Gandhi's Philosophy:

To be born a Hindu in India means that a person enters the caste system, one of the longest standing means of stratification in society. This centuries old institution is based on the perception that all individuals are born unequal. In addition to the four well-known varnas, there also existed, and continues to exist, a fifth varna- the *Atishudras*- who have been constantly subjected to atrocities. Their rights have been campaigned for in several ways by several people. Perhaps the most interesting of these are Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar. Today we will be examining the conflict between the ideologies of these two people with regard to Untouchability. I will be talking about Gandhi's philosophy with regard to this.

A brief look at Gandhi's background and upbringing will help better understand his philosophy with respect to Untouchability.

Gandhi was born a Vaishya and grew up under a devout mother. So he absorbed very early in his life some of the influences that played an important role in his life. It was but natural that he imbibed Hindu principles and practiced them throughout his life. This included his belief that everyone was born equal.

When he was in London studying to be a Barrsiter, he came in contact with many members of the Theosophical Society who invited him to their readings of the Bhagvad Gita, of which he later wrote a commentary in Gujrati. I would like to point out that such experiences may have influenced his ideologies, including those with regard to the caste system and Untouchability, deeply.

Gandhi's ideas about the caste system and Untouchability may seem very idealistic or even illogical and irrational to some but I think it is possible to trace these back to the fact that he very closely followed what was laid down in the Gita. While he viewed the social stratification that was

the caste system as an integral part of Hinduism, he found Untouchability to be unacceptable. Chapter 4 of the Gita talks about the four fold caste structure while Chater 18 mentions the four castes. However, the Gita, though it talks about the inherent caste system, it also says that discrimination between classes must not exist. Which was why though Gandhi supported the existence of the four castes, he opposed Untouchability. What he failed to see was that the concep of Untouchablility was too deep-rooted within the caste system for one to exist without the other.

In an attempt to change this, Gandhi coined the term Harijan, which means Children of God, hoping that the use of the new term would change the attitude of the upper caste Hindus towards the *Atishudras*. He viewed Untouchability to be a sin within Hinduism and wanted upper caste Hindus to reform it. He believed that the upper caste Hindus could be changed by applying moral pressure from within the Hindu tradition. He once said, “If untouchability lives, Hinduism must die.”

It must be noted here that despite being a devout Hindu, Gandhi did not necessarily follow all the Hindu traditions. He described himself as a believer in sanatan dharma, or the idea of Hinduism as an eternal faith, and he similarly often declared his belief in the institution of varnashrama, or the idea that a well-regulated society is to be understood as a collection of varnas or of which performs the duty for which it is best fitted. These views appear to

place Gandhi firmly in the orthodox Hindu camp. Yet the fact remains that few

public figures of his time in India endeavored as much as Gandhi did to lessen the impact of

caste in Indian life and to erode the disabilities under which lower castes had labored for

tens of generations.

He believed that It is a wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste. He compared it to the destruction of a body because of an ugly growth in it or of a crop because of the weeds. The idea of the outcaste must be removed, if the whole system is not to perish. Untouchability is the product therefore, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is thus an attack upon this 'high-and-low' ness. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true Varnadharma, the four division of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each as necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other

His religious life was full of paradoxes.

I would like to illustrate this with a few examples from Gandhi’s life. Gandhi never visited temples as he felt that there was no need for a Hindu to visit temples in order to be a good Hindu. For a man who held such a belief, Gandhi fought for the rights of each person, Untouchables included, to visit temples.

Similarly, when some Hindus quoted the Manusmriti in support of orthodoxy, and the rigid separation of the castes, Gandhi unhesitatingly described a number of the verses as “apocryphal” and “meaningless”. He firmly believed that if one had to choose between the scriptures and his principles, and the scriptures appear unconscionable, one must always choose his principles.

Ambedkar’s Philosophy:

INTRO

Dalit, a term that has become synonymous with Untouchable, is the name that many Untouchables, especially politically aware individuals, have chosen for themselves. The name means "oppressed" and highlights the persecution and discrimination India's 160 million Untouchables face regularly. Dalit has largely come to replace Harijan, the name given to Untouchables by Gandhi. Dalits were discriminated against in several ways, both social and religious. They were not permitted to enter into the temples that other caste groups worshipped in, and they were denied the right to read the religious scriptures, such as the Vedas. They were socially ostracised, and had to live in separate quarters outside the village. They were not allowed to use common wells, taps etc. as their sight and touch was considered polluting. There did not have the right to acquire wealth in the form of cattle or land, could only wear torn and soiled clothes, could not wear jewellery and had to have names that described ‘contempt’.

Ambedkar’s experience of Dalit Discrimination

Ambedkar was born into the Mahar community of Dalits. His family had been in the army for generations, and education was compulsory in the military, both is parents were literate. His father, Ramji Sakpal used his unique position to get his children admitted in school, something Dalit children did not have access to. He also encouraged the reading of the Scriptures. Even though he was admitted in school, Ambedkar still had to face constant discrimination in school. He was made to sit apart from the rest of his classmates, and his teachers refused to check his notebooks. He was not allowed to drink water from the common tap, and someone else, usually the school peon had to pour water from the tap from him. On days that the peon was absent, Ambedkar was forced to go thirsty. When Ambedkar passed the matriculation exam, there was great jubilation in the Dalit Community as he was one of the first Dalit students to do so. Later, with a scholarship from the Maharaja, Ambedkar pursued higher studies in Columbia University and later the London School of Economics, where he was exposed to Western ideals and thoughts.

IDEOLOGY

Ambedkar’s ideologies were based primarily on two core ideas- ideas that became the foundation of the Dalit movement. Firstly he believed that the rights of each individual are protected not by law but by social and moral conscience of society, and a democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society.

Similarly, he also believed that a religion must be one whose spiritual principles are governed by

Similarly, he also believed that a religion must be one whose spiritual principles are governed by morality, rationality and the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, which he felt were not present in Hinduism. Hence, he advocated the abolition of privileges on the basis of caste status and vigorously fought for the liberty and dignity of the individual. While Gandhi worked on the abolition of untouchability, Ambedkar aimed for a complete rework of the Brahmanical notion of the Hindu religion.

He believed that just abolishing untouchability would not change the social status of the Dalits. They would still remain at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar laid emphasis on the liquidation of hierarchical structure of society on the basis of Chaturvarna, to give every individual equal status to create a truly democratic society. He strived to create an egalitarian social order.

Soon, it became evident that the Dalits would never receive the rights they demanded and would remain oppressed within the existing social hierarchy. He then advocated a change in the Dalit identity. He placed Dalit demands outside the folds of Hinduism by converting to Buddhism, leading to a mass conversion by his followers. He did not ask for rights within the framework of the Hindu religion. He stepped outside the Hindu religion, and in that way separated the Dalit identity from the Hindu religion and in that way, made the Dalit struggle for rights independent.

Ambedkar believed that the Dalit community primarily needed to develop self-respect, something they lacked due to the years of oppression they faced. In order to achieve this, he advocated long term plan for changes in existing social, political and economic institutions in order to improve access to education for the Dalit community and thereby improving their livelihood opportunities. He felt that such measures would not only lead to a greater self-respect but also make the Dalits self-reliant, something they were unable to achieve in the previous caste hierarchy. Within such measures, he also advocated reservation for the Oppressed classes in educational institutions for a limited period of time in order to improve their social and economic status. He believed this measure should be discontinued once the Oppressed classes reached an equal platform, as they would be able to

The sources of Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s philosophies:

Gandhi and Ambedkar had two very different views when it came to the issue of untouchability. Gandhi had a reinforced belief in the Bhakti philosophy; i.e., believed in the caste system, the chaturvarna system, where society is divided on the basis of occupation, in order to maintain socia order, with the view that each faction has its own purpose in society, and must not go beyond its scope. He however, abhorred the practice of untouchability, calling it “an excess to be removed,” in order to “purify the caste system”.

In this sense, Gandhi was greatly influenced by Vivekananda’s ideas on caste in India. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) condemned the oppressive treatment of the so-called untouchables and other subordinate castes. He re-echoed contemporary Western ethnological themes in his remarks about the ‘natural differences of ability and character’ that separated persons of unlike Varna.

Vivekananda says that, “Caste is a natural order, I can perform one duty in social life and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for, can you mend my shoes? Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life.”

Gandhi believed that by giving the untouchables the identity of ‘harijan’, literally meaning the son of God, he has solved the problem of untouchability i.e., Gandhi's solutions to the caste problem were always religious and never political, the latter being the more important one.

Gandhi believed in *Antyodaya*, a concept meaning, ‘serving the last man in the queue’; implying that the welfare of all is through the weakest of the society and therefore, considered it the sacred duty of every hindu to uplift the plight of the Dalits whom he called the sons of god, Harijan. He believed that there can be no untouchability between one son and the other son of the same God. This was induced in the spirit with which Plato propounded his theory of Justice in the Republic. Both the Bhagvad Gita and the Republic talk about an inherent social hierarchy which cannot be breached; but discrimination between classes must not exist.

Ambedkar, on the other hand believed that the caste framework and hierarchy itself must be removed, and those considered the ‘untouchables’ must be empowered so as to achieve an equal standing in society. He created a new identity for this class of people, calling themselves the ‘dalits’, literally meaning, ‘the oppressed’.

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, an activist from Madras, founded the Self Respect movement which harshly criticised the caste system and the dominance of the Brahmins in the Hindu society. Ambedkar’s rigorous activism followed after these movements.

Another source of Ambedkar’s philosophy is the charbak literature. This school of thought is based on materialistic philosophy, i.e., the thought process which has a firm basis in reality and rationalism. it was the main contention of the brahminical texts that Brahmins were privy to a special knowledge which gave them a divine status; and it must be the aim of every other person to achieve the very same, and henceforth, used this knowledge to exercise power and control over all the other castes, especially those on the bottommost rung. The charbak philosophy questioned exactly this. It believed in rationalist. In fact, it goes on to call the three authors of the Vedas, buffoons, knaves, and demons.

Sant Ravidas, a humble chamar shoemaker of the 15th century became one of the most popular saints of northern india. He spearheaded the fight against mam-made discrimination based on caste, creed, colour and preached the lofty ideals of socialism, secularism, equality and fraternity. In fact, he became the spiritual advisor of princess Miroabai of Chittogarh. He carried his profession, and continued to preach his teachings.

Ambedkar regarded Buddhism as a much more rational religion compared to Hinduism, rather the most rational religion. His main objection to Hinduism was that it sanctified inequality and

untouchability through its doctrine of Chaturvarnya. Buddhism, on the other hand, rejected Chaturvarnya and supported equality. He commends Buddhism for rejecting god and soul and for emphasizing morality. According to him, prajna (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), karuna (love), and samata (equality), which Buddhism alone teaches, is all that human beings need for a "good and happy life".

Ambedkar understood religion in a historical dialectical way. He borrowed the tools of Marxism in understanding Indian history in this fashion. Buddhism had been considered as revolutionary strand against Brahminism and against the triumph of Brahminism. Moreover, he made a systematic attempt to bring in view the history of victims of Indian society, where one finds no trace of any historical evidence in official records or narratives of dominant brahminical class.

Why the dalits favoured Ambedkar's philosophy:

- Rejecting the **term** Harijan:
  - No belief in the concept of 'God'.
  - Becoming at one with thee higher castes solved no problems
  - Couldn't wait for Durjanas to repent; but became proactive.
  - The caste framework will stand; only the practice of untouchability will be abolished
- Rejecting the **person**: Gandhi failed to become an accepted leader
  - To start with, Gandhi was pious Hindu
  - Couldn't place trust in Gandhi, as he came from the upper class
  - Supported the Caste system by not eradicating the existing hierarchy.
  - Weren't willing to be embrace the Dharma values of being a Harijan, as the caste system itself was a dharma principle
- Rejecting the **faith** itself

Ambedkar's vision and the reality today.

"Dalit" (Oppressed) is the name which the people belonging to those castes at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy have given themselves. Formerly, they were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. The official label for them has been Scheduled Castes, because if their caste is listed on the government schedule, caste members become eligible for a number of affirmative action benefits and protections. Dalits have chosen the "Dalit" label for themselves for at least three important reasons. First, the label indicates that the condition of the Dalits has not been of their own making or choosing; it is something which has been infl icted upon them by others. Thus, secondly, there is an element of militancy built into the label; Dalits seek to overcome the injustices and indignities forced upon them so as to gain the equality and respect hitherto denied them. "Dalit also indicates that all these castes (Pariahs, Chamars, Mahars, Bhangis, etc.) share a common condition and should therefore unite in a common struggle for dignity, equality, justice and respect under a common name.

Both historically and currently Dalits have adopted three main strategies, singly or in combination, in order to attain these ends. Economic, religious and political

Economic:

More than half of India's Dalit popluation lives below the poverty line and is heavily dependent on the upper castes for their livelihood as agricultural or urban labourers. Economic independence is therefore an end in itself and also a means to other ends like political power and better education. A number of grassroots dalit organizations have been engaged in a number of community development activities which focus on such things as small-scale industries, teaching new skills, educating Dalits on how to take advantage of government schemes, developing cooperatives etc. However, the Dalits still continue to face opposition from the dominant castes in rural areas who do not want to lose their source of cheap labour.

Religious:

There have been attempts to bring about reforms within the religion Eg. Some Hindu sects have renounced caste hierarchy and Hindu reformers like Gandhi have sought to end Untouchability. The more radical option has been to convert into a more egalitarian religion. Over the past 125 years, so many Dalits have converted to Christianity that today a majority of the Christian population in India is Dalit. Several million more Dalits have followed Dr. Ambedkar and have become Buddhists. The idea behind such a conversion was that it would offer the Dalits a new identity based on religion rather than caste. However, this has not been successful as we now have Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits who are not only discriminated against but are also denied the affirmative action benefits and protections granted to other Dalits.

Political:

Dr. Ambedkar believed that the Dalits could uplift themselves by gaining political power and worked to make it accessible for them. However, the future that he envisaged seems to be reluctant to materialise into reality. Political empowerment was intended to be the key to social and economic empowerment. There are a sizeable number of Dalit representatives in the political arena but, they have failed to bring about social change and uplift the community. There is undoubtedly something wrong in the movement which needs to be identified.

One possible explanation would be that of the Dalits within the Dalits. The Dalit communtiy in India is divided into a number of castes and sub-castes within itself with about 56% of the population belonging to 20 dominant castes amongst them. These dominant castes are the ones who primarily benefit from the privileges provided to the Dalits. Even Ambedkar had been unable to unify them as a result of which his influence was limited to his caste, the Mahars of Maharashtra. This is like a creation of a caste of 'Brahmins' within the dalits who are exploiting the actual dalits. Despite sounding like a paradox, it is the reality.

Ambedkar wanted to annihilate caste system not by revenge, hatred and violence, but by rethinking, reason and reformation. He, therefore, taught untouchables “To organize, educate and agitate” with an aim to finishing caste prejudices, the arrogance, and the“Holier than thou’ attitude of Brahmins. He wanted his people to improve their condition by education, enlightenment and enterprise. His name is now used ruthlessly by his followers who want to glorify the caste status and their oppression and continue to incite Dalits against the caste Hindus without any effort at the emotional integration that is essential for the upliftment of their community. (the caste hindus are becoming more aware of the evils of the caste system and there has been a gradual shift in their mindset which has become more open to the integration of the Dalits into the society. There can be a social reform by which everone will get a chance at a dignified life. But, this continual inciting of caste hatred nullifies it.)

ANOTHER ISSUE THAT DESERVES MENTION WITH REGARDS TO THE CASTE SITUATION IN INDIA IS THE NEW, GLAMOURIZED POSITION THAT BEING BACKWARD NOW OCCUPIES IN THE MINDS OF PEOPLE.

• Reservation was introduced for a duration of 10 years at the end of which it was to be removed. The objective was to create a level playing field. However, due to various political and social reasons, the 10 years has stretched to 60 and being backward was never so popular. Ambedkar realized that SC and ST would not be able to stand on their own feet, so long as they depended on the crutches of Reservation. □gReservation,□h Dr. Ambedkar said,□gEncouraged backwardness, inefficiency and lack of competitive merit among them barring a few stray cases.□hTherefore, when he launched the Republican Party of India, he incorporated this view in the Manifesto, according to which the party was committed itself to abolish all kinds of Reservations based on caste and birth.

BACKWARDNESS HAS BECOME A STATUS SYMBOL. NUMEROUS CASTE GROUPS, WHICH CLAMORED FOR HIGHER CASTE STATUS IN CENSUS OPERATIONS OF 1901, 1911, AND 1921 AND JUSTIFIED THEIR CLAIMS WITH DIFFERENT ARGUMENTS AND FACTORS, NOW VIE WITH EACH OTHER TO BE INCLUDED, PREFERABLY IN SC LIST, FAILING WHICH IN OBCS LIST.

POLICY OF RESERVATIONS ON CASTE BASIS HAS CREATED A VESTED INTEREST IN REMAINING OR PRETENDING TO BE BACKWARD. INCLUSION OR ANY CHANGE IN SCT