THE FLAMING FEET
A study of the Dalit Movement in India

D R Nagaraj

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CHAPTER 1

Self-Purification v/s Self-Respect
On the Roots of the Dalit Movement

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic.

(Wittgenstein in ‘On Certainty’)

The best way to begin this book is by a critical invocation to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. After all, the Buddhist method, taught by the Tathagatha, excels in offering a critique of the master himself. The Dalit Movement in ways more than one owes its existence to Babasaheb, and is also facing a crisis because of his fatherhood. A critical estimate of his philosophical and political career will both illuminate and situate the Movement in a proper context.

Irony of Ironies: To understand the nature of Babasaheb’s political career one has to place it along with Gandhiji’s, for the apparent divergence between the two will highlight the unique problems of the former. Is the irreconcilability between the two real and fundamental? I shall try to explore a truthful answer to this question. Since the answer will have far reaching consequences for the Dalit Movement, one has to proceed, with care and caution, fighting deep-rooted prejudices and, of course, wishful thinking too. In other words, the Dalit Movement was a product of the mental state that believed in the firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problems of untouchables, and that has shaped the contours of its themes and patterns. But today historical circumstances have changed, and their consequences have forced us to re-examine the origin and structure of these forces that have conditioned the Movement. Even if a nasty surprise is in store for us, we should be able to bear it, for it could also mean the existence of certain undiscovered affinities.

For a start, let us study the already accepted notions regarding the Gandhiji–Ambedkar relationship. While studying this we should be extremely careful for we have become captives of the picture that has been presented to us. Babasaheb’s politics was decidedly different from the Gandhian ideology and cultural politics that had dominated the nation till 1947. Gandhiji had become the centre of the nation’s
politics, and those who disagreed with him—there were many—were considered eccentrics. Particularly, the imprint of the Gandhian model of tackling the Harijan question merits a serious analysis. This question has been voiced on us by the necessity of studying the Congress-Harijan leadership against which the angry young generation of Dalits revolted in the sixties and onwards. The Harijan leadership created by Gandhiji was not at all like him; the politico-psychological factors that shaped these leaders had given birth to a new kind of nationalist political articulation, but there was a great deal of silence also on socio-cultural questions. A paradoxical convergence of articulation and silence. In the post-Independence decades, the new generation of Dalits interpreted the nationalist rhetoric of senior Harijan leaders as nationalist crap which concealed structural disparities, and their cultural silence was dubbed both as domestication and cowardice. For a change, in the history of socio-cultural movements, it was not exactly a case of passionate misreading of the Father tradition. The case for patricide looked both genuine and unavoidable. Was the judgement on senior Harijan leaders not too harsh and equally guilty of being ignorant of complex historical forces which shaped them? Well, that is the seductive charm of history; she convinces one that a partial view is the total view and drives the passionate to act. One who waits for the total view will never act or take a plunge into history, and here lies, precisely, the liberative potential of history. Both Babasaheb and Bapuji plunged into history with such creative impatience and clashed. Historical action is the Mahasamadhi of the creatively impatient, and having jumped into action they cured each other’s excesses; they emerged as transformed persons at the end of a very intense encounter. I am referring to the complex yet fascinating Gandhiji-Ambedkar encounter of the nineteen thirties. It is true, though each continued to refer to the other as a ‘fool’ and ‘heretic’ (not necessarily using these very words), till the end of their respective lives. This ferocity was more true, however, in the case of Babasaheb. But I suspect that this was only for the sake of form; it was for the consumption of those who laid a great deal of emphasis on the continuity of form. By the end of the mid-thirties both Ambedkar and Gandhiji were not the same persons they were when they had set out on a journey of profound engagement with each other. They were deeply affected and transformed by each other. Let us study this story closely. I shall not try to explain the story, but here is an attempt to describe its major events. As for the source of the story, I have picked a thing or two from the epic of Harijan weekly; in my view, particularly the issues between 1933–1936 are truly a work of epic dimension with all the

stunning variety of genres (not in terms of the narrow literary definition of the word), the experiences of life having transcended their limitations and become genres of literature.

Untouchability was one of the central concerns of Gandhiji. In all historical fairness it must be admitted that it was Bapu who made untouchability one of the crucial questions of Indian politics, although there were many yogis and movements before him in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whose contributions require a deeper grasp and analysis. On the whole, there seems to be a general ferment in the Indian society of the nineteenth century, which created both social movements and a religious symbolization that sought to question the foundations of the caste system. The mechanisms which generated these movements and activities are not necessarily linked to India’s problematic relationship with the West, although some were decidedly the products of this contact or encounter.

In fact, historically speaking, a whole range of indigenous yogis and sadhus, for whom colonialism hardly mattered either as a transitory phase or as a source of confrontation, had tried to deny, quite forcefully, the centrality of caste hierarchy in the scheme of things. In this regard, Shishunaala Sheriff and Kaivara Narayanappa, two yogis of Karnataka, the Satnamis and the Mahima Movement of North India come to mind immediately.

Apparently, the chief reason for their inability to influence the historical events in any significant way was that they did not either see or present the problems as a political one which was related to the larger task of regenerating Indian society as a whole. To be precise, they did not see their society as a part of the nation-state. For these indigenous radicals the task of fighting the caste system had been one of the spiritual requirements of their tradition. Their notion of society was, basically, a cultural one consisting of smaller communities which lived intimately in terms of geographical and social space. Most of them lived and travelled, say, in a geographical boundary of 100-200 miles. They were the conscience of smaller communities. Colonial intervention—the historical experience which dominated the Indian discourse totally for more than a century—did not make them nervous. Some of them were awed by this intrusion while some maintained stoic indifference towards it. The most important reason for such a response on the part of these yogis was that their tradition had always treated temporal power as something alien on which very little or no positive influence could be exerted. According to them, state power and historical agencies are like nature; erratic and beastly at one time and friendly, generous and benvolent at another. Many have used nature-metaphors to
respond to the colonial intervention. Shishunaala Sheriff, a Muslim —
Veerashaiva yogi with a Brahmin advaitin guru, has described this in
a beautiful poem as the birth of rain-flies which descend on the fields
at the onset of monsoons. He had also reacted to the setting of a
ginning mill in Hubli, as the beginning of capitalist industrialization.
The response made him write a poem which begins with these lines: ‘Look
at the vast expanse of the mill and salute it’; and proceeds further
by totally spiritualising the experience. Even the machine, with all its
complex mechanical body, could provide him with a perfect metaphor
to delineate the more complex yogic experience. The mill was equated
with a transcendental realm of existence. To put it differently, anxiety
and nervousness — the two experiences which are presented as central
to colonialism by modern theorists — were never the dominant mental
states in these yogis. For them, the liberation of the self from the
phenomenal world was the spiritual goal, and both the arrogance and
humiliation of the caste system were the major obstacles in the path
of moksha or nirvana. Not surprisingly, these yogis did not make use
of the logical schools of Indian philosophy. The anti-caste attitude was,
mostly, a product of a Brahminical traditions, though, many dissident
Brahmins contributed to their glory and vitality. In their view, the spiritual
transformation of the ‘being’ has the aspect of social reform built into
it. It was not a deliberate position or a dogma, but simply a matter
of metaphysical requirement.

That Gandhiji, not Ambedkar, had many things in common with
these yogis is evident from the way he defined the problem of
untouchability, though he was different from them in ways more than
one. Since Desi spiritual traditions were slight modifications of the Bhakti
Schools of both Shaiva and Vaishnava varieties, Gandhiji could be
innovative. He drew inspiration from the Vaishnavite tradition, for
instance the centrality of temple symbolism, which gave him many
moments of inner torment and self-questioning, a theme to which we
shall return later. As opposed to the yogis, anxiety had entered Gandhiji
quite deeply; he knew the destructive power of colonialism too well to
harbour any illusions about its neutrality or to pretend that it would pass
away smoothly without injuring the Indian psyche. He had stubbornly
refused to transcend the reality of colonial experience into something
else which was the practice with some yogis. There were many other
traditions in Gandhiji which had shaped his sensibility, and they were
not certainly Western. When anxiety, a product of colonial experience,
became unbearable, thus threatening the very integrity of existence,
Indian spiritual traditions provided him with a healing touch. Gandhiji
never allowed the spiritualist zeal towards the annihilation of the
caste-ego to turn upside down his priorities in the larger task of the
nationalist struggle. Similarly, the nationalist battle against foreign power
did not reduce the importance of the struggle against the caste system.
But the Gandhian view of the problem of untouchability is basically a
religious and spiritual one, its models are in Indian mystical schools.
Such was his position in the thirties before the encounter with Ambedkar
began.

There exists another response to the problem of the caste system,
and this was wholly secular in character and thrust. This is popularly
referred to as the non-Brahmin Movement of the South, although it is
by no means confined to the region.  This development is
over-determined by a whole range of complex forces of which the politics
of colonial intervention is the most crucial factor. It is a deliberate,
organised and conscious effort on the part of the lower castes and
social groups. They chose to fight the hegemony of superior castes
through gradualist and constitutionalist methods that they had learnt from
their white masters. The demands of the Shudras were materialist.
The colonial policy of promoting collaborative elites also had played a big
role in shaping the Movement. The social policy of the Raj combined
with an intense desire for upward mobility among lower castes had
generated quite a strong optimism among the Shudras; but unfortunately
the non-Brahmin Parties and Movements were not adequate enough
a medium to realize their ambitions.

It is quite easy to denigrate the importance of this Movement, and
it has been done so by scholars of various persuasions in the past.
The non-Brahmin Movement, particularly in its incarnations as the
Justice Party in the Madras Presidency and as the Prajamitra Mandali
in the Princely Mysore State, was lacking in larger ideals, and was
given to opportunistic and anti-nationalist political manoeuvres. To take
an uncharitable view of this Movement, one could describe it as a rat
race to join the ranks of government clericaldom. The leadership of
the Movement was drawn from the middle castes and landed gentry,
and the fact that Brahmins had cornered and dominated both important
and minor official positions in governments had infuriated the Shudras.
The internal contradictions of the Movement surfaced in public quite
often. Particularly, the condescending attitude of middle castes was
hardly sufficient to conceal the caste Hindu prejudices. They had
internalized the Brahminical value system totally. In fact, this is one
of the major problems faced by the Dalit Movement today. Whenever
it tries to build a larger base for itself by involving other castes as
allies, very soon contradictions emerge and this particularly assumes
acute forms in questions of values. Other non-Brahmin castes would not hesitate to take the support of the Dalits when it is a question of fighting the hegemony of other powerful social groups. In fact they are quite desperate to build this alliance. But they usually shy away on fundamental social and cultural issues. In other words, the Janus-faced collaborative tendencies of other castes are an integral part of their mobility, and they are active allies of social and cultural conservatives. This tendency was evident in the early years of the non-Brahmin Movement.

All these rightful criticisms should not make us blind towards the complexity of those forces which had shaped the Movement, and the legitimacy it had gained though it was only partial. It was confined to the justified task of securing proportional representation in jobs and education. Here one should pause for a while and reflect on the relation between the noble and ignoble faces of such Movements. Usually, one is moved by the lofty philosophical talk against caste, and is equally horrified by the mean and ignoble faces of the Movement. The latter are seen in the determined, though crude at times, efforts to secure jobs and other material benefits in the name of communal justice and positive discrimination. The beauty and the horror stem from the source of defying the caste system. The caste system in India is not only a structure of cultural values but also a certain pattern of inequitable distribution of power and wealth of different kinds along the lines of caste hierarchy. One who appreciates the spiritual beauty of the revolt against the caste system should also accept the horror of materialist demands. Gandhi could deeply respond to the spiritual beauty of the revolt, but he recoiled in utter embarrassment when confronted with its material form. Even to this day such a fragmented response to injustices of the caste system continues to affect the liberal supporters of the Dalit Movement. They are, justly, touched by the exercises in symbolic politics, and strangely annoyed when they see the Movement’s involvement with concrete issues like the Mandal Commission. The origin of the Dalit Movement lies in the convergence of these two forces: the transcendental aspect of fighting the caste-ego and the mundane reality of fighting for real opportunities in education and jobs. If the aspirations of the people are not translated into real and tangible terms, there is always the danger of a movement losing its wider social base. At the same time, it can also become a prisoner of the materialist and immediately realizable demands of an articulate and influential group in a class. The terrifyingly commonsensical approach to a movement can diminish its radical energy and potential. Against this background, Babasaheb had developed a pragmatic attitude towards the non-Brahmin Movement which was also equally informed by more radical aims. He was in deep sympathy with its drive towards upward mobility, and simultaneously, suspicious of the statusquoist implications of such moves. In a dinner speech in 1944, when the Justice Party was trounced in the General Elections in the Madras Presidency, Ambedkar deeply reflects on the decline and downfall of the party.

Then what was wrong with the party to make it fall like a pack of cards, notwithstanding the long period in office? What was it that made the party unpopular with a large majority of non-Brahmins themselves? In my view, two things were responsible.

Firstly, they had not been able to realize exactly what their differences were with Brahminical sections. Though they indulged in virulent criticism of Brahmins, could any one of them say those differences had been doctrinal? How much Brahminism had they in them? They wore namams and regarded themselves as second class Brahmins. Instead of abandoning Brahminism they had been holding on to the spirit of it as being the ideal; their anger against Brahminism was that they (the Brahmins) gave them only a second class degree.

The second reason for the downfall of the party was its very narrow political programme. One defect in the political programme of the non-Brahmin party had been that the party made it its chief concern to secure a certain number of jobs for their young men. That was perfectly legitimate. But, did the non-Brahmin young men for whom the party fought for twenty years to secure jobs in public service remember the party after they received emoluments for their jobs? During the twenty years the party had been in office, it forgot the 90% of the non-brahmins living in the villages, leading an uneconomical life and getting into the clutches of the money lenders.

This speech throws up two interrelated themes that have a definite bearing on the different kinds of pulls within the Dalit Movement today. First, the process of upward mobility of a certain section within the multitudes of Dalits and its induction into the middle class ethos. This process generates a powerful optimism among the class, which, usually, envelops the entire community, and the basis of this optimism is both real and illusory: real in the sense that a visible section of the community gets into public services, thus presenting itself as a model to be emulated. But it is also, ultimately, illusory in the sense that the Dalits as a whole can never attain the status achieved by their own visible minority, without a structural change in the entire society. The real problem of this selective upward mobility lies elsewhere. I would describe it as the phenomenon of wilful amnesia. To be more precise, it is amnesia towards one’s own past. Babasaheb was referring to the same problem when he posed this question to the Justice Party: did the non-Brahmin young men remember the Party after they had received emoluments for their jobs? The working of the caste system has always tried to create mental states of self-doubt, self-denial and self-hatred.
among the lowercaste individual in the modern context, and, generally these attitudes are collectivized. The birth of the modern individual in the humiliated communities is not only accompanied by a painful severing of ties with the community, but also a conscious effort to alter one's past is an integral part of it.

Dr Siddalingaiah, a famous Dalit writer of Kannada, portrays this entire syndrome in his unique style full of humorous pathos, wit and irony in his play "Panchama" [the Fifth One]. The dramatic locale of the play is an interview conducted by an IAS officer, Hayavadan Rao, whose Brahminical arrogance and condescension, dwarfs and deforms all the untouchable candidates who appear before him. The first four candidates, both men and women, present different faces of the making of modern Dalit identity in all its unauthentic forms. The first four are not sure of themselves, they are awkward and clumsy, they lie and are caught in the act; one thing that is common to all is that they show an attitude of wilful amnesia towards their past. The Panchama, the Fifth One, appears and then everything is changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born. Hayavadan Rao has not seen the likes of the Fifth One before in his entire life. Panchama not only refuses to forget his past, he remembers it deliberately; an aura of noble anger surrounds him. The play ends with an impassioned plea to his community to begin a new life of self-respect. To put it metaphorically, the first four ones of the play are the unavoidable baggage of the Dalit Movement, the Panchama its power and glory.

Since the very moment of its inception, the Dalit Movement is saddled with the first four ones of the play, and this is what distinguishes the Movement from the Marxist-Leninist inspired struggles of the landless that are prevalent in rural India. But it would be culturally blind to judge the first four as beyond redemption. Such a position ignores the psychology of the caste system and the way it deforms human beings. The first four need succour, a radical atmosphere which will accept and respect their Dalit identity, and only a strong movement could provide them. The entire Dalit Movement at one level starts from the assumption that the first four will be eventually transformed as the Panchama. That is also the understanding of the play. The task of transforming its own inadequate members is central to the Movement and is also a pointer to its inbuilt idealism.

To take the debate further, wilful amnesia regarding one's own past on the part of an influential group means a firm riveting of the movement to the present. In terms of actual demands, what it means is that there will be considerable pressure on the movement to act as an instrument to safeguard and promote the interests of select groups, and the struggle is subjected to a definite process of conditioning and reflects only the aspirations of the city-based groups. It is to the credit of Babasaheb that he had identified this danger in the very beginning of the Movement.

The second theme that Babasaheb introduces in the speech is the problem of defining alternative cultural values not only for the individual Dalit but for the entire Movement. The state of amnesia induces a state of stupor discouraging the painful effort of building a new culture along with the rejection of the old. One thing that Dr Ambedkar could never tolerate was this cultural inertia, and his entire life can be summed up as a relentless battle against this mental state, although this landed him in a great deal of problems in terms of defining the relationship between a movement and the structure of its memories - a theme to which we shall return in chapter 3. This was one of the areas where Dr Ambedkar clashed bitterly with Gandhiji. The latter's use of Hindu symbols is heavily dependent on mainstream Hinduism and the method he used to invest them with radical energy could hardly inspire the non-initiate. Gandhiji's method of using Hinduism required a very profound kind of inwardness towards a very imaginative way of expressing dissent against it. Not only Harijan followers of Bapu, even his caste-Hindu followers, with the possible exception of Lohia and Rajaji, could hardly follow the double-edged use of Hindu symbolism. A majority of them understood and practised it as celebratory acts thus missing the subversive dimensions. It was only during the Temple Entry Movement that they were placed in a confrontationist situation. But the enemies of Bapu had well understood the implications of his strategies to allow them to go unchallenged. His detractors succeeded where the disciples failed.

As far as Ambedkar was concerned, the dialectical method adopted by Gandhiji appeared complicated and too ineffective a route to fight the evils of Hinduism. Developing such inwardness towards Hinduism could easily degenerate into a pious and mild grumbling about the caste hierarchy, and this is what happened with the majority of the followers of Gandhiji. Babasaheb wanted a strong bedrock foundation to build a new Church (to alter Eliot slightly), and the Vatapi Garbha of Hinduism allows only the occasional eruption of protest only to be re-absorbed again in the quiescence of conservatism. But for the time being, the relevant thing for us is that the impassioned and sad reference to village India by Babasaheb almost sounds Gandhian, and the reverse reading is equally true. This shall be the theme of my
narrative. After their encounter with each other during the thirties Gandhiji and Ambedkar had internalized each other. This could happen only in the midst of a series of malignant clashes. The whole story is worth recounting for the richness of its symbolism.

II

Gandhiji’s take-off point was that the problem of untouchability was a problem of the self, in this case the collective Hindu self. He had transformed the notion of individual self and the necessity of clearing the cobwebs of the caste ego was shifted to the level of the larger notion of the collective self. But he always stubbornly maintained the importance of internalizing these values at the personal level too. The Untouchable is a part of the Self. He saw the Movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification. He wrote in Harijan (April 15, 1933) — “The movement for the removal of untouchability is one of self-purification.” This religious emphasis on the self has to be situated against the background of what is neutrally referred to as the Poona Pact of September, 1932. The Pact was seen as a decisive point in the battle between the irreconcilable positions represented by Bapu and Babasaheb. Babasaheb has defined the problem in terms of building an independent political identity for Dalits in the structures of social, economic and political powers, whereas for Gandhiji it was purely a religious question, that too an internal one for Hinduism. He did not at all take kindly to the challenge thrown by this new position aggressively represented by Dr Ambedkar. At the level of visible historical evidence, it was Gandhiji who had won this battle, and even today this has remained as a deep scar in the minds of Ambedkarites. As rightly guessed by Ravinder Kumar, what prompted Ambedkar to accept the Pact was his fear of massive retribution upon Dalits in the eventuality of Gandhiji’s death. Everything, however, was in favour of the Father of the Nation. Fortunately, he was not the sort of man who would gloat over ephemeral victories in history. For Gandhiji truth was more important, and in his heart of hearts he had realized that his victory stood on shaky grounds. The Krishna of history had lent a helping hand to humble Karna. Gandhiji had to know the truth. Raghavan Iyer in his brilliant exposition of Gandhiji’s ideas, locates the complex significance of the Mahabharata in his life.

Gandhiji invoked the Mahabharata in support of his view that Dharma signifies the way of truth and non-violence and not the mere observance of ritual externals. The scriptures, he said, have given us two immortal maxims — 1. Ahimsa is the supreme law of Dharma and 2. There is no other law of Dharma than Sathyas or truth. The Yerawada fast was an outcome of Gandhiji’s committed Dharmik position both in its abstract and applied forms. Gandhiji, I think, this time deeply felt the tragic separation between dharma and sathyas, and that Ambedkar’s way of looking at untouchability could also be truth, and thus had to be tested. Thus began one of the most fascinating encounters in Indian history. The pages of Harijan are a moving witness to this. In the first issue itself (February 11, 1933), both Ambedkar and Gandhiji came out with their authentic views on the question. Gandhiji considered some issues deeply and wrote in his usual forthright manner without any rhetoric. The question:

Why do you restrict the movement to the removal of untouchability only? Why not do away with the caste system altogether? If there is a difference between caste and caste and caste and untouchability, is it not one only of degree?

Gandhiji’s answer:

Untouchability as it is practised today in Hinduism in my opinion, is a sin against God and man and is, therefore like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. There are innumerable castes in India. They are a social institution and at one time they served a very useful purpose, as, perhaps, they are even doing now to a certain extent... There is nothing sinful about them. They retard the material progress of those who are labouring under them. They are no bar to the spiritual progress. The difference, therefore, between caste system and untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind.

These views, along with Gandhiji’s belief in varnasrama dharma have been attacked by radicals and are said to be at the core of his conservative social philosophy. In a way this can also be read as a statement about equality of castes with which majority of Hindu liberals would have no difficulty. Particularly, the upper caste and middle caste intelligentsia would define the positive aspects of the caste system in terms of its capacity to provide its members with a feeling of identity. These qualities would, certainly, have a positive appeal in the context of homogenising tendencies of international capital. But from the viewpoint of Dalits the picture is radically different. Instead of offering a sense of identity and security the caste system constantly threatens them with humiliation and insult. Similarly, the problem of identity also carries a stigma which cannot easily be erased. Against this background, any attempt to defend or show the caste system in a positive light is suspect from the viewpoint of the Dalit Movement. It was this position, precisely, that Babasaheb articulated in the first issue of Harijan.
The out-caste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcasts as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste-system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma.\textsuperscript{11}

This brief statement, interestingly enough, was made in the context of differing from Gandhiji, and this has served as a manifesto of the Dalit Movement over the last two decades. The tenor of this statement has carved out a distinct identity for the Dalit Movement which is different from other forms of Shudra dissent. Gandhiji's endorsement of the caste system came in for harsh criticism in the thirties itself. He could never repudiate it totally, although he conceded the legitimacy of some attacks in the mid thirties. Rammanohar Lohia, the most imaginative leader of Left-Gandhians, analysed the implications of the caste system in certain categories which had more affinity with Ambedkarite terms.\textsuperscript{12} Gandhiji in his dislike of the dehumanising tendencies of modern civilization became somewhat soft towards the equally dangerous structures of the caste society.\textsuperscript{13} Lohia had no such illusions about the caste system, hence he could develop a more subtle theory of injustices in traditional India and their techniques of self-perpetuation.

One could also debate the issue of differences between Gandhiji and the radicals employing different categories. The former did not find any fault with the 'constitutive rules' of the caste system, and his conviction was that something went wrong with the regulative aspects of it.\textsuperscript{14} Only a strong Movement could correct this, thus restoring its original vitality. The radicals, however, did not agree with this: the difference between constitutive and regulative rules was not tenable both ethically and philosophically. The only alternative was to define and articulate different sets of rules which were a negation of the previous sets at all levels. Interestingly, though Ambedkar had rejected the Gandhian definition of constitutive rules of the caste system, he, nevertheless, played the game along the rules laid by Bapu.\textsuperscript{15} This becomes clear when one studies the Temple Entry Movements led by Babasheb and his followers. Two Temple Entry satyagrahas, the first one at the Parvati temple of 1929 and the second one at the Kalaram temple in Nasik (1930-35) deserve special attention. Although, in the Parvati temple Ambedkar was not physically present, he was the source of inspiration for it. Eleanor Zelliot sums up its importance thus.

Templels of stone and mortar are nothing else than a natural extension of these human temples and though they were in their conception undoubtedly habitations of God - like human temples they have been subject to the same law of decay as the latter.\textsuperscript{16}

Organised by Ambedkar and local Mahar leaders, the Kalaram satyagraha involved thousands of Untouchables in intermittent efforts to enter the temple and to participate in the annual temple procession. As in the case of the Parvati satyagraha of Poona the attempt was unsuccessful. The outcome of the Kalaram Satyagraha, however, was not only further disillusionment with the satyagraha method and the attitude of the Congress, but also a rejection of Hinduism and a strengthening of the separatist political stance then developing among the Untouchables.\textsuperscript{16}

Ambedkar succeeded in drawing attention towards inbuilt contradictions of the symbolic politics of the Temple Entry Movement, and a study of them would be quite relevant to the present-day Dalit Movement as well, since the temple has remained at the centre of popular Hinduism.

Let us pause here a while and reflect on the symbolism of the temple and Gandhiji's relationship with it. In Hindu culture, the temple has always been both a source of spiritual joy and a symbol of material power. Basavanna, the great saint-leader of the 12th Century Veerashaiva Movement of Karnataka, rejected the very notion of the temple which had become an instrument of power. He saw the human body itself as a temple. But, Vaishnavites treat the issue differently, and in their symbolism the temple has a predominant place. Gandhiji had a very ambiguous attitude towards the temple signifying a deeper conflict within him, between his Vaishnavite attachment to the temple and a sort of Advaitin denial of the same.\textsuperscript{17} In an issue of Harijan (July 8, 1944) Gandhiji says - "...for I have always believed God to be without form". Coupled with this is the fact that he rarely visited temples during the period of the Temple Entry Movement. In Gandhi there existed two personalities: the radical spiritualist of tradition who, like Basavanna, upholds the human body as a temple and the second one - a modern interventionist seeking to influence the course of historical events. He tried to achieve a synthesis of the two but was not always successfully. Subtle failures in this regard often assumed fierce forms to ridicule him. Basavanna would not have presented one thing for the self, a different thing for the other. The anti-temple stand of radical spiritualists was irreconcilable with the Vaishnavite veneration of the temple. Probably Gandhiji had realised this contradiction, and tried to achieve a synthesis of both positions by using the same method positing a difference between constitutive and regulative rules. It was an effort to save the spiritual significance of the temple, simultaneously explaining its proneness to decay. Here is the difficult exercise undertaken by Gandhiji (Harijan, March 11, 1933).
Even this attempt could not satisfy the critics. Surprisingly, it was Rabindranath Tagore who disagreed with Gandhiji’s unauthentic fascination towards the temple and wrote a reply which was published in the Harijan April 1, 1933 issue.

Dear Mahatmaji,

It is needless to say that I do not at all relish the idea of divinity being enclosed in a brick and mortar temple for the special purpose of exploitation by a particular group of people. I strongly believe that it is possible for the simple-hearted people to realize the presence of God in the open air, in a surrounding free from all artificial obstructions.

Gandhiji, of course, did not offer to elaborate his position on temples further.

In the way Gandhiji handled the Hindu symbolism and Temple Entry one could also identify the merger of two strands: the exegetical exercise of a Pouranika and the shrewd political interventionist who has an eye on the immediate response of the people. The Pouranika is always moved by an intense desire to reinterpret texts and symbols, and the mythological rigour of this exercise lies in his capacity to separate the constitutive and regulative rules in an effective manner. The origin has a different meaning in his/her constant refrain; the impasse imagination of the Pouranika can make texts and symbols to signify the desired meaning. And this was, undoubtedly, the Gandhian mode of engagement with Hindu symbolism. The political interventionist and realist in him had understood the deeper craving for temples among Harijans in the absence of other strong alternatives. As said earlier, temples have always been a source of spiritual joy and a symbol of material pride. Dalits, usually, assert their new identity by demanding Temple Entry and equal religious rights. It is intensely real to them on both these counts. When a given religious tradition is insulting to their self-respect, the Dalits assert their dignity by rejecting to perform their traditional roles. In such cases the position of the Dalit Movement is fairly simple – it has to support such moves, whereas in the context of Temple Entry the Movement faces many contradictions. By supporting the move it suffers from the guilt of supporting the very symbolic structure that it vows to fight. Stubborn refusal amounts to neglecting the important dimension of temples as a structure of material power and pride – this is apart from the fear of getting alienated from the people.

There is also another significant dimension to this problem. Right to worship the same God, although through different means and forms, has been one of the major motifs of the medieval Bhakti Movement. The story of Bedara Kannappa, the hunter, which is available in both medieval Bhakti literatures of Tamil and Kannada, is a classic example of this, where he worships Shiva in a 'non-vegetarian' way much to the horror of the vegetarian upper caste priests.

Only 'believing' Gandhians could conceive of launching and sustaining the Temple Entry Movement. With others it could be an act of the bad faith. Playing along the Gandhian rule, Babasaheb soon realized both the bad faith dimension and the paradoxes involved in it, for he had already been tormented by cruel doubts about the very desirability of seeking solutions to the problems of untouchables within the framework of Hinduism. And then Ambedkar did not have the element of Pouranika in him. In this sense he had all the characteristics of the first generation Buddhists even before he formally became one. No tortuous hermeneutics. A simple straightforward reading of meaning has always been Ambedkar's strength. In the hands of lesser people, exegetical and interpretative exercise could easily degenerate into bad faith. Ambedkar was quick to act, and bid goodbye to Hinduism in 1935.

What made Ambedkar's position significant was not that the majority of the untouchables supported him. On the contrary there is enough evidence to show that they were on the other side. Influential leaders like M C Rajah were more favourably disposed towards Gandhiji on this question. But Ambedkar had no use for the Pouranika talent. Hinduism is the very embodiment of Avidya, and it can never be rejuvenated – this was his position.

While playing along the Gandhian rule of Temple Entry, Babasaheb was almost simultaneously trying to articulate and build an alternative mode. In this regard the Mahad Struggle of 1927 to assert the untouchable's right to use public water demands serious discussion. There is a world of difference between temple and tank, and Ambedkar's way of leading that struggle serves as a useful guide to enter the world of difference that existed between him and Gandhiji in these years. In Ambedkar's Mahad model, the emphasis was on treating the question of untouchability as a civil rights issue. In that case any one, Christians, Muslims and secularists can support the struggle without feeling that they were trespassing into the private affairs of a religion. In Kerala, Vaikkom Satyagraha was about to acquire such character, but Gandhiji resisted efforts to secularise the issue. For him it was purely an internal religious affair of Hinduism. Even modern democratic methods have no role in this regard. If one treats the problem of untouchability as a civil rights issue, naturally, other socio-economic and political forces join together to build a formidable front against the religious rights approach. In fact, in the pages of 'Harijan' itself such challenges went on
increasing thus laying a great deal of emphasis on total or economic uplift of the community. Gandhiji himself records the resolution passed at Agra’s Harijan Conference. This is an excerpt from the resolution in question. (Harijan, September 2, 1933)

Harijan Movement lays stress on the Temple Entry problem more than on economical and educational problems. The former item of the programme is not desirable for the Harijans, since it will produce slave mentality, spirit of blind devotion and many other evils which will go to mar the efficiency of the Harijans. The Pijari-Samaj will dominate the Harijans and they will become slaves of Pujaris. Hence it is highly necessary that great emphasis must be laid on the educational and economic aspects of the progress. Inter-caste marriage and inter-dining must be on the programme of the movement.¹¹

While agreeing with the first line of the above cited resolution Gandhiji said: But uplift will not be complete without throwing open the temples. The throwing open of temples will be an admission of the religious equality of Harijans. Regarding the demand for inter-caste marriage and inter-dining, Gandhiji was not an unequivocal supporter of these. He did not want to provoke the wrath of Sanatanis on these issues. Even while agreeing with his own son’s inter-caste marriage, he tried to play down the obvious radical implications of the event. Such vacillations on the part of Gandhiji made him suspect in the eyes of radicals.

Apart from all these things Babasaheb had more fundamental difficulties with the Gandhian model, and these can be summed up as follows. Since Gandhiji saw the Movement to eradicate untouchability as a sacred ritual of self-purification, it had placed a great deal of moral responsibility on the caste Hindu self. A profound ethical halo would envelop which would almost look spiritual. This would in turn generate awe in the minds of Harijans who were attracted towards Gandhiji and the Congress – and this was precisely what happened during the pre-Independence days.

The agony of the spiritual cleansing of the Hindu self leading to self-purification had acquired tones of public grandeur, and in a subtle way though, led to the glorification of the individual self. The Gandhian tales of sacrifice, courage and struggle against the Hindu orthodoxy almost became a household talk in those areas where nationalist struggle was popular. In other places it acquired a legendary character inviting both ridicule and veneration. The Gandhian grit and determination generated gratitude in the hearts of Harijans. Even the Sanatanis were not left untouched. Being deeply moved by the epic fast of Gandhiji for the great Harijan cause a Sanatani Brahmin in U.P. even cleaned the latrines of a Government primary school before a big crowd of people in Dilkhuva on 18 May 1933.

The guilt-ridden Hindu self badly needed the untouchables to expiate its guilt. The heroic stature of the caste-Hindu reformer further dwarfed the Harijan personality. Literatures of our languages are full of such complex and yet moving encounters, and it can be safely said that this is one of the central themes of Indian literature which was produced during the phase of nationalism.

The grandeur, the agony, the moving romanticism of the Gandhian project of self-purification also came be seen as its Achilles’ heel, but it had succeeded in creating a leadership among Harijans who felt grateful. Interestingly, not all Harijans were moved by the Gandhian act. There were enough critics and doubters who were more than keen to present a realistic assessment of the programme. Not surprisingly Harijan itself (March 4, 1933) carries such a critical piece which acts as a counter-point to Gandhian idealism. The untouchable correspondent portrays the relationship between the caste Hindu reformer and Harijans on these lines.

All have to come to us as patrons. Hardly has anyone come as friend and equal, let alone as servant. Your provincial organisation is no exception. It is difficult for a Harijan to approach its chiefmen without fear and trembling.

Gandhiji had agreed with the bitter tenor of the correspondent’s argument and conceded that there is a tendency towards self-glorification, but in the end he upheld the correctness of the path he had advocated.

In the intensely moving romantic tragedy of self-purification (à la Martin Greene) there was scope for only one hero, that is, Gandhiji himself. Extend the metaphor further, it is the ultimate celebration of a hero’s capacity to suffer spiritual isolation. But, unfortunately, the script could only be staged by caste Hindu incarnations of Gandhiji. He himself wrote to admit that ‘What mattered was not so much the entry of Harijans to temples as the conversion of the orthodox to the belief that it is wrong to prevent Harijans from entering temples’ – this is that famous or notorious ‘conversion of heart’ theory. The radical critics accused that the heart of the caste Hindu was scattered all over – in land, wealth, property, socio-political power, and unless you transformed these, it was difficult to effect the conversion of heart of caste Hindus. In the early months of 1933 Gandhiji could never agree with such a position but he reflected on it quite deeply.

Even philosophically, the Gandhian model provided the caste
Hindu self with much textured interiority, and what generated the real
tensions was the way it initiated the self-conscious Hindu reformer into
the sacred ritual of confrontation against the orthodoxy. There was very
little scope for the Congress Harijan leader to develop interesting and
useful models of praxis from within. That was the basic limitation of
the text: Sugreeva, Hanumantha and Guha can never aspire to act the
major part displacing the hero in the Ramayana. Only Rama is the
hero and Ambedkar could never settle for the roles of Hanumantha
and Sugreeva.

It is quite difficult to say whether Gandhiji had visualised the nature
of the fallout of the practice of self-purification. The Congress Harijan
leadership turned out to be quite soft and pliable – the two qualities
that are quite pleasing to the hegemonic forces of traditional village
society. The paradox was that Gandhiji challenged and sought to shake
the very foundations of Hindu society, but the Congress Harijans did
not pose any real threat to the social and cultural establishment. The
awed leadership remained pious Hindus by and large. Because of this,
unfortunately, many admirable qualities like for instance, their moral
integrity, incorruptibility, rootedness in the community, and strong
common sense of senior generation of Gandhian Harijans came to be
disregarded. It was even satirised by the new generation of Dalits.

The tragedy of the Gandhian project of penance was that it came
to mean different things to different people. For the idealist caste-Hindu
it was a cross he had to inevitably bear, for the angry Dalit it was
a subtle way of domestincating the radical energy of humiliated
communities, and lastly for the conservative Hindu forces it eventually
meant, although after a great deal of resistance, a difficult exercise in
repressive tolerance.

Babasaheb had no other option but to reject the Gandhian model.
He had realized that this model had successfully transformed Harijans
as objects in a ritual of self purification, the ritual being performed by
those who had larger heroic notions of their individual selves. In the
theatre of history, in a play of such a script, the untouchables would
never become heroes in their own right, they are just mirrors for a
hero to look at his own existentialist angst and despair, maybe even
glory.

Gandhiji had staked his entire life on the question of untouchability,
and that too for tackling it in a particular way. It is fundamentally
a matter of religious right. Ambedkar opposed this, as discussed earlier,
right from the beginning. In fact, Gandhiji's previous fast was
undertaken to resist other modes of tackling the same question. The
importance of his second epic fast in May, 1933 has to be understood
against this background. In the context of the first fast, the aims and
objectives were clear: they were directed against the attempts to
translate the problem of untouchables into the parlance of modern day
democratic processes in a colonial context. Such translation, Gandhiji
seriously believed, could eventually prevent the 'natural growth' of the
suppressed classes and would remove the incentive to make honorable
amends from the suppressors. Such a position itself is a product of
a firm belief in an organic community which is essentially different from
a modern democratic society. The very notion of an organic community
– a favourite theme in the post Enlightenment European thought – had
special appeal for Gandhiji, and he thought that contradictions of this
society are not irreconcilable. In the framework of an organic community
there is scope for natural resistance which leads to equally natural ways
of solving a problem. Such an arrangement would not wreck the fabric
of a given society. Ambedkar totally disagreed with this position and
its strategies for social transformation. In his letter to A V Thakker, he
had clearly stated his perspective on the matter in question in 1932:
civil rights and equal opportunity in economic matters and social
intercourse. Gandhiji's first fast was precisely against this.

In his first statement regarding his second fast (May, 1933)
Gandhiji had specifically declared that it was particularly against himself.
He explains the background of the tempest that was raging within him
which was insistent on an unconditional and irrevocable fast for twenty
one days.

During all these months since September last, I have been studying the
correspondence and literature and holding prolonged discussions with men and
women, learned and ignorant, Harijans and non-Harijans. The evil is far greater
than I had thought it to be. It cannot be eradicated by money, external organisation
and even political power for Harijans, although all these three are necessary. But
to be effective, they must follow or at least accompany inward health, inward
organisation and inward power. In other words, self-purification; this can only come
by fasting and prayer. We may not approach the God of Truth in the arrogance
of strength, but in the meekness of the weak and the helpless.

But the mere fast of the body is nothing without the will behind it. It must
be a genuine confession of the inner fast, and irresistible longing to express
truth and nothing but truth. Therefore those only are privileged to fast for the cause
of truth who have worked for it and who have love in them even for opponents,
who are free from animal passion and who have abjured earthly possessions and
ambition.23

This statement is rich because of its undercurrents and the
complexity of the suggested meanings. When Gandhiji says that it
will not be eradicated by money, external organisations and even political power, he is translating Dr Ambedkar into the language of spiritualists, as they see such efforts to achieve material progress. The ideas of economic opportunities are translated as money, civil rights; and social intercourse as political power. Incidentally, these three have been defined as major priorities for Ambedkar. Translating the other viewpoint, even while debating, is usually a tricky job, and this is where traditional Indian opponents are mutilated beyond recognition. But here Gandhi excels in his job as a demolition expert without resorting to subtle exercises in logic: he does it just by reducing the other viewpoint to its essentials. But in this context he doesn’t use the ‘reductio ad absurdum’ method, for Gandhi was never known to use *vitanda vada* to further his arguments. If Prof. B K Matilal were to write a history of those who used *vitanda* in the twentieth century he could not have found an uncontested place for Bapu in it. In any case Lenin would have topped the list, for he had acquired talents for dialectical thinking from the Guru, Marx himself. (Many writers on Indian philosophy including Prof. Matilal translate *vitanda* as dialectical method).

Nevertheless, Gandhi achieves the same Nagarjunian goal but by a different route: by reducing it to essentials the other viewpoint is trivialized. The trivialization seems deadly because it denies the legitimacy of spiritual reasons that Ambedkar gave to strengthen his dissent. The point is that Gandhi chose to ignore that dimension of Ambedkar’s personality. According to Gandhi, the materialist approach was the weakness of his adversary and for Ambedkar spirituality was the weakness of Gandhi: apparently these exclusivist positions concealed the simultaneous existence of both materialist and spiritual viewpoints in both of them. It was quite a decisive question in defining the parameters of the conflict. The line cited below suggests both the firm conviction and willingness to learn from the encounter. In it, Gandhi, a victor in the recently concluded battle, solemnly admits, ‘one may not approach the God of truth in the arrogance of strength’; hence the long consultations with others, but the opponent is very much there although he too is to be loved.

I think this is the crucial difference between the two epoch-making fasts: in the first one Gandhi wanted to win, in the second, he was seeking truth. Arrogance of strength had disappeared in him or the purpose of the fast was to fight it. The transformation of the external conflict into an internal one was complete. This was the moment of illumination where the distinction between inner and external worlds disappears.

One can compare this experience of Gandhi with the brilliant poetic passages of the Marathi classic *Jnaneshwari* which describes the state of Arjuna when confronted with *Vishwaroopadarshana* of Krishna. I am using this exaggerated analogy (*uprekshalankara*) only to highlight the complexity of the experience.

From a different angle, Renford Bambrough in one of his Wittgensteinian essays, considers the meaning of such situations and reflects on some of the central themes they throw up.

That the philosopher who is alone in his room, meditating, confessing, engaging in criticism and self-criticism can be at the same time in contact and in conflict with others in the Academy, in the Agora, in the temple.²⁴

Such conflict – is it internal or external? – is resolved by the conversion from the one side to another of the person who is the scene and the subject of the conflict. Here my purpose is to show that this was precisely what had happened with Gandhi. At this stage let me confess to the secret of my methodology, for I have adopted the working patterns of metaphor and imagination which bring together undisclosed affinities.²⁵ One is forced to give up the method of natural and social sciences where the examination of verifiable evidence leads to scientific conclusions. But metaphors and metaphorical reading work differently: they don’t organize material in a system-making method. They take a leap and illuminate a truth defying all worldly logic, and this meaning could not have been reached through the route of normal social sciences. The great Kannada poet Bendre describes the birth of metaphor in these lines: “Flights of fancy rode on the back of the bee/ Rhythms were borne to wings of the sharpening wind. A lightning smile flashed and vanished”. The method of the social science is like the working of the earthworm; it painstakingly prepares the earth for the farmer. Well, the bee is a different species altogether.

III

Treat the May 1933 fast like the central metaphor in a narrative poem: a whole range of images then start revolving around it. Particularly, the image of a Harijan boy who went to meet Gandhi in the evening at 6 o’clock on the 8th May, after waiting for some hours, keeps haunting. This puts the birth of the Dalit Movement in a totally different light. Mahadev Desai narrates this entire story with touching sincerity.²⁶ The boy had come to see Gandhi to seek his help about a scholarship; he was simply anxious to secure an assurance. The
boy had to pass through much misery and it was with difficulty that he had scraped together money to purchase a pair of sandals to come to the jail. Till this point I was more or less using the sentences of Mahadev Desai to tell the story with slight modifications. Now I will let Desai himself describe the rest:

"Well are you satisfied? I give you the assurance", he (Gandhiji) said to the boy. "No" said he covering Gandhiji's feet with the flowers he had brought. "Why should I ask others? Why I have no faith in them. I have only in you. Everyone else is insincere".

"But if all my associates are insincere", said Gandhiji, "then I must be the sincerest of them all. You had better not trust me either".

The boy had with courage kept on the feigned irony upto now but he now burst into tears.

"Why then are you leaving us? You yourself say that your associates are impure. There is no purity around you and you must fast yourself to death". He uttered these words sobbing.

"But why do you say I am leaving you? I am not"

"How can we believe it? He said with a fresh outburst of tears.

"I assure you, I am not going to die. Come along, we enter into a contract. On the noon of Monday 29th of May you come with an orange and I shall break my fast with its juice and then we shall talk about your scholarship. Are you satisfied?"

He beamed with joy, the tears had fled. "Yes" he said. "So you will keep the contract", said Gandhiji, every one including him filling the prison cell with laughter.

So ends the first part of the story. It was more than poetic justice that a Harijan boy would offer orange juice to break the epic fast which was undertaken for the cause of the untouchables. So the day arrived for which hundreds and thousands had prayed. Mahadev Desai had been expecting the Harijan boy who had entered into a contract with Gandhiji to offer orange juice. No, the boy did not turn up. Desai did not know his address either. The orange juice was supplied not by him but by the kind hostess, Lady Thackersey who perhaps felt the luckiest woman that day. Mark it, the orange juice was supplied by Lady Thackersey. Among those present on that solemn occasion were Prof. Wadia, Dr Ansari, Kaka Saheb, and Thakkar. The story is slowly abandoning its realist character and acquiring a symbolic note. It is becoming an image: to be fair to historical accuracy the door keeper had flung the doors open to all Harijans, and the first and only garland offered to Gandhiji before the break of the fast was that of a Harijan girl.

Well, why did the boy betray the contract? What happened? Let Desai, the truthful narrator, resume the story.

I have already told the readers that the Harijan youth who had been booked to see Gandhiji with an orange at midday, 29th May, had failed to keep the appointment. I was not quite happy about it for the simple reason that I felt in his place he should not have failed to do so. It was not without a pang that I told everyone that the newspaper story of the youth having come was false. But on the 1st of June I got a letter (postage due) in which the youth complained that he did come but that he had failed to gain admittance. I immediately asked him to come with an orange although it was too late. He came and told me that he could not come at noon on the 29th because he was employed somewhere during the college vacation, but that he came late in the evening when he was not admitted. Next day he told me the true story which should make us all think and feel the moral ruin that the cancer of untouchability has wrought. He said he had come during the fast once or twice and had followed the progress of the fast with anxious interest, but on the last day his courage had failed him. He felt that he was too humble an individual to be admitted to the function that day; he also feared that his good fortune (if he came and was advertised by the newspaper) would excite the envy of some of his fellows and he might lose the little he had. It was a strange mixture of feelings which had overcome him. But all of them are to be traced to the brand of untouchability that he bore. He had not hesitated to come twice to the jail and send in his name to be admitted as an untouchable visitor, but on an occasion of this kind he felt that he lacked the strength to take hold of the luck that had appeared before him. It is we who are responsible for fostering this feeling of undue self-abasement (Harijan, June 10, 1933).

The way Mahadev Desai reads the story reveals the inability of a certain kind of sentimental Gandhians to understand the complexity of the educated Dalit psyche. What is seen as lack of strength by Desai could as well be profound uneasiness regarding the nature of the whole Gandhian enterprise. Desai talks about abstract historical forces that have shaped the Harijan boy, but the boy is responding to the concrete situation that is glaring at him in the present. Desai gets sentimental and loses his capacity to notice the existence of many subtle and crude ironies of the situation, he doesn't even see the tragic gap that exists between the master and his disciples. Right from the beginning the boy has retained his sense of irony and discrimination and he also knew that what was tragic with the master had easily degenerated into farce with his shishyas. By lying, the boy was trying to protect himself from the danger of becoming an object of holy pity. The guilt of the past can humiliate its own source in the present. Metaphorically speaking, the Harijan boy who took a decision not to keep the appointment with Gandhiji was reborn as a Dalit youth. In a different sense on that fateful afternoon, like Desai, he too came to the conclusion that there was no difference between Gandhiji and his followers. Ambedkar says that Gandhiji's enthusiasm for the Temple Entry Movement petered out in the thirties itself. The book "What the Congress and Gandhiji have done to the Untouchables" has a couple of angry and ironical passages regarding this. At the level of
concrete historical evidence what Ambedkar says is true and one can notice a definite shift in the orientation of the programme by Gandhians. In an issue of Harijan (December 28, 1935), C Rajagopalachari had even declared: "untouchability is not yet gone. But the revolution is really over, and what remains is but the removal of the debris. The monster has been killed". The naivety of this position is amazing, and this coming from a shrewd, intellectual politician like C R makes it more mysterious.

There is sufficient evidence to prove that Ambedkar and Gandhiji had transformed each other. The latter extended the very scope and definition of the Harijan cause. It was no more a question of mere untouchability. It had become a larger holistic understanding of the untouchables. Because of the confrontation both of them had changed their emphasis: to put it crudely, Gandhiji had taken over economics from Babasaheb. Ambedkar had internalised the importance of religion. Gandhiji adopted the primacy of economic uplift, which was intelligently argued by non-Gandhian Dalits, and treated it as a question of rejuvenation of village India. In other words, Gandhiji sought to achieve a holistic philosophy of life having the Harijan question as the fulcrum, but the shift was construed as the conclusion of a successful revolution. Gandhiji himself explains the expansion of the scope of Harijan cause (December 21, 1934).

Some readers have taken exception to the way in which the columns of "Harijan" are being occupied with the development of the village industries scheme, and some other have welcomed the change in what they had thought was a monotony of presentation. Either opinion is probably hasty. Any problem connected with the welfare of village as a whole must be intimately related to the Harijans, who represent over a sixth part of India's population. If a village gets good rice and flour, Harijans will benefit by the change as much as the rest of the population. But there is a special sense in which Harijans will benefit. Tanning and the whole of the raw hide work is their monopoly and economically this will occupy the best part of the new scheme.27

Such issues have formed the basis of the Ambedkar-Gandhiji encounter. But from the viewpoint of the present, there is a compelling necessity to achieve a synthesis of the two. They clash, quite bitterly at that, at the level of major details but are complementary at a fundamental level. It is not an easy task to iron out the difference between two masters, but the necessities of the present are forcing us to see their inner commonality. This is a hermeneutical task of refuting the extremist positions which pose themselves as mutually exclusive and even threaten to cancel out each other. To describe the situation using the Buddhist dialectic method of Nagarajuna – both Gandhian and Ambedkarite positions had hardened themselves and they could not see the true nature of reality.

In the final analysis, what do we learn from Gandhiji which is of central relevance to the Dalit Movement today? The liberation of the untouchable is organically linked to the emancipation of village India, and the vice versa is equally true. In this context the Gandhian merger of the Harijan cause with the regeneration of the entire village has a great deal of relevance, but this enthusiasm has to be slightly altered from the Dalit perspective since village India is also seen virtually as holes of hell by the untouchables. But there is no other alternative. One should transform it totally as a livable and humane place. In other words, Gandhian endorsement of village India has to be whetted by the Ambedkarite scepticism; this is particularly essential regarding certain strategies of economic empowerment of Harijans that Gandhiji suggests. The Khadi programme was taken up in an ambiguous way by Gandhiji because simple weaving was almost an exclusive speciality of Harijans (Harijan Oct. 27, 1933).28 One need not take these ideas literally. The best way is to take them as a model of economic rejuvenation of the entire village economy with special emphasis on lower castes and untouchables. There are areas suggested by Gandhiji in his village reconstruction programme where his idealisation of the rural society ignores the working of the caste ethos: one such programme is village tanning, and Gandhiji places a great deal of emphasis on this most useful and indispensable industry (Harijan, September 7, 1934).29 Such ideas just cannot be accepted. The Ambedkarite insistence on the historic necessity for Dalits to give up such jobs is more realistic and radical in its implications.

In the caste Hindu mind tanning is inerasably linked with the untouchables, and that is one of the major sources of cultural stigma. Harijans need not be delinked from villages. In fact one of the surest ways of empowering is to privilege them with independent means of subsistence. But achieving this end through means of tainted professions will be counterproductive from the viewpoint of Dalits. As suggested earlier, one should take the village-centred vision of Gandhiji and treat it with Ambedkarite distrust of the rural society to cure its romantic excesses. The lower castes in India have nowhere else to go, and their will to transform the existing rural society should be strengthened. Gandhiji weaved a whole complex network of political, economic, social and spiritual ideas around the central question of Harijans; Dalit Movement today is compelled to undertake an identical task. Forces of international capital will seek to destroy rural India.
Along with it the lower castes are going to be maimed economically, culturally and socially.

To conclude, in what way was Ambedkar transformed by Gandhiji? Babasaheb had always opposed to treat the question of untouchability as a religious question; he accepted the primacy of religion in the matter. He did to religion what Gandhiji did to the idea of economic uplift. It is a pattern of acceptance and altering the same. Religion is the crucial thing, true. Give up Hinduism itself was the Ambedkarite alteration. The 1935 Yeola Declaration of Ambedkar that he would not die a Hindu was an act of recognizing the legitimacy of the Gandhian mode although rejecting the choice in which solution was sought. Economic uplift is the effective remedy, true; let us rejuvenate the entire village not the selective mobility: such was the Gandhian transformation of the Ambedkarite idea. Even regarding the caste system Gandhiji had to change his soft approval of it: in the Harijan issue of November 16, 1935, he simply declared that caste has to go much to the consternation of his orthodox supporters. He even criticised the cruel restrictions on inter-dining and inter-caste marriage, a refreshing change compared to his earlier vacillation regarding these.

Needless to mention at this stage that both Gandhiji and Ambedkar can and should be made complementary to each other. Surely such efforts will be met with stiff opposition from hardened ideologues and researchers, and they are bound to unearth fresh evidence to fuel the fire between the two. One way of fighting such tendencies, apart from pointing out the political necessity of such hermeneutic exercise, is to file a philosophical caveat highlighting the notion of ontological difference to distinguish between contingent details of historical fact and the truth of a deeper historical concern. At the level of deeper historical truth the conflicting fact disappears to reveal the underlying unity. The theoretical project of this entire book draws its sustenance from the notion of ontological difference. In this case accepting and examining the difference leads to the truth of dynamic unity.

Notes and References


2. For an understanding of reform and protest movements among the lower castes, readers can refer to the following studies, and I have made allusive references to them in my study.


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4. S Chandrashekar, Nationalism in South India (unpublished monograph, Department of History, Bangalore University, Bangalore). This work has a detailed discussion on non-Brahmin Movements in South India.


11. ibid, p.3.

12. Rammanohar Lohia, The Caste System, (Hyderabad, Samata Vidyalaya Nivas, sec. rpt.) This entire book is an evidence to the theoretical affinity between Lohia and Ambedkar.

13. See for a discussion of Gandhiji’s critique of modern civilization

14. These concepts arose in a discussion with my friend Dr Satya Goutam of Chandigarh University on the possibility of using Wittgensteiin categories to study such situations.

15. For a study of the Temple Entry Movements in Maharashtra and Gujarat see; Makaranand Mehta, The Dalit Temple Entry Movements in Maharashtra and Gujarat 1930-48 (a paper presented at the previously cited IAS seminar).


17. See for an Advaithin reading of Gandhiji; Ramachandra Gandhi “God is Truth” in Ramashraya Roy (ed) Contemporary Crisis and Gandhi (Delhi, Discovery Publishing House, 1996) pp.31-43.


19. ibid, p.36.

20. In fact, M C Rajah, the respected leader of the depressed classes in South India, clashed with C Rajagopala Chari on this question; being in power CR was more cautious, but Rajah was keen to move his private bill regarding temple entry, and it was defeated in the end. For an interesting discussion of the issue see S Krishna Swamy, The Role of Madras Legislature in the Freedom Struggle 1861-1947 (Delhi).


22. ibid, March 4, 1933, p.7.

23. ibid, May 6, 1933, p.1.


Works of Paul Ricoeur are of immense interest in this regard.
26. If put together what Mahadev Desai has written on this untouchable boy, it will read like a short story which is pregnant with multiple meanings. See Harijan, Vol-1 - issues from May 13 to June 1933 for the entire story I have narrated in the body of this chapter.


28. Ibid., Vol-1, October 27, 1933, p.4.

29. Ibid., Vol-11, September 7, 1934 p.236.

30. Lacoue-Labarthe uses this concept of ontological difference while defending Heidegger against attacks launched by many writers including Adorno who argued that the much celebrated German philosopher's thought is 'fascist right down to its inner most components'. See Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art and Politics trans. Chris Turner (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990). Clarification of a point will be in order here: I am more interested in using this particular notion of 'ontological difference' rather than endorsing the author's defence of Heidegger. I am equally fascinated by Lacoue-Labarthe's ideas regarding the quite complex relation between politics, aesthetic categories and philosophy. See Lacoue-Labarthe, Typographie: Mimesis Philosophy, Politics, Christopher Fyynsk (ed), (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

CHAPTER 2

Violence on Dalits and The Disappearance of the Village

Two clearly identifiable patterns emerge if one analyses the all too frequent attacks on Dalits. The first is related to the notion of justice that the village society has. The second is a consequence of the efforts made by Dalits to secure new rights which the traditional society refuses to concede. The two patterns of violence are not necessarily different, although they have separate origins. The first form of attack gives birth to a new consciousness among Dalits, and is usually the confirmation of their worst fears regarding the true nature of caste-Hindu society. The second form of violence is a sharp Hindu reaction to the birth of a new awareness and the consequent beginning of a new form of social presence registered by Dalits: the first pattern of violence shapes a struggle and eventually a movement, while the second one is an expression of a proto-movement.

Let us give a close reading of the first form of violence. In this case, when the behaviour of a single individual or a group of Dalits differs from and challenges traditionally accepted notions of morality, norms of social behaviour and rules related to love and sex, the caste-Hindu society takes it as grave violation of its ethics and punishes the alleged offenders severely. The notions and practices of justice of the rural Hindu society are organically linked to the ethos of the caste system. Equally important is the fact that the structure of justice rests on the consensus of the entire village, which could also mean the unchallenged rule of upper castes. Against this background, Dr Ambedkar rejected the village as the basic unit of justice.

Remember the speeches and interventions he made during the debates on the Panchayat Bill in Bombay legislature; this is where he decisively differs from the Gandhian idea of gram panchayat. Gandhiji had accepted and passionately upheld the consensus approach to justice that the Indian village had practised. Unfortunately he did not give sufficient importance to the gap between the mechanism of justice and its content in terms of the values of the caste system. It is true that traditional ways of settling disputes are more efficient than their modern day counterparts, but the ethos of the practice is firmly rooted in the unquestionable acceptance of the caste system. Ambedkar had