for the ‘untouchables’ is that of ‘self-help and self-dependence with such aid as the non-Panchama Hindus will render’. He recommended to them the use of non-cooperation and suggested that by ‘way of protest against Hinduism, the Panchamas can certainly stop all contact and connection with the other Hindus so long as the special grievances are maintained’.17 But even this was not considered practicable by him as there was no leader among them who could lead them to victory through organised intelligent effort and
non-cooperation. Therefore, he concluded, the best course for the Panchamas is to join the great national movement. Here one must observe the lack of realism behind suggesting that the ‘untouchables’ could afford to stop all contact and connection with other Hindus. Probably, he was not aware that the Panchamas were essentially agricultural labourers depending on other Hindus for their daily wages and livelihood and could ill-afford to boycott them. In fact, it is the oppressors of the ‘untouchables’ who are in a position to wield the weapon of social and economic boycott against them which they are wielding to this day in many places in India when the ‘untouchables’ seek their legitimate rights including the right against ‘untouchability’ or their Constitutional Right to Life under Article 21, which means and includes Right to Life with Dignity, without subjection to ‘untouchability’.

In fact, in the memorandum submitted by Dr Ambedkar to the Minorities Committee of the Round Table Conference (RTC) in 1930, he mentioned that social boycott ‘is the most formidable weapon in the hands of the orthodox classes with which they beat down any attempt on the part of the Depressed Classes to undertake any activity if it happens to be unpalatable to them’ (Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done cited in Moon, 1990: 43). He cites the report of the Starte Committee, appointed by the Government of Bombay in 1928, which inter alia pointed out that there were two difficulties in the way of the depressed classes exercising the right to all public utilities ‘for a long time to come’, namely, ‘first open violence and second and more seriously social and economic boycott’, often imposed by the majority on the economically dependent and vulnerable depressed classes to prevent them from or to punish them for the slightest deviation from established oppressive customs or exercise of elementary rights (ibid.: 44).

Therefore, in his memorandum, setting out the terms and conditions on which the depressed classes will consent to place themselves under majority rule in self-governing India, Dr Ambedkar proposed inclusion in the future Constitution of India, under consideration by the RTC, of provisions, defining boycott and prescribing punishment for boycotting and instigating or promoting of boycott and for threatening of boycott. Whatever was found by the Starte Committee was true when Gandhiji gave the depressed classes the well-intentioned but unrealistic advice and true even today. It is ironic that such a serious group of crimes was not included in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 though I, from my then position as Special Commissioner for SCs urged upon the government, at meetings and in writing, to include this group of crimes by the names of social boycott, economic boycott, social blackmail and economic blackmail in the Bill which was then on the anvil. I have urged this upon the government in various public documents like the Dalit Manifesto and the Himalaya Proclamation both formulated by me respectively in 1996 and 2004. Now the inclusion of these crimes in the Act is one of the important amendments proposed recently to the government by the National Coalition for the Strengthening of the POA Act, 1989 and its Implementation, of which I am the Chief Advisor.
Gandhiji in the same article in *Young India* dated 27 October 1920 advised the Hindus to realise that ‘if they wish to offer successful Non-co-operation against the Government, they must make common cause with the Panchamas’. He asked the Hindus: ‘Should not we the Hindus wash our bloodstained hands before we ask the English to wash theirs?’ But, it is puzzling that in the next breath, Gandhiji said that ‘it is an impossible task’ because ‘a slave has not the freedom even to do the right thing’. It is difficult to agree with Gandhiji that being under British rule in any way deprived caste Hindus of the ability to stop practising ‘untouchability’ against the ‘untouchables’. If that were the only obstacle, after 1947 it ought to have been possible for the dominant caste Hindus to have stopped practising ‘untouchability’. Instead we find that not only ‘untouchability’ is flourishing but it has mutated into more virulent and subtler forms in keeping with ‘modern’ changes in society and has also graduated to the higher stage of systematic and regular atrocities, to deal with which the Government of India found it necessary to get enacted the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Again, according to Gandhiji, the process of struggle for *swaraj* has commenced and ‘whether the Panchamas deliberately take part in it or not, the rest of the Hindus dare not neglect them without hampering their own progress’. Unfortunately, the reality is that the struggle for *swaraj* has been successfully completed on 15 August 1947 and the rest of the dominant Hindus largely continue to neglect the Panchamas and their rights including the Constitutional Right to Life with dignity, that is, freedom from ‘untouchability’.

**Opposition to ‘Untouchability’ as a Consistent and Continuing Theme in Gandhiji’s Political Campaign**

In the *Young India* of 29 December 1920, Gandhiji warned the Hindus against ‘untouchability’ in the following words:

> Non-cooperation against the Government means co-operation among the governed, and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability, there will be no Swaraj whether in one year or in one hundred years... Swaraj is as unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity. (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 37)

This was a bold formulation and by its token the question arises whether what India has now, since 1947, attained *swaraj*, since ‘untouchability’ continues to flourish. Or is it truncated *swaraj* or is it incomplete *swaraj*? In any case, obviously, it is not the *swaraj* of Gandhiji’s concept and if so the challenge remains before the leadership of the state, the government and the civil society of advanced classes including media to take steps to make *swaraj* complete in accordance with Gandhiji’s concept in this regard.
In the *Young India* of 25 May 1921, as seen from Swami Shraddhanand’s letter dated 23 May 1922 to the All India Congress Committee (AICC) General Secretary Vithalbhai Patel (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990, Appendix I, pp. 298–301), Gandhiji put the question of ‘untouchability’ in the forefront of the Congress programme.

In *Young India* dated 3 November 1921, he wrote:

> Untouchability cannot be given a secondary place on the programme. Without the removal of the taint Swaraj is a meaningless term. Workers should welcome social boycott and even public execration in the prosecution of their work. I consider the removal of ‘Untouchability’ as a most powerful factor in the process of attainment of Swaraj. (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 36)

Many of Gandhiji’s formulations are unrealistic, but they show that Gandhiji had become acutely aware of and seriously concerned about the Panchamas and the practice of ‘untouchability’ against them and took a firm stand against ‘untouchability’.

In 1922, the Congress adopted a Constructive Programme of ‘social amelioration’ at the meeting of its Working Committee at Bardoli, held in February, 1922, known as the Constructive Programme of social amelioration and also as the Bardoli programme. One of the eight programmes of action contained in the Working Committee’s resolution was, ‘To organize the Depressed Classes for a better life to improve their social, mental and moral condition, to induce them to send their children to national schools and to provide for them the ordinary facilities which the other citizens enjoyed’ (ibid.: 20). This resolution was confirmed by the AICC at its meeting in Delhi on 20 February 1922. Thereafter, the Working Committee at its meeting held in June 1922, resolved to appoint a committee consisting of Swami Shraddhanand, Sarojini Naidu, I.K. Yagnik, and G.B. Deshpande to ‘formulate a scheme embodying practical measures to be adopted for bettering the condition of the so-called untouchables throughout the country’. This resolution was accepted by the AICC at its meeting held at Lucknow in June 1922 stepping up the amount to be raised for the scheme to ₹5 lakhs from ₹2 lakhs mentioned by the Working Committee.

But, the correspondence between Swami Shraddhanand, on the one hand, and Vithalbhai Patel and Motilal Nehru, General Secretaries of the AICC, on the other, the dilatory movements of the matter between the Working Committee, the Depressed Classes Sub-Committee and the AICC and the cries of anguish of Swami Shraddhanand bring out the indifference of some of the important Congress leaders of the times to the humanist and patriotic idea Gandhiji incorporated in the Bardoli programme. Swami Shraddhanand’s letters reflect his deep feelings for the ‘untouchables’ and against ‘untouchability’. Dr Ambedkar refers to him as ‘the greatest and the most sincere champion of the untouchables’ (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 28). To Dr Ambedkar it was doubtless that if Swami Shraddhanand had worked on the committee, he would have produced a very big scheme.
One of the interesting and significant convergences of Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar is their assessment of Swami Shraddhanand and his work. Gandhiji pays rich and respectful tributes to Swami Shraddhanand, his sincerity and his work in his various speeches of 1927.\textsuperscript{19}

It is one of the misfortunes of India’s history that Swami Shraddhanand, about whose sincerity and dedication to the cause of the ‘untouchables’ both Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar spoke in unison, was eased out of the Convenorship of the Committee and then out of the committee itself. It would appear that social conservatives in the Congress ensured that Gandhiji’s emphasis on the removal of ‘untouchability’ was not put into practice. Much of what Swami Shraddhanand bemoaned like the lack of attention to the work pertaining to the ‘untouchables’ and the step-motherly treatment accorded to it in the matter of providing grants are true even today of what is happening with regard to matters pertaining to the SCs including allocation of funds to the Special Component Plan (SCP) for SCs and inclusion of liberating and equalising programmes with adequate funds and organisational arrangements in the SCP. It is worth remembering that Swamy Shraddhanand was the first person to use the term ‘\textit{dalit}’, translating Swami Vivekananda’s term ‘Suppressed Classes’ to refer to the ‘untouchables’ and Gandhiji adopted Vivekananda’s term in 1920—an interesting and significant convergence.

Finally, in May 1923, the Congress Working Committee washed its hands off this programme by assigning it to the All India Hindu Mahasabha ‘in as much this question of Untouchability concerns the Hindu community particularly’. Needless to say, the Hindu Mahasabha did not oblige.

The treatment meted out to Swami Shraddhanand and the disposal of the Bardoli programme in respect of the depressed classes by shifting the responsibility to the Hindu Mahasabha drew justified criticism from Dr Ambedkar (\textit{What Congress and Gandhi Have Done} cited in Moon, 1990: 24).

\textbf{Vaikkom Satyagraha and Gandhiji}

Gandhiji came closer to the issues of SCs (depressed classes/untouchables) and BCs through the Vaikkom and Guruvayur satyagrahas in Kerala, his interactions with Narayanaguru and finally his famous encounters with Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Second RTC and thereafter.

The Vaikkom Satyagraha, started in 1924, was the first organised mass struggle against ‘untouchability’ conducted in Kerala by the victims of ‘untouchability’. It was undertaken under the leadership of T.K. Madhavan, a prominent disciple of Sree Narayanaguru and a Congressman. He started it with the blessings of Narayanaguru. This \textit{satyagraha}, which was sustained over a long period of twenty months, mobilising directly and indirectly the entire populace of Kerala, the victims of ‘untouchability’ as well as others, attracting the support
and participation of regional leaders of Kerala as well as outsiders like Periyar E.V. Ramasamy of Tamil Nadu (then in Madras Presidency), was not about the “untouchables” right of entry into the famous temple at Vaikkom, but only for the right of the Avarnas (or untouchables or depressed classes) who included Ezhavas, now in the list of BCs, for the freedom to walk on the road surrounding the external wall of the temple. It secured all-India attention and Gandhiji was among the national leaders who visited Vaikkom during the long satyagraha and expressed solidarity with the struggle.

There are many communications between Gandhiji, K.P. Kesava Menon, George Joseph, K.M. Panikkar, Shri C. Rajagopalachari, T.R. Krishnaswamy Iyer, etc., in all of which Gandhiji supported the Vaikkom Satyagraha.

In his article in Navajivan dated 6 April 1924, Gandhiji referred to Vaikkom Satyagraha and its background:

> The accumulated burden of Hindus’ sins is big enough. …, we have elevated wickedness to the place of dharma. My conscience tells me ever more emphatically every day that one such wickedness is the practice of untouchability. …. But with a view to serving these people kept at a distance and atoning for their own sins, Hindu members of the Congress in Travancore have started Satyagraha.

Gandhiji continuously expressed his appreciation of the significance of this ‘socio-religious movement’ in his various articles and interviews. But, unrealistically, he held that the silent, living suffering of one single pure Hindu as such would be enough to melt the hearts of millions of Hindus.

**Gandhiji’s Meeting with Narayanaguru**

From Vaikkom, Gandhiji proceeded to Sivagiri where Narayanaguru had established his ashram. Gandhiji appropriately and respectfully referred to him as His Holiness Shri Narayan Swami Guru. They conversed with the help of a bilingual interpreter. This was Gandhiji’s first interaction with a stalwart of social justice who, as a Hindu religious saint, radically changed the social perception and self-perception of the Ezhavas and other ‘untouchables’ of Kerala, and this meeting was in the background of the mass movement started by Narayanaguru’s disciples for an elementary human right, and therefore it had a significance in deepening Gandhiji’s understanding of the condition of the ‘untouchables’ or depressed classes, who included the present SCs and some of the present BCs. In the course of his responses to Gandhiji’s queries, Narayanaguru confirmed his support for the Vaikkom Satyagraha against ‘untouchability’ and expressed the opinion that the struggle was proceeding on right lines (Balakrishnan, 1954/1969: 164–67). Gandhiji’s record of their conversation also confirmed that Narayanaguru entirely approved of the Vaikkom Satyagraha movement.
Guruvayur Satyagraha and Gandhiji

The Guruvayur Krishna temple, then in the Ponnani Taluk of British Malabar and now in the Thrissur district of Kerala, was the venue of an important *satyagraha* in 1932 which started with the agitation for securing the untouchables’ entry into the temple by a Congress leader K. Kelappan, a caste Hindu who was working for the cause of untouchables of Malabar. This *satyagraha* too attracted wide participation of the victims of ‘untouchability’ as well as upper castes. Among the participants were E.M.S. Namboodirippad and A.K. Gopalan, then Congress Socialists, who later became important communist leaders of Kerala and India. On the 20 September 1932, Kelappan commenced a protest fast lying in front of the temple in the sun. On Gandhiji’s request he suspended his fast on 1 October 1932 (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 115–16). Gandhiji frequently refers to the Guruvayur Satyagraha in different contexts.

Gandhiji’s Encounters with Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar—Divergences and Differences

Then followed Gandhiji’s well-known interactions with Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Gandhiji’s Earliest Notice of and Reference to Dr Ambedkar

Gandhiji’s first recorded notice of Dr Ambedkar is in 1927 in his article in *Young India* dated 28 April 1927 in which he also expresses his support for the Mahad Satyagraha. The exercise of their lawful right to take water from the public tank on 20 March 1927 by the ‘untouchables’ gathered at a conference of depressed classes under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar and the violence unleashed by a mob of ‘touchables’ on peaceful ‘untouchables’ was brought to the notice of Gandhiji. Gandhiji describes this incident as ‘unprovoked lawlessness on the part of the so-called higher castes…’. Gandhiji was unequivocal about who was at fault—he said that ‘…. the blame is all on the side of the “touchables”’. ‘Brute force will not sustain untouchability. It will bring about a revulsion of feeling in favour of the suppressed classes.”

While Gandhiji’s sympathies are very clear, he with unrealistic over-optimism refers to untouchability as ‘tottering’—more than eighty years after the foregoing event, it is still going strong in most parts of India. He was also over-optimistic about the generation of a revulsion of feeling among the ‘touchables’ in favour of suppressed classes. This has not happened even today on a general scale. Gandhiji expressed appreciation for some ‘touchables’ who tried to defend the ‘untouchables’, but he pointed out that silent sympathy is of no use. He wanted that ‘every Hindu who considers the removal of untouchability to be of paramount
importance, should on such occasions prove his sympathy by publicly defending
the suppressed classes and having his own head broken in defending the helpless
and the downtrodden’. Gandhiji without reservation said that Dr Ambedkar was
fully justified in putting to test the resolution of the Bombay Municipal Council
and Mahad Municipality by advising untouchables to quench their thirst in the
tank.

Thus, Gandhiji’s introduction to Dr Ambedkar and his work and his reference
to them were positive and showed convergence. Unfortunately, this convergence
did not continue and the divergences between the two began to find expression.

**Primary Divergence—Constitutional Project and the Yeravda Convergence**

The main divergence between Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar arose against the back-
ground of the Constitutional reforms which the British government was contem-
plating in partial response to the nationalist movement under the leadership of
Gandhiji. A Royal Commission under the chairmanship of Sir John Simon (Simon
Commission) was appointed in 1928 by the British government. After the Simon
Commission’s work, representative Indians were called to London at a RTC with
the representatives of the British parliament and the British government.
Dr Ambedkar and Diwan Bahadur R. Srinivasan were invited to represent the
untouchables at the RTC.

Dr Ambedkar was anxious that enlargement of the powers of Indians should be
accompanied by adequate safeguards for the ‘untouchables’ so that the transfer of
power did not leave them more vulnerable. The ideas of separate electorate and
reservation in electoral seats as well as in posts under the state and educational
institutions were in Dr Ambedkar’s mind and he moved for them from Simon
Commission (1928) onwards and pursued them at the RTCs of 1930 and 1931.
While Gandhiji recognised the fact of the age-old sufferings of the ‘untoucha-
bles’, he was against separate electorates for the depressed classes and initially
was not even in favour of reservation. The opposing stands of Gandhiji and
Dr Ambedkar at the Second Session of the RTC in 1931 under the chairmanship
of the Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald and in one of the important committees
of the conference, namely, the Minorities Committee which also held its deliber-
ations under the Chairmanship of Ramsay McDonald, have been recorded in detail.
Dr Ambedkar frankly points out that what happened in the Minorities Commit-
tee’s proceedings on the issue of separate electorates and other Constitutional
safeguards for the ‘untouchables’ was the root of the bitterness between the Con-
gress and the ‘untouchables’ led by him. This is also the root of the bitterness
between these two giants, one concentrating on national liberation and on the
unity of people belonging to different religions and social classes and the other
concentrating on *dalit* liberation along with national liberation. The fundamental
issue in the controversy between the Congress and the untouchables, according to

Dr Ambedkar, is: ‘[A]re the untouchables a separate element in a nation like India or are they not?’ (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 181). They are a separate element according to Dr Ambedkar. According to the Congress and Gandhiji they are not a separate element but are a ‘chip of the Hindu block’. According to Dr Ambedkar they are not only a separate element, but the most vulnerable section of the Indian population.

From this difference arose the difference in their approach to the proposed Constitution for a free India. According to the Congress, the Constitution of free India would be democratic, based on adult franchise. Any safeguard devised for preventing the tyranny of a Hindu communal majority, besides adult suffrage, would be a ‘vivisection of the nation’.

Dr Ambedkar’s stand was that:

Indian social life has to be reckoned in terms of communities. There is no escape. Communities are such hard facts of Indian social life that it would be wrong to accept that communal impulse and communal prejudice do not dominate the relations of the communities. The social psychology of the Hindu Communal Majority is dominated by the dogma which recognises not merely inequality but graded inequality as the rule governing the inter-relationship among the various communities. This dogma of graded inequality is absolutely inimical to liberty and fraternity. It cannot be believed that this graded inequality will vanish or that the Hindus will strive to abolish it. That is impossible. The graded inequality is not accidental or incidental. It is the religion of the Hindus. It is the official doctrine of Hinduism. It is sacred and no Hindu can think of doing away with it. The Hindu Communal Majority with its religion of graded inequality is not therefore a passing phase. It is a permanent fact and a menace for ever. In making a Constitution for India the existence of a standing Communal Majority cannot be ignored and the problem of devising safeguards so as to reconcile it with political democracy must be faced. (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 170)

There is no need for me to dwell upon the details of the very educative presentations and exchanges in the Minorities Committee and in the Second Session of the RTC. Suffice it to say that the failure to arrive at a common agreement among the leaders representing different interests led to the ‘communal decision by his Majesty’s Government in 1932’ announced by the Prime Minister on 17 August 1932 which is referred to as the Communal Award. This Award provided for a separate electorate for the depressed classes and for special depressed classes constituencies where both candidates and voters would be only of the depressed classes. This arrangement was to exist for twenty years. This was followed by the protest fast unto death against the grant of separate electorates for ‘untouchables’, from the 20th September, 1932, undertaken by Mahatma Gandhi who was lodged in the Yeravda prison in Pune from the time he returned to India after the second RTC. The entire national leadership rushed to Yeravda prison in a bid to find a satisfactory solution and save Gandhiji’s life. On their request Dr Ambedkar also went to Yeravda. As a result of intense negotiations a compromise was struck.
between them whereby an agreement known as the Poona Pact or Yeravda Pact was signed on 24 September 1932 by which separate electorates were given up and a system of representation for the depressed classes by reservation in a larger number of seats then provided in the McDonald Award was agreed upon. This system of representation of the depressed classes in the provincial and central legislatures was to continue until a date determined by mutual agreement. There was also national agreement for the first time that the depressed classes should be represented in appointments in public services as well as in local bodies, in other words reservation in public services and local bodies.

About this Pact, Dr Ambedkar said that ‘it conceded the political demand of the untouchables’ and that it did not cancel the Prime Minister’s Award as Gandhiji had demanded ‘but only substituted another and a different system of constituent safeguards’ and there is no difference between the Poona Pact and the Communal Award (Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done cited in Moon, 1990: 249, 259–60).

The commitment regarding reservation in local bodies had to wait till 1993 when the 73rd and 74th amendments of the Constitution of India, 1950 came into force. In 1990 as Secretary, Ministry of Welfare (now trifurcated into Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Ministry of Minority Affairs), I was involved in the inter-ministerial discussions which led to these amendments during which I insisted that reservation should be provided for the SCs and STs not only in seats but also in the posts of chairperson of the local bodies. It is a matter of satisfaction for me that I could play this role in furthering a significant item in the Gandhi–Ambedkar synthesis of September 1932.

There was also a little-known provision in the pact requiring that in every province out of the educational grant, an adequate sum shall be earmarked for providing educational facilities for the depressed classes—this was at a time when there was no developmental planning in India. This can be called the seed of the concept of the SCP for SCs which I conceived and developed in the late 1970s when I was Joint Secretary, SC and BC Welfare, Ministry of Home in the context of the much wider sweep of the system of planned development that took shape in independent India.

The Yeravda Pact was perhaps the acme of the national movement when all previous bitterness was dissolved. Dr Ambedkar records that after the Poona Pact he ‘proceeded in a spirit of forget and forgive’ (Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done cited in Moon, 1990: 133). I consider it a coincidental good fortune of mine to have been born in the year which saw this glorious convergence of the nationalist and social justice streams of modern India.

The Yeravda Pact describes itself as ‘the agreement which has been arrived at between leaders acting on behalf of the Depressed Classes and of the rest of the Hindu community regarding the representation of Depressed Classes in the Legislatures and certain other matters affecting their welfare’. Its signatories are representative of the entire spectrum of the national dalit and civil society leadership of the country. The Congressmen among them covered different shades of
opinion from the conservatism/traditionalism of Madan Mohan Malaviya to the liberalism of Tej Bahadur Sapru and the pragmatism of C. Rajagopalachari. Apart from Dr Ambedkar, there were seven other SC representatives. There were also industrialists like G.D. Birla and Walchand Hirachand, social activists like H.N. Kunzru, P. Kodanda Rao and Hansa Mehta. Apart from these initial signatories many more appended their signatures the next day and subsequently making a total of eighty-seven. A photocopy of the document with all the signatures is one of my treasured possessions.

It was a grievous misfortune of recent Indian history that the bitterness before this pact was not avoided though it could have been. It is another misfortune that the convergence that took place at Yeravda and generous impulses that were generated and expressed immediately after the pact could not be sustained in the years that followed.

The next day, on the 25th of September 1932, there was a meeting of the Hindus’ Conference in Bombay to ratify and support the pact and action arising from it. At this conference, where warm and generous feelings, sentiments and resolves were expressed, inter alia, Dr Ambedkar said, ‘My only regret is, “Why did not Mahatmaji take this attitude at the RTC?” If he had shown the same consideration to my point of view then, it would not have been necessary for him to go through this ordeal’ (Pyarelal, 1932: 189). This shows that there was the possibility of the consensus of 24 September 1932 being reached without any bitterness, with harmony, a year earlier in 1931 itself. But, Dr Ambedkar wisely chose to let bygones be bygones and continued to say ‘however, these are things of the past. I am glad that I am here to support the resolution’—that is, the resolution of the meeting ratifying and supporting the Yeravda/Poona Pact and resolving on the action programme. Referring to Gandhiji as ‘the greatest man in India’, he expressed his happiness that it had been possible through the cooperation of all ‘to find a solution so as to save the life of the Mahatma and consistent with such protection as is necessary for the interests of the depressed classes in the future’. He gave a large part of the credit in the negotiations to Mahatma Gandhi himself and effusively said, ‘I must confess that I was surprised, immensely surprised, when I met him, that there was so much in common between him and me.’ Paying encomium to Gandhiji’s sincerity, Dr Ambedkar said:

I do not think there is anyone among us who dare even for a moment to challenge or entertain any doubt about the depth of his conviction…. I feel it would be preposterous to doubt his sincerity in regard to the question of the depressed classes. In the case of many of us … nationalism is a mere figure of speech, but to Mahatma Gandhi it is his life-breath. I cannot even imagine Mahatma Gandhi in terms of caste Hindus or any other way than in terms of the nation.

Referring to Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru’s earlier observation that whenever any dispute arose in the negotiation they approached Gandhiji, Dr Ambedkar says that these disputes were of a very crucial character and thereupon ‘I was astonished to
see that the man who held such divergent views from mine at the RTC came immediately to my rescue and not to the rescue of the other side. 'And he expressed his gratitude to Mahatmaji for thus extricating him from his very difficult dilemma between the need to save the life of the greatest man in India as he referred to Gandhiji and at the same time safeguard the interests of the ‘untouchable’ community as he was trying to do at the RTC. Allaying apprehensions expressed in earlier speeches whether the agreement would have the support of the whole depressed class community, while assuring that there need be no doubt about this, he expressed the counter concern in the following words: ‘Our only concern is this, whether Hindu community will abide by it (voices: Oh, Yes, We Will). We feel that the Hindu community unfortunately is not an integral whole’, but, ‘a Federation of small communities. I hope and trust that the Hindus on their side would look upon this document as sacrosanct and work in an honourable spirit’ (Pyarelal, 1932: 181–91).

It is a matter for agonising appraisal and introspection now for the present non-dalit civil society whether this legitimate expectation of Dr Ambedkar and the assurances of the speakers and wide audience of the non-dalit Hindu community present have been and are being fulfilled and followed now. The painful answer is in the negative. The warm tributes paid by Dr Ambedkar to Gandhiji on that day seventy-seven years back stand in contrast to the bitterness of his references to Gandhiji in his book What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables. What events and circumstances led to this? What lessons do they provide for the Indian leadership for the future? These are matters I shall discuss in the following while dealing with the re-emergence of the pre-Yeravda Constitutional divergence between Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar and other divergences that existed in the Gandhian and Ambedkarite view points.

Meanwhile, returning to Dr Ambedkar’s speech at the meeting of the Hindus’ Conference on the 25th of September, Dr Ambedkar, with remarkable foresight, also cautioned that any electoral arrangement cannot be a solution for the larger social problem. It should be necessary to go beyond the political arrangement in the Yeravda Pact and make it ‘possible for the Depressed Classes not only to be part and parcel of the Hindu community, but also to occupy an honourable position, a position of equality of status in the community’ (Pyarelal, 1932: 181–91). He foretold, again with great foresight, that as the depressed classes get education they would begin to smart under the Hindu social laws and ‘there is a great danger of their seceding from Hindu society’. He earnestly requested the Hindu representatives present to bear this in mind and hoped that they would do the needful in the matter. Earlier, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, who was considered to be the authentic representative of the ‘orthodox sentiment of the Hindu community’, as Tej Bahadur Sapru described him, pointed that the heart’s desire of Gandhiji was not merely to remove existing social disabilities ‘but to make the very idea that there are “untouchables” disappear from the Indian society’. This observation elicited wholehearted support from Dr Ambedkar who shouted ‘Hear’, ‘Hear’. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya wanted a committee to be set up to bring the
meaning of the day’s resolution home to every man in the country and take practical steps to bring about the unity that was needed.

Apart from ratification of the pact, the most important resolution of the Conference of Hindus on 25 September 1932 was that:

[H]enceforth no one shall be regarded as untouchable by reason of his birth and those who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same rights as other Hindus in regard to the use of public-wells, public roads and public institutions. These rights shall have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest acts of the Swaraj Parliament if it shall not have received such recognition before that time.

It was further resolved that, ‘It shall be the duty of Hindu leaders to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so-called untouchable classes, including the bar in respect of admission to temples.’ The promise of statutory recognition of the civil rights of the ‘untouchables’ was fulfilled by Article 17 of the Constitution of India, 1950 followed five years later by the enactment of the Untouchability Offences Act, 1955, renamed in 1976 as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, but it is a sobering and agonising thought that this statutory recognition on paper has not yet been followed in practice in most of India even today.

Here, it is necessary to remark that Dr Ambedkar’s foresighted prophesy that as the depressed classes get education they would become more and more resentful against Hindu social laws and there is a great danger of their secession from Hindu society is a point of convergence between him, Gandhiji and Swami Vivekananda.

In a speech in 1917, Gandhiji, referring to ‘untouchability’ as a serpent, warned that ‘if Hinduism does not destroy this serpent while there is yet time, it will be devoured by it’. In his article in Young India of 17 November 1920 replying to S.M. Michael’s letter of 4 November 1920, Gandhiji says that Hinduism will certainly perish ‘if it does not purge itself of the blot on itself in the shape of untouchability’. Again, Gandhiji in his speech in Bettiah on 23 January 1927, reported in Search Light dated 30 January 1927, warned that ‘… if the pernicious custom of untouchability remained in force, the Hindus would be wiped out of India in the near future’.

Even earlier, as long back as 1897, in a lecture at Madras, Swami Vivekananda, warned as follows:

The Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the down-trodden, to the poor. That is why one-fifth of our people have become Mohammedans. It was not the sword that did it all. It would be the height of madness to think it was all the work of sword and fire. And one fifth … one-half … of your Madras people will become Christians if you do not take care. Was there ever a sillier thing before in the world than what I saw in Malabar country? The poor pariah is not allowed to pass through the same street as the high-caste man, but if he changes his name to a hodge-podge English name,
it is all right; or to a Mohammedan name, it is all right…. Shame upon them that such wicked and diabolical customs are allowed. (Vivekananda, 1897)

The warnings of all these three great men of modern India have fallen on deaf years in the subsequent decades and generations to this day. Consequently, Dr Ambedkar and many of his followers left the Hindu fold and adopted Buddhism on the 14 October 1956 after giving ample opportunity for the dominant Hindus and their leadership to correct themselves. Conversion to Christianity has also proceeded and is proceeding apace as specifically warned by Swami Vivekananda. Even now instead of heeding the grave warnings of Swami Vivekananda, Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar and correcting themselves, the upper caste Hindu leadership harps on making anti-conversion laws more stringent which will not succeed in stemming conversion, forgetting that the simple remedy against dalit conversions to Christianity and sometimes to Islam as in Meenakshipuram in 1981 is in their own hands, namely, firmly putting an end to all discrimination—social, economic, educational, political, cultural, socio-linguistic and socio-psychological—that come under the rubric of ‘untouchability’. Gandhiji again and again strenuously pointed out that untouchability is not part of Hinduism and is not sanctioned by any scripture. Prof. Nadkarni has recently written a book to establish the same point (Nadkarni, 2006/2008). What is required is not arguments and intellectual disquisitions. It is for the caste Hindu leaders of society, polity, economy, academia and media to show by their personal behaviour and active social action and performance that there is no link between the Hindu religion and untouchability—unfortunately they are yet to seriously undertake this responsibility they owe not only to the SCs, but also to the memory of Gandhiji, Babasaheb Ambedkar and other great nationalists of Yeravda and to the cause of the Indian nation. If they are not prepared to perform this type of social amputation, no amount of arguments will convince the victims of untouchability that it is not part of Hinduism and it is not sanctioned by Hindu scriptures. The ball is in the court of the caste Hindu leaders of society, polity, economy, academia and media.

Post-Yeravda Divergence

In true Yeravda spirit, within a week after the pact, at a large public meeting on 30 September 1932 under Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya’s presidency, resolutions were passed assuring Mahatma Gandhi that ‘a quickening of conscience has been seen in the Hindu community in the last few days on the question of Untouchability and that all possible steps will be taken to translate this enthusiasm into action with a view to remove the virus of Untouchability from the Hindu community’ and deciding to establish an All-India Anti-Untouchability League (AIAUL) (Pyarelal, 1932: 181–93). I must observe here that if there was
quickening of conscience, it did not last long and dalits and their friends feel that now that conscience is virtually dead.

Certain actions of the Congress leaders of AIAUL, differences in approach leading to the resignation of Dr Ambedkar from the Central Board of the AIAUL, its renaming as Harijan Sevak Sangh, brought about a fissure, which could have been avoided by Gandhians if they had strictly adhered to the Yeravda spirit. The post-Yeravda divergence was widened by differences in approach between Gandhians and Dr Ambedkar on the temple entry Bill, introduced in 1933 in the Central Legislature, which was too weak in Dr Ambedkar’s view as it did not condemn ‘untouchability’ as a sin and as immoral, but only as a social evil, and the unceremonious abandonment of even this weak Bill by Congress leaders in 1934 when the Viceroy announced new elections. This was on account of the Congress leaders’ fear of adverse upper caste reaction in the elections, a forerunner of the fear on account of which political parties even today are too timid to take up essential radical measures for root and branch change in the social and economic structure of the country. In the chase for electoral advantage, basic principles of importance to the society and the nation become casualties. This happens now and this seems to have happened then.

The hair-splitting interpretations of certain clauses of the Yeravda Pact, to the disadvantage of the depressed classes, made by Congress representatives before the Hammond Committee, and the practice of Congress electoral managers of putting up ‘convenient’ SC candidates to defeat independent or independent-minded SC candidates who take a firm, independent and principled stand on SC rights, embittered Dr Ambedkar. Learning a lesson from this, the Congress as well as other political parties must desist from their continuing practice of using the electoral process to defeat those SC candidates who would take a firm and independent stand in matters affecting SC rights, whereby they may win certain seats but at the very heavy cost of loss of trust of the SCs which in turn is harmful to the cause of integrating society and strengthening the nation.

Divergent Gandhi–Ambedkar Perceptions of Untouchability

The divergence of Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar in their understanding and perception of the phenomenon of untouchability, a difference that existed before the Yeravda Pact and resurfaced soon after that pact, was basic. Many of Gandhiji’s speeches and letters give the impression that he took untouchability almost in its literal sense of ‘touch-me-not-ism’.27

But it is also true that he noticed untouchability as a practice of denying to the ‘untouchables’ admission to schools and use of public facilities like the road, the drinking water, well, etc., denial of freedom to buy or hold land and access to courts.28

Ambedkar had a wider understanding and perception of untouchability. He perceived untouchability as ‘a mental attitude manifesting itself in social
discrimination’ which may also include touch-me-not-ism but goes much beyond it. Ambedkar saw untouchability also as a means of ensuring a large retinue to serve, to be used as forced labour on a mere pittance, to do the dirty work of scavengers and sweepers, who can be kept to lower jobs and prevented from entering into competition for higher jobs. He saw untouchability as more than a religious system. ‘It is also an economic system which is worse than slavery (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 196–97). While he accepted that untouchability, as most people believe, is a religious system, he pointed out that it would be a mistake to suppose that it is only a religious system. He explains why it is more exploitative than slavery. ‘As an economic system it permits exploitation without obligation.’ It is ‘not only a system of unmitigated economic exploitation, but it is also a system of uncontrolled economic exploitation’, because there is no public opinion to condemn it, no impartial machinery of administration to restrain it, and whatever public opinion there is, is the opinion of Hindus belonging to the exploiting class and as such favour exploitation. And, there is no check from the police or the judiciary, ‘for the simple reason that they are all drawn from the Hindus, and take the side of the Exploiters’. Untouchability ‘does not arise out of any personal fault’ on the part of the ‘untouchable’. ‘Untouchability is an attitude of the Hindu.’ Hindus will not easily give up untouchability in view of its economic advantages to them—they have nothing to fear from the failure to abolish untouchability and they have nothing to gain by abolition of untouchability, ‘they have in fact much to lose by the abolition of untouchability’. ‘The system of untouchability is a goldmine to the Hindus.’ ‘Vested interests have never been known to have willingly divested themselves unless there was sufficient force to compel them.’ The untouchables have no capacity to generate such compelling force, they are poor and scattered. ‘They can be easily suppressed should they raise their head.’

Dr Ambedkar gives a very graphic and moving account of the life and place of untouchables or SCs in the village society:

In an agricultural country, agriculture can be the main source of living. But this source of earning a living is generally not open to the Untouchables.…. In most parts the Hindus would resent an Untouchable coming forward to purchase land and thereby trying to become the equal of the Touchable class of Hindus. Such an act of daring on the part of an Untouchable would not only be frowned upon but might easily invite punishment. In some parts they are disabled by law from purchasing land. For instance in the Province of Punjab there is a law called the Land Alienation Act. This law specifies the communities which can purchase land and the Untouchables are excluded from the list. The result is that in most part the Untouchables are forced to be landless labourers. As labourers they cannot demand reasonable wages. … the Untouchables have no holding power. … Nor have they an bargaining power. They must submit to the rate fixed or suffer violence. …

When the agricultural season is over the Untouchables have no employment and no means of earning a living. …. 

There is no trade in which they are engaged themselves as a means of earning a livelihood. They have not the capital for it and even if they had, no one would buy from them.

… There is no security. There is only one secure source of livelihood open to the Untouchables in some parts of the country known to me. It is the right to beg food from the Hindu farmers of the village. …. The Untouchables of the village are hereditary menials employed in the village administration. As part of their remuneration the whole body of Untouchables get a small parcel of land assigned in the ancient past which is fixed …. Coupled with this is given to them the right to beg for food.…

This statutory beggary as a means of livelihood for the Untouchables has been reduced to a system. The Untouchable families are attached to different Touchable families in the village as did the serfs and villeins to the Lords of the Manors in Medieval Europe. The Untouchable families attached to the Touchable families are at the command of the latter. …

Even today, long after Dr Ambedkar made the foregoing in-depth and incisive economic analysis of the position of SCs in the Indian economy, especially its rural economy, villages and agriculture remain the predominant socio-geographical fact of India. Of the SC population, the proportion in rural India is much larger than the proportion of non-SC, non-ST in the rural area out of the total non-SC, non-ST population.

It is this economic dimension of ‘untouchability’ that completely bypassed Gandhiji or Gandhiji totally missed. The issue of landlessness of and denial of landownership to SCs does not figure in his speeches, letters and writings, except for a passing notice of the land-related grievance of ‘Panchamas’ of Mayavaram in his speech on 1 May 1915.

Many people consider the issue of untouchability to be a mere social problem. Dr Ambedkar points out that the problem of the untouchables is ‘quite unlike the problems of dowry, widow remarriage, age of consent, etc., which are illustrations of what are properly called social problems’. The problem is essentially one of ‘securing to a minority liberty and equality of opportunity at the hands of a hostile majority which believes in the denial of liberty and equal opportunity to the minority and conspires to enforce its policy on the minority. Viewed in this light, the problem of the Untouchables is fundamentally a political problem’ (Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done* cited in Moon, 1990: 190). This political aspect also missed Gandhiji till the Yeravda Pact.

Connected with the divergence of Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar in their perception and understanding of ‘untouchability’ was the divergence in their views on the caste system. Gandhiji believed that caste system minus ‘untouchability’ is a useful social arrangement worth preserving.

Gandhiji repeatedly referred to ‘untouchability’, but not the caste system, as an excrescence of Hinduism. On the contrary, according to Dr Ambedkar, the ultimate goal for the untouchables was a religion which would give them equality of social status and for this the Hindu religion has to purge itself of the doctrine of
Chaturvarna as the root cause of all inequality and also the parent of the caste system and ‘untouchability’. So long as Chaturvarna and the caste system stand to be the cardinal doctrine of the Hindu faith, the depressed classes are bound to continue to be looked upon as low. Indicating that depressed classes are not averse per se to remain Hindus, but spelling out the condition on which they can remain Hindus and also warning that they cannot remain Hindus if this condition is not fulfilled, he declared that, ‘The Depressed Classes can say that they are Hindus only when the theory of Chaturvarna and caste system is abandoned and expunged from the Hindu Shastras.’

**Measures for Elimination of Untouchability—Gandhi–Ambedkar and Gandhi–Narayanaguru Divergence**

Based on their basic differences of perception of ‘untouchability’, its meaning, its ramifications, its socio-economic functions and its political implications in the context of Constitution-making, the approach of Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar to the solution of the problem of untouchability also had certain fundamental differences.

Gandhiji carried out a consistent campaign, before the Yeravda Pact and more intensely after that pact, and the resolution of 25 September 1932 against ‘untouchability’. But this campaign was directed against ‘touch-me-not-ism’ and centrally against denial of entry of untouchables into temples. He believed that if temple entry was achieved, at one stroke it would open the door to the achievement of freedom of education and economic advancement to the untouchables.

Gandhiji believed that achievement of temple entry was an imminent possibility and that caste Hindus were coming round and being influenced by his campaign through his articles, letters, speeches and pronouncements. On all these assumptions, Gandhiji was unrealistic and over-optimistic though it is clear that the sincerity and depth of his feelings against ‘untouchability’ were unquestionable.

Within the limits of his perception of ‘untouchability’, and subject to his emphasis, priorities and sequencing, his campaign against ‘untouchability’ was relentless. He linked it with his idea of swaraj. For him, removal of ‘untouchability’ was a necessary pillar of swaraj. Swaraj, if and when attained, would be hollow and meaningless if untouchability is not removed. In fact, it would not be swaraj at all. Thus though in Hind Swaraj itself there is no reference to the ‘untouchables’ and ‘untouchability’, in his subsequent articles, speeches, lectures and letters, he fills his concept of swaraj and underpins his concept of swaraj with the removal of ‘untouchability’.

Dr Ambedkar criticised Ranga Iyer’s Temple-Entry Bill because it did not refer to ‘untouchability’ as a sin. Gandhiji, day in and day out, referred to ‘untouchability’ as a sin and as a crime—a significant convergence in the midst of their divergence on ‘untouchability’. It is interesting and significant that in his speech...
on 5 June, reported in Gujarati on 11 June 1916.\textsuperscript{35} Gandhiji observes that ‘even the slavery of the Negroes is better than this’, a point on which he and Dr Ambedkar fully agree. This reference to slavery in the context of SCs is not an isolated instance and recurs elsewhere.\textsuperscript{36} In one instance, he refers to those who practice ‘untouchability’ as ‘slave-owners’.

His uncompromising opposition to ‘untouchability’ and characterisation of it as a sin and as a crime is a recurrent theme in his various articles, speeches, notes and statements all the way from 1916, and the early 1920s, till the 1940s,\textsuperscript{37} all of which indicate the significance attached to removal of “untouchability” in Gandhi’s scheme of things, both in the context of civil disobedience and in the context of swaraj.

After the Yeravda Pact, there was a spate of temple-entry activity. Issues of Harijan every week published lists of temples, wells and schools thrown open to the ‘untouchables’. It would appear that reports that came to Gandhiji from his sources, that is, Congress workers in the field, were exaggerated apparently with the intention of pleasing him. The reality check on these exaggerated reports comes from the reply of a minister, who was a Congressman to a question asked by B.K. Gaikwad, a SC member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly, on 17 August 1939, and Bombay Chronicle’s comments dated 28 August 1943, and 4 January 1944 (Ambedkar, What Congress and Gandhi Have Done cited in Moon, 1990: 262).

Gandhiji apparently overestimated the influence of his words and underestimated the strength of resistance against removal of ‘untouchability’ whether in the admission to temples which was paramount to him or in the admission to schools, public wells and other public facilities like restaurants which also fell within the ken of his campaign. This over-optimism and underestimation comes through in a number of his speeches and letters,\textsuperscript{38} like a speech at a meeting of Antyajas at Dohad, reported in Young India of 10 September 1919, his ‘Notes’ in Young India dated 9 March 1922.\textsuperscript{39} In his article in Young India of 17 November 1920, Gandhiji says that ‘there will be no Pariah or non-Brahmin problem left to be solved’ and asserted that ‘amelioration of radical social evils means an attainment of Swaraj’.\textsuperscript{40}

It is sobering for us now to note that though swaraj in the sense of political freedom from British rule was achieved more than six decades back, yet contrary to Gandhiji’s assessment, the problem of ‘untouchability’ and the problem of caste still remain. One can of course draw the conclusion that the swaraj Gandhiji was speaking of was not merely freedom from foreign rule but swaraj for all people and sections of India which has not yet been achieved. In that sense, the swaraj of Gandhiji’s vision is yet to come.

Even while supporting the education of SCs and admission of ‘Panchama’ or ‘Antyaja’ (that is, SC) children into the same schools as others, he envisaged, in keeping with his adherence to the Varna Vyavastha or caste system, that educated untouchables should not give up their traditional occupation, as for example, in
his article in *Navajivan* dated 27 June 1920. These ideas of Gandhiji regarding traditional occupation are at variance with the feelings and aspirations of the SCs as well as BCs. Contradistinct from Gandhiji’s ideas on traditional occupations, Dr Ambedkar referred to the existence of the hierarchy of occupations, corresponding to the hierarchy of castes, as a feature of the caste system—an analysis which is in keeping with sociological reality in the context of India. Thus, with regard to the caste system, where Gandhiji felt that a surgery would do to achieve the removal of ‘untouchability’, Dr Ambedkar found that the rot was so deep that an amputation was necessary to save the body.

The decades after the Gandhi–Ambedkar controversy on this point, including the decades after independence has, brought home how pernicious and persistent the caste system is. Though the Constitution does not specifically outlaw the caste system as it has outlawed ‘untouchability’, the Supreme Court has interpreted the Constitution to mean that its goal is a casteless society in its judgment on 10 April 2008 in *Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006* case (*Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs. Government of India; (2008) 6 SCC 1*).

Thus, even though Gandhiji recognised the need for economic and educational instruments of *dalit* advancement there was a clear difference in emphasis, priorities and sequencing between him, on the one hand, and Dr Ambedkar, Narayanaguru and Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy, on the other.

Narayanaguru’s vision is expressed in his actions as well as in his teachings and preachings. His first epochal public act was that of installation of an idol of Siva at Aruvipuram near Thiruvananthapuram in 1888. This was an act of rebellion against the caste system because installation of idols and consecration of temples were customarily performed only by Brahmins and not by a person born in the then ‘untouchable’ caste of Ezhava as Narayanaguru was. He deflected the critical voices of objection against this act with gentle irony by telling the critics that he had installed not their Siva but only the ‘Ezhava Siva’ or the ‘Untouchable Siva’. His simple and profound teachings were part of the air breathed by the generation in Kerala now in their 1970s and 1980s in age including myself, such as the following:

- One caste, one religion, one God for man.
- Ask not of caste, speak not of caste, think not of caste.
- Whatever be the religion, it is enough if man progresses.
- Whatever be the religion, dress, language etc., of human beings, since their *Jati* is one, there is nothing wrong in marrying and eating together without any restrictions. (Here he plays upon the meaning of the word *Jati* and uses it in the sense of *Species*.)
- The substance of all religions is the same.

Most revolutionary of all, for a man of religion, was his statement bringing together the Vedantic doctrine of illusion or *Maaya* and the scientific materialism

of Marx (before Marxism came into vogue): ‘The World is an Illusion, Food is reality.’ [Lokam Mithya, Annam Sathyam]

Like Gandhiji, Narayanaguru gave importance to temple entry; but as Ambedkar later envisioned he proceeded from there to education and economic improvement. He bypassed the opposition to entry of untouchables into temples by launching a programme of establishing new temples as free temples open to all people as model institutions where all live with fraternity, free from caste differences and religious hatred, a concept inscribed as a motto in a shloka in Aruvipuram itself. But in 1917, he issued a clarion call that the stage of building temples was over and the time had come to build schools and libraries as the main temples. In recognition of peoples’ attitude to religion, he told them that if they were very particular they could have temples as adjuncts of schools and libraries.

Another significant expression of Narayanaguru’s socio-spiritual realism is revealed in his observation, in reply to Mahatma Gandhi’s query about what in the Guru’s opinion was required for the removal of the disadvantages of the depressed classes, in addition to the removal of ‘untouchability’, that the depressed classes must have education and financial competence and they should have facilities for advancement as others have. This is also the pointed advice he directly gave to the Pulayas (the numerically largest SC of Kerala who were earlier subjected to aggreastic slavery) at a large meeting at Muttathara near Thiruvananthapuram. He told them:

All human beings belong to one Caste. The only difference among them is that of circumstances, …. Pulayas actually suffer today from absence of money and education. You should acquire both these. But most important is education. If one has education, wealth and cleanliness will follow.… (Balakrishnan, 1969: 152)

Narayanaguru also gave importance to access to temples for the ‘untouchables’ but like Dr Ambedkar he did not want to beg for entry into the existing temples and like Gandhiji he also did not want forcible entry. He found a third way, namely, construction of new temples by untouchables for themselves. No doubt this was possible because of certain specificities pertaining to the then largest ‘untouchable’ community of Kerala, namely, the Ezhavas/Thiyyas. The strengthening of this community through these specificities has also been noticed by Dr Ambedkar in his statement on the Temple-Entry proclamation of 12 November 1936, opening the temples of Travancore to the ‘untouchables’.42

Dr Ambedkar’s efforts from the time of the Simon Commission onwards were in the context of the imminent constitutional reforms and focused on ensuring that the Constitution which came in the shape of Government of India Act, 1935 had in-built safeguards for the SCs, but his movement was much larger and covered a broad spectrum including education, and economic measures apart from a frontal attack on caste system and ‘untouchability’.

The Constitution-making process for independent India was the momentous occasion of a renewed national convergence, the convergence which earlier briefly occurred in the Yeravda Pact and was unfortunately soon dissipated. Dr Ambedkar’s joining the Cabinet of Independent India as Minister of Law, on the invitation of Prime Minister Pandit Nehru in 1947, was the first step in this renewed national convergence. In this appointment of Dr Ambedkar, Gandhiji’s counsel had its influence. Thereafter, the appointment of Dr Ambedkar as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly was a decisive step. That this happened in a Constituent Assembly that had very little presence of SCs and in which ‘upper castes’ were predominant is an indication that Gandhiji’s influence had rubbed on that entire generation of national leaders and representatives.

The Constitution of India, 1950 framed under the stewardship of Dr Ambedkar and adopted on 26 November 1949 which came into force on 26 January 1950 enshrines the very principles that Dr Ambedkar espoused throughout his life. Dr Ambedkar’s prescription for the disadvantages and deprivations of the SCs emphasised adequate space for them in the political set-up, comprehensive measures for their educational and economic advancement and extermination of ‘untouchability’ by law. Political space for the SCs as well as the STs was ensured by Part XVI of the Constitution, especially Articles 330 and 332 which provide for reservation of seats in the House of the People or the Lok Sabha and in the Legislative Assemblies of every state for the SCs and STs in proportion to their population. This principle of proportional political space by reservation was later carried to the lower levels of governance, namely, in the Panchayats at the village level, intermediate level and district level in rural India and in the municipalities in urban India by Article 243 D and 243 T in Part IX and Part IXA inserted by constitutional amendment in 1992, belatedly fulfilling Clause (8) of the Yeravda Pact. Here, a caveat is necessary. What is incorporated in this part of the Constitution is the principle of political reservation for SCs and STs as agreed in the Yeravda Pact and not separate electorate advocated by Dr Ambedkar before Yeravda. There is even now a sense of loss and disappointment among educated sections of SCs that if the principle of separate electorate had been accepted, they would have had better representatives in the central and state legislatures who would be sensitive and loyal to the needs and aspirations of SCs. They hold Gandhiji to blame for the rejection of the separate electorate principle. The practical way in which all political parties can mitigate these feelings of disappointment and resentment is to stop the practice of putting up ‘convenient’ candidates from SCs for elections who would be acceptable to the caste Hindu majority by watering down their assertiveness on behalf of the genuine rights and aspirations of SCs. Instead, they should put up SC candidates of integrity who have won the trust of SCs by firmly and consistently standing for their rights and aspirations.
Dr Ambedkar ensured that a noble edifice of social justice and equality was erected within the magnificent mansion of the Constitution. The Articles in the Indian Constitution which have direct bearing on the SCs along with the Articles which have direct bearing on STs and the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEdBCs), the social categories identified by the Constitution—SCs by Article 341, STs by Article 342 and BCs by Article 340(1)—as the prime subjects of social justice and equality constitute an integrated structure. These three social categories were identified because Dr Ambedkar and other members of the Constituent Assembly were aware that these are the three categories of India’s people who, by the operation over the centuries of the traditional social system of India, namely, the caste system, which prevailed not only among Hindus but also infected non-Hindu societies, had been deprived of their rightful share in the economy, polity and society of India and deprived of educational opportunities to secure upward mobility and their share in unfolding economic opportunities and submerging them in ‘untouchability’ in the case of SCs and other forms of social humiliation in the case of non-SCs.

At the foundation of this structure is Article 46, which is both a political command as well as a moral commandment to the state. It runs as follows:

46. Promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections. — The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

The term ‘weaker sections’ includes the BCs.

The Constitution mandated the state to create a society permeated by equality and justice, ensuring that the three deprived social categories were able to get the economic and educational and all other inputs which would enable them to come up to the level of the advanced classes. Articles 38, 39 and 39A are significant in this regard.

Clause (4) of Article 15 empowers the state to make any special provision for the advancement of the BCs and for the SCs and STs. Clause (5) of Article 15 inserted in 2005 empowers the state to provide reservation for SC, ST and BC in admission to educational institutions, both state-run and private.

A separate Article 16 has been devoted to equality of opportunity in matters of public employment in view of its importance. Clause (4) of Article 16 provides for reservation of appointments or posts under the state for any BC citizens not adequately represented in services. The term ‘backward class of citizens’ has been understood and judicially interpreted to include the SCs and STs and socially and educationally BCs. In addition, Article 335 lays down that the claims of members of SCs and STs shall be taken into consideration in the making of appointments to services and posts under the union or a state. Article 335 is worded mandatorily. That Articles 15, 16 and 16(4) and also 16(4A) and (4B) including the provision of reservation are also mandatory and are not merely enabling will be clear from
their reading along with Article 46 and the Preamble of the Constitution in an integrated manner, as it should be read.

Thus, the people of India through the Constitution adopted the Ambedkarite path not only in respect of SCs, but also in respect of STs and BCs towards the goal of the establishment of an egalitarian society permeated by the principles of equality and social justice which figure prominently in the Preamble to the Constitution—the Preamble is considered to be the key to the Constitution. This Ambedkarite path is also the path of Narayanaguru and Mahatma Phule. With this, the conflict in this area between Gandhiji’s views and Dr Ambedkar’s views has been finally laid at rest.

Article 17 represents the convergence of Gandhiji and Dr Ambedkar in the matter of ‘untouchability’. This Article abolishes ‘untouchability’ and forbids its practice in any form, but the instrumentality of effectuating this ‘abolition’ is in keeping with Dr Ambedkar’s prescription. The Article makes the enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ an offence punishable in accordance with the law. In terms of this Article, the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955 was enacted. Subsequently, it was replaced in 1976 by the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 with somewhat stronger provisions.

Though the Constitution does not say in so many words that it abolishes caste or lay down the goal of a casteless society, the Supreme Court in its judgment in the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Education) Act case (Ashoka Kumar Thakur case) has pronounced that a casteless society is the goal of the Indian Constitution. This is also in keeping with Dr Ambekdar’s vision which is also the vision of Narayanaguru and Basaveswara, the radical socio-religious revolutionary of the 12th century in Karnataka.


The significance of the edifice of social justice erected within the Constitution by Dr Ambedkar with the cooperation of the national leadership of that period will be evident on its perusal in comparison with the Constitution of the US which is sterile with regard to social justice and equality. Unlike the US Constitution, the clear-cut foundational mandate of the Indian Constitution and the various specific Articles in it based on the foundational political command and moral commandment has enabled the Indian judiciary to protect the executive and legislative initiatives of the state in compliance with the Constitutional mandate and provisions in favour of the SCs, STs and BCs, unlike the negative American judicial experience with regard to the American blacks, the American Indians and Eskimos and Hispanic Americans who are the deprived/disadvantaged races of the US.

This is the long-lasting effect of Dr Ambedkar’s endeavours of a lifetime and the renewed national convergence that was brought about by the patriotic

Gandhi-inspired national leadership of that time in the exercise of Constitution-making under the guiding hand of Dr Ambedkar.

Since the Gandhi–Ambedkar differences have thus been finally settled (subject to the caveat mentioned earlier of the duty of the political parties in the choice of their SC candidates for elections), the question is how do we go from here in order to fulfil the Constitutional goals of social justice and equality and establishment of an egalitarian society. This will be clear when we examine how and to what extent the Constitutional provisions have been implemented through specific and effective laws, adequate and meaningful plans and budgetary outlays and appropriate institutional structures and placing their implementation in each relevant institution in the charge of carefully and purposefully selected individuals attuned to the Constitutional mandate of social justice and equality. This picture is not only disappointing but also alarming and is in a way a repetition of the post-Yeravda disillusionment to which Dr Ambedkar has given bitter expression.

Sixty years after the Constitution, though some ameliorations have occurred, the bulk of the SC families remain agricultural wage-labourers, as in the past many centuries, depending on their very oppressors and exploiters for their daily bread. This is because the land-reform legislations passed in India have not been in keeping with the principle of ‘land to the tiller’, which was adopted by the national movement for independence led by the Indian National Congress. This principle necessarily means land to every tiller and no land to any non-tiller. This is very important for the SCs because they are mainly landless and forced to remain agricultural wage-labourers, by the ruthless operation of custom based on the caste system and in some areas by formal law. Land-reform legislations and other land distribution measures have brought about some improvement in this matter but have not been designed with the goal of ensuring that no rural SC family is left out to remain landless. A large part of the country’s agricultural land has been brought under irrigation but the limited extent of lands owned by the SCs remain almost wholly unirrigated, forcing even small farmers among the SCs to depend on agricultural wage-labour. Whatever land ceiling and re-distribution Acts have been enacted, with all the limitations, have been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. The Special Component Plan (SCP) for SCs, which I conceived and was introduced in 1978 as part of the planning system of India as a means of channelising adequate plan outlays for their all-round development and progress, has been routinised and trivialised, losing sight of its liberational, equalisational and transformative purpose. The SCs continue to be forced to live in the most miserable rural bastis and urban slums. A large section of them continue to be forced to render ‘safai’ (scavenging) service. The bonded labour system remains in all its vicious vigour and about two-thirds of bonded labourers in the country belong to the SCs, as a modern outcrop of their earlier serfdom and slavery. The chasm between SCs and the advanced classes in education continues to be wide and becomes wider as one goes up the educational ladder. The 93rd amendment to the Constitution passed in 2005 inserting Clause (5) in Article 15 to re-open the door to private educational institutions in which reservation was
barred by the Supreme Court’s judgment in the Inamdar case in 2005 is yet to be fully implemented. After the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006 which provides for reservation for SCs, STs and BCs in central educational institutions was upheld by the Supreme Court on 10 April 2008, a similar Act in respect of private educational institutions was due, but it is yet to be enacted though that was the prime purpose of the 93rd enactment. This has adversely affected the educational opportunities for not only SCs but also STs and BCs.

Untouchability continues to be rampant in many parts of the country. The following are some aspects of ground reality:

- ‘Untouchability’ in its classic expressions known all over India, for example, Mahad in 1927, continues to exist in many parts of India.
- The Act and its machinery are not able to reach out to most of the victims in the villages or to alter the situation there significantly.
- Some of the ‘classic’ expressions of ‘untouchability’ have ceased to be practised in some parts of the country—a silver lining to draw hope from.
- Some of the ‘classic’ forms of ‘untouchability’ have been modified in some parts of the country.
- Some neo-modern forms of ‘untouchability’ have emerged in rural as well as urban areas in many parts of the country, in keeping with new developments. For example, village tea shops are a recent phenomenon in many villages. With this has arisen a variety of discriminatory practices against SCs such as not allowing them to be seated, seating them on the floor, separately seating them and requiring them to use separate glasses, usually old, dirty and cracked or chipped, kept for their use.
- In many metropolitan areas, ‘untouchability’ has seemingly attenuated, but is practised with sophisticated concealment in a variety of ingenious ways, revealing creativity worthy of a better cause. In many modern offices and educational institutions, dalits have to suffer snide remarks and quiet and neat acts of discrimination.
- Untouchability is practised even against school-going boys and girls, in many parts of the country, in seating in the class and at the important programme for mid-day meals, vital for children’s nutrition and education and full enrolment and retention without drop-out.
- Untouchability is practised even against infants in many parts of the country in the operation of the important programme of Anganwadis linked with child nutrition, child health protection and mother’s nutrition and health.
- More than everything else the mindset behind ‘untouchability’ and the caste system continues almost unabated. The walls in the mind stand intact.

Atrocities continue to be perpetrated against them whenever they seek to secure even a small part of their rights. Legislations to prevent and penalise ‘untouchability’ and atrocities are drafted defectively and implemented
half-heartedly. It is only a small proportion of SCs, about 2 per cent of SC families, who have been able to secure employment in government, public sector units (PSUs) and other such public organisations through the mechanism of scholarships, hostels and reservation in posts and appointments. It is only this small proportion who have been able to cross the ‘Line of Economic Freedom’ and the ‘Line of Self-Respect’, demarking lines most relevant to SCs, STs and BCs. Even the benefits of reservation have not reached the SCs in full because of poor implementation by the central as well as state governments.

Scheduled Tribes, proud masters of their traditional territory, are being progressively deprived of their lands and have, in many cases, been reduced to minorities in their own home-lands. This is a historical process that has been going on for centuries and has acquired greater momentum in the decades of independence. The lands that still remain with them are poorly developed, are rarely irrigated and are un-integrated or poorly integrated with the market, leaving the field open to exploiters and middlemen from outside. Irrigation projects that have been undertaken by governments in the tribal areas are typically programmes for creating dams in tribal areas, submerging tribal lands, scattering their settlements and people to the wind and taking water to non-tribal lands outside the tribal areas; the plan expenditures incurred on such projects are gratuitously and unabashedly shown as part of the Tribal sub-Plan, which has also been routinised and trivialised. An aggressive new entrant in the field of land deprivation of STs is large private mining enterprise of a number of corporates. No wonder an increasing number of STs are forced into agricultural wage-labour and the proportion of STs among agricultural wage-labourers has increased in recent decades. STs have become the largest contributors of bonded labourers next to the SCs, about one-fifth of bonded labourers being members of STs. Traditional tribal rights in forests, which they have been enjoying through traditional symbiotic relationship between tribes and forests, were unilaterally abrogated and abridged by the colonial government, an abrogation and abridgement continuing even after independence, making the STs dependent on others for their elementary requirements and for their very survival. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act passed in December, 2006 to remedy this is yet to be fully or even adequately implemented. In the trading of minor forest produce (MFP), in the collection of which STs are specialised, they are being exploited both by private trade as well as by cooperatives/corporations set up by governments. Availability of MFP, which is the main or a substantial source of livelihood for a large percentage of STs, is fast shrinking. The benefits of reservation have reached STs even to a lesser extent than in the case of SCs. It is only 1 per cent of STs/ST families, who have been able to get into employment in governmental and quasi-governmental establishments and it is only this 1 per cent which can be said to have crossed the relevant lines, namely, ‘the Line of Self-Respect’ and ‘the Line of Economic Freedom’ in the modern sense of the term. The rest are vulnerable or potentially so. They, along with SCs and BCs, are still waiting for reservation in private
educational institutions which is yet to be enacted by the state under the new Clause (5) of Article 15.

A large proportion of the BCs are dependent on their traditional occupations like fishing, a variety of traditional productive industries and of services and so on. While, on the one hand, the doors of access to other occupations of their individual choice have been barred to them, on the other hand, opportunities and incomes in the traditional occupations, to which they are largely confined, are also being threatened and truncated by the organised market and through denial of access to relevant technology and to finance and credit. Many of them have consequently been pushed into agricultural wage-labour and even bonded labour. Almost all bonded labourers who are not SCs or STs belong to BCs. The problem faced by BCs engaged in traditional occupations is also the fate of those sections of SCs and STs who are dependent on similar traditional occupations. The presence of BCs in the organised modern establishments of government and quasi-government bodies is very limited on account of denial of their Constitutional right to be recognised and accorded reservation and other facilities until 1990–93 at the centre and in a number of states. Even now their other entitlements have not been provided for in the central sector except to a marginal extent. Reservation in central educational institutions was provided for them as late as 2006 and they, along with SCs and STs, are still waiting for reservation in private educational institutions which is yet to be enacted by the state under the new Clause (5) of Article 15.

Thus, as illustrated earlier, in the life of these three categories, who together constitute about two-thirds to three-quarters of India’s population and almost the entirety of India’s agricultural and other labour force, economic freedom is absent. Consequently, almost all of them dwell below the ‘Line of Economic Freedom’ and the ‘Line of Self-Respect’. An important instrument of progress emphasised by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, namely, education of equal and high quality, has not been made available to them either in full quantity or in quality. There is no educational equality for them with the dominant elite minority. In fact the qualitative gap between the educational availability to this majority and the dominant elite minority has been alarmingly widening in the last one or two decades. Thus, there is no true equality of opportunity for them. Indian governance at the central as well as state level has not till now addressed itself totally, comprehensively and consistently to measures which would bring economic freedom, educational equality and true equality of opportunities to SCs, STs and BCs in an integrated and comprehensive manner. Developmental assistance has been and is usually sporadic, patchy, truncated and inadequate. Even these are poorly implemented because of the presence of inegalitarians, in large numbers and in crucial positions, both in political as well as administrative governance and the persecution and sidelining, in the decades after independence to this day, of those in the administrative structure of the country, who are egalitarians and who bear faith to the Constitutional principle of socio-economic justice.

The hiatus between Constitutional mandates and their implementation has a deleterious effect on the still incomplete project of building a unified and strong nation based on an integrated and egalitarian society and an economy friendly to the SCs and other deprived classes and other common people, but the voice of social justice has become weaker than it was at the time when and soon after the Constitution came into existence. Macro-economic and global concerns have put social justice based on the Constitutional mandate in the backburner.

It is in the national interest to correct this situation urgently. This requires a two-fold approach. On the one hand, measures to economically liberate the SCs and along with them the STs and BCs, to bring about educational parity for them in relation to the advanced classes at all levels of education and, on the other hand, protect the SCs and STs against atrocities and exterminate ‘untouchability’ urgently. These measures should include quick distribution of agricultural land to all rural SC families so that not a single rural SC family remains landless and dependent on others for daily livelihood, and similar land distribution to landless ST families in non-tribal areas and stopping the haemorrhage of tribal lands in tribal areas, inter alia rescuing SC children from the compulsion to work to supplement the family’s meagre wage income instead of going to school; development of their lands through community irrigation and other means; setting up a network of high quality residential schools from Class VI to XII for SC children in every district and mandal/tehsil area and similar schools for STs and BCs (in which one-fourth to one-third of the seats could be provided for poor non-SC/non-ST/non-BC children respectively); ensuring full access and reasonable presence of SCs, STs and BCs in educational institutions, both governmental as well as private, at all levels through reservation and other means (Bill for reservation of seats for SC, ST and BC in private educational institutions for which the 93rd Constitutional amendment was passed in 2005 is pending after the Act providing reservation for them in government institutions was upheld by the Supreme Court on 10 April 2008); and strengthening the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955 by amendments already formulated and communicated to the Government of India, and strengthening their implementation.

A programmatic consensus in this regard based on the Constitutional mandate has already been reached and this is reflected in documents like ‘Dalit Manifesto, Incorporating the Rights and Entitlements of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes & Backward Classes’ (1996), the Himalaya Proclamation (2005), Draft Common Minimum Programme (DCMP), 2009 in respect of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes, all of which I had formulated on behalf of dalit and BC organisations, and in the Common Minimum Programmes (CMPs) of Coalitions from 1996 onwards, including particularly the CMP of the UPA, 2004—all of which except the DCMP, 2009 have been brought together as Appendices in my book Empowering India for Empowering Dalits: A Road-Map.
A powerful and peaceful democratic mobilisation is required to see that this programmatic consensus based on the Constitutional mandates is fully and scrupulously implemented without any further delay.

The other prong of the two-fold approach is to institute well-designed courses of human rights education with focus on the economic, educational and social rights of the SCs, STs and BCs, from childhood upwards in order to counteract the anti-national culture of casteism, concepts of caste-based superiority and creation of aversion to the caste system itself. In designing this part of the nation-building and nation-strengthening project, it will be useful to draw upon the resources sourced from Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Gandhiji and Narayanaguru. Along with Dr Ambedkar would be revolutionary reformers like Mahatma Phule, in addition to Narayanaguru. Along with Gandhiji would be Swami Vivekananda, Basaveswara and Sankardeb. These are illustrative. There are a number of other egalitarian social reformers and social revolutionaries (in today’s terminology, of SC, BC and ‘Advanced Caste’ origins) in the Indian tradition who can be drawn upon and who would have an appeal to different sections of the people in different parts of the country. In this design, the dialectical methodology of Marx would be useful in bringing out the nature of exploitation and deprivation in the Indian context of which an important feature is the caste system and the economic burdens imposed through it on the SCs, STs and BCs and the economic advantages and privileges appropriated through its mediacy by a small minority of the population constituting the upper classes drawn from the upper castes and more recently from sections of the land-owning middle castes. The application of the Marxist dialectical method will, on the one hand, be enlightening in unraveling these socio-economic processes but it will also enrich Marxism itself by its application in the Indian context through the prism represented by Dr Ambedkar, on the other.

It is imperative to synthesise all these resources represented by Gandhiji, Ambedkar, Narayanaguru and Marx in the present critical stage of social justice in India, instead of continuing to harp on the differences of the past which have been finally settled in the Constitution of India. This process will be helped if the political parties adopt the procedure suggested earlier regarding selection of their respective SC and ST candidates in all elections.

In the light of Gandhiji’s concept, without the liberation and empowerment of SCs, STs and BCs (including the BCs of religious minorities), there cannot be swaraj—in other words, the swaraj we achieved on 15 August 1947 is not complete without dalit liberation and empowerment.

Notes
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
18. These public documents have been included in my book *Empowering Dalits for Empowering India: A Road Map*.


References

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