GANDHI'S NOW LITTLE-KNOWN CRITIQUE
OF THE FOUR-FOLD Varna ORDER

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Gandhi's critics had argued at the time that he was carrying out his campaigns against untouchability, that it would go only when caste was destroyed. It is not generally known that Gandhi moved to this position in the mid-1940s. It is also generally understood that while Gandhi opposed untouchability and criticised caste, he defended 'varnayavastha', the fourfold varna order. This is not entirely correct over the entire Gandhian trajectory. Gandhi's own critique of the varna order, which unfurled over time, is usually overlooked by scholars.

Gandhi had said to Sri Lankans in 1927 that if India could take pride "in having sent you Mahinda and the message of the Buddha to this land, it has also to accept the humiliation of having sent you the curse of caste distinctions." By the early 1930s, Gandhi had declared that caste, that is, the endogamous sociological category, of which there are hundreds, if not thousands, was "a handicap on progress" and "a social evil" and, by the 1940s, that it was "an anachronism" which "must go".

Since Gandhi distinguished the caste system from 'chaturvarna', the scriptural fourfold varna order of hereditary occupational divisions, his still unfolding critique of the fourfold order has often been overlooked. This critique is ignored especially by contemporary scholars, partly perhaps because of the traditionalist nature of the concepts with which it deals. Such oversight is unfair to Gandhi's dalit critics as well as to his dalit supporters; for his interaction with both ? exemplified by B R Ambedkar and Jagjivan Ram ? had no doubt contributed to the evolution of Gandhi's positions.

Gandhi incrementally unfurled a critique of the fourfold varna order, taking the concept of such an order in the end, by the mid-1940s, to vanishing point. Even in the early years, while defending the fourfold order, Gandhi said that it was not observed in his own circle: "In the ashram, however, from the beginning, it has been our rule not to observe the varnayavastha because the position of the ashram is
different from that of the society outside."6

Later, in 1927, Gandhi declared that "if varnashrama goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear."7

He knew the struggle against old ingrained practices would be long. Let us fight untouchability, he says open-endedly, and we'll cross the other bridge later. In February 1933, he gave what he then saw as practical reasons: "At the present moment, it is the 'untouchable', the outcaste, with whom all Hindu reformers, whether they believe in varnashrama or not, have agreed to deal. The opposition to untouchability is common to both. Therefore, the present joint fight is restricted to the removal of untouchability... It is highly likely that at the end of it we shall all find that there is nothing to fight against in varnashrama. If, however, varnashrama even then looks an ugly thing, the whole of Hindu society will fight it... At the end of the chapter, I hope that we shall all find ourselves in the same camp. Should it prove otherwise, it will be time enough to consider how and by whom varnashrama is to be fought."8 Gandhi's sequencing did not, at this point, synchronise with Ambedkar's. But it is clear that Gandhi did not, even at this stage, rule out a later struggle against the fourfold varna order.

**First Salvo Attack**

In April 1933, Gandhi declared on the basis of some authoritative texts that varna could not be perpetuated or determined merely by birth. He argues: "These and numerous other verses from the shastras unmistakeably show that mere birth counts for nothing."9 This formulation was Gandhi's first salvo attack on the concept of varna. It did not repudiate birth as a criterion for varna; yet it took away the conclusive element attached to birth. From now onwards it is inaccurate and erroneous to say merely that Gandhi defended the fourfold varna order or varnashrama.

During Gandhi's all-India anti-untouchability tour of 1933-34, he was opposed virulently by Hindu orthodoxy. His car was stoned in Bihar. In Benaras he was met with black flags. There was an attempt on his life in Pune. A lethal bomb was hurled and several persons were injured. Pune was the heartland of Hindutva opposition to Gandhi. It was one of the cities which nurtured his future assassin. In Oc-
ober 1933, before launching out on the tour, Gandhi said that the Jains must vehemently stress the fact that their religion knows no varnashramadharma. "They must emphatically tell the people that untouchability and the present-day varnadharma have no place in Jainism, after first convincing themselves about it." These are clearly not the words of one who is smug about the varna system.

He could not accept, he said in 1934, that in his religion "there should be a single human being considered lower than myself." In 1935, Gandhi described the restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining imposed in relation to the varna system as "cruel."

He had stood especially for the 'bhangis', considered the weakest section of the dalits. He was therefore conscious of hierarchies among dalits themselves. The scheduled castes, he said in 1937, "cannot be expected to appreciate and accept ex-cathedra usages that discriminate between savarnas and avarnas and between the different groups among the avarnas themselves, as these smack of invidiousness and offend against reason."

In 1945, Gandhi's positions against the fourfold varna order become more emphatic. He discards some previous formulations, including those on hereditary occupations. In a new foreword to an older Gujarati language compilation of articles on the subject, he invites the reader "to discard anything in this book which may appear to him incompatible" with his latest formulations. He looks beyond this aspect of the Gita, saying now that:

But there prevails only one varna today, that is of shudras, or you may call it, ati-'shudras', or harijans or untouchables. I have no doubt about the truth of what I say. If I can bring round the Hindu society to my view, all our internal quarrels will come to an end.

The thought recurs, being sometimes formulated not descriptively but normatively, expressing the view that this single category situation should be made to prevail.

Interestingly, it is in 1945 that Gandhi says, in reversal of his earlier understanding that untouchability could be fought separately from caste and the fourfold varna order, that "castes must go if we want to root out untouchability." Thus he had now veered round to Ambedkar's line on
Meanwhile, persistent with the one varna idea, Gandhi observed in April 1946: "I have of late been saying that the Hindus have to become ati-shudras not merely in name but in thought, word and deed.\(^\text{17}\) Returning to the theme the following month in Mussoorie, he burns the conceptual candle at both ends. For now the notion of repudiating one's varna enters Gandhi's mind:

I myself have become a harijan by choice... A harijan by birth may repudiate his varna but how can I who have become a harijan by choice? I have not hesitated to suggest to caste Hindus that today they have all to become ati-shudras, if the canker of caste feeling is to be eradicated from Hinduism and Hinduism is not to perish from the face of the earth.\(^\text{18}\)

And again in New Delhi: "If the caste Hindus would become bhangis of their own free will, the distinction between harijans and caste Hindus would automatically disappear. There are various divisions amongst the harijans too. They should all go. All should be of one caste, that is, the bhangi."\(^\text{19}\)

Speaking in July 1946, he encouraged marriages between dalits and others: "Finally there will be only one caste, known by the beautiful name bhangi, that is to say, the reformer or remover of all dirt. Let us all pray that such a happy day will dawn soon."\(^\text{20}\) Thus by 1945-46 Gandhi had denuded the conceptual category of varna implied in the Gita, both of its sociological implication and of its original connotation of fixed classes of humanity determined by birth and distinguished by four categories of occupations.

Gandhi's penultimate blows to the varna concept were delivered in February 1947. He now turned the category of varna upon itself by removing the foundation of the edifice of varna distinctions. Saying that caste must go if Hinduism is to survive, he went on: "There was room for varna, as a duty." According to him: "This was true of all religions whether the name used was other than varna. What was a Muslim 'maulvi' or a Christian priest but a brahmin if he taught his flock its true duty, not for money but because he possessed the gift of interpretation? And this was true of the other divisions."\(^\text{21}\) Significantly, the position of a
maulvi in Islamic society does not indicate any inherent superiority and does not necessarily pass hereditarily.

On the same occasion, the idea of hereditary occupations which was the essence of the fourfold varna order was laid to rest by Gandhi. Asked if he favoured inter-caste marriages and whether the monopoly of occupations of specific castes should be abolished, Gandhi reiterated his long-standing position in favour of inter-caste marriages and proceeded to say:

The question did not arise when all became casteless. When this happy event took place, monopoly of occupations would go.22

In a letter written around May 15, 1947 Gandhi observes in appreciation of Gautama Buddha that he "knew no caste and stood for perfect toleration".23

**On Terminology**

In 1927 and 1931 Gandhi had referred to the word "dalit" and even used it, while saying that the state to which it referred was so obnoxious that any word to describe it would be rejected after a while. He wrote that "dalit" was used "quite rightly" because the people to whom it referred were not "depressed" but "suppressed"; and "they became, and remain, what they are because they were suppressed by the so-called upper classes".24 Evidently, he would not have been surprised at his preferred term 'harijan' now fading out of use.

Gandhi knew the struggle was also political. Many dalits went to prison in Gandhi's campaigns against British rule. To them, Gandhi was the liberator and alien rule the established ally of their local oppressors. Social and economic oppression were connected and the colonial regime was upholding a highly inequitable land system which had contributed to the assetlessness of the dalits. As independence dawned, Gandhi spoke aloud about the "rule of the bhangis"25 and of a dalit girl becoming president of India, indeed the first president.26

In June 1947 Gandhi told the All India Congress Committee which was meeting in Delhi to discuss the partition of India:

...if you do away with the distinction of savarna and
avarna, if you treat the shudras, the untouchables and the adivasis as equals then something good will have come out of a bad thing. But if we oppress them and oppress those following other faiths then it will mean that we do not want India to survive, that we are out to destroy it.

Understandably, a leading socialist had observed in 1950 that Gandhi's assassination was an episode not merely in the Hindu-Muslim context; it was equally a result of the "bitterness" accumulating from his blows "against caste and for woman".

Gandhi's trajectory has been the subject of this essay. He was conscious of the vital need to take society with him, for merely taking an advanced position without having an impact on society held no attraction for him. He had told a questioner: "It is one thing for me to hold certain views and quite another to make my views acceptable in their entirety to society at large. My mind, I hope, is ever growing, ever moving forward. All may not keep pace with it. I have therefore to exercise utmost patience and be satisfied with hastening slowly."

His approach and method were well understood by many of his contemporaries. The famous atheist, G Ramachandra Rao, "Gora", for example, summed up in 1950:

This attitude and method of Gandhiji can be seen in his answers to questions at the meeting of the Harijan Sevak Sangh held on August 14, 1945. When he first undertook to remove untouchability, the problem of varna-dharma (caste system) was also there. It was easy to see intellectually, even then, that caste ought to go root and branch if untouchability was to be completely eradicated. But as a practical proposition, caste was not the immediate problem then. The problem was only the removal of untouchability. So he allowed caste to continue, though personally he observed no caste even then. Thus the work of the removal of untouchability progressed through the early stage, leaving the contradictions of the caste system untouched, and, therefore, without the complication of opposition from those who would resist the abolition of caste. When the stage had come where he found caste was a serious hindrance for further progress, Gandhiji said that caste ought to go root and branch and proposed not only inter-dining but inter-marriages as the means. A mere intellectual might read inconsistency in Gandhiji's tolerance of caste earlier and his denunciation of it later. But to a practical man of non-violent creed these are stages of
progress and not principles of contradiction.29

Gandhi’s positions against untouchability and caste were direct assaults and may be compared with Luther’s attacks on the church. On the fourfold order he moved more cautiously, somewhat like Erasmus.

Yet it is difficult to understand why Gandhi’s critique of the fourfold order is now so little known. This omission from scholarship at large is significant, as his earlier statements on the fourfold order have become, in writings on the subject especially since the 1980s, a primary ground for criticism of Gandhi’s position.

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Notes

The references to the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CW) published by the publications division, ministry of information and broadcasting, government of India, New Delhi (1958-1994) are to the original or standard edition.

1 Speech at Colombo, November 25, 1927; CW, Vol 35, p 318.
2 Young India, June 4, 1931; CW, Vol 46, p 302.
6 Letter to Khushalchand Gandhi, August 31, 1918; CW, Supplementary Vol VII, p 27.
7 Young India, November 24, 1927; CW, Vol 35, pp 522-23.
9 Harijan, April 15, 1933; CW, Vol 54, pp 410-11.
10 Answers to correspondents, before October 8, 1933, CW, Vol 56, p 69; and Letter to Haribhau Upadhyaya, October 8, 1933, CW, Supplementary Vol V, p 86.
12 'Caste Has To Go', Harijan, November 16, 1935; CW, Vol 62, p 122.
13 Harijan, February 20, 1937; CW, Vol 64, p 317.
21 Harijan, March 16, 1947; CW, Vol 86, p 484.
22 Idem.
23 Letter, After May 15, 1947; CW, Supplementary Vol V, p 137.
24 Navajivan, March 27, 1927, CW, Vol 33, p 196; and Navajivan, June 7, 1931, CW, Vol 46, p 342.
27 Speech at AICC Meeting, June 14, 1947; CW, Vol 88, p 156.