CHAPTER-VI

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The striking thing about modern India is, that it is simultaneously undergoing five dramatic transformations: the urban transformation, the industrial transformation, the national transformation, the democratic transformation and the social transformation. The Indian economy earlier was largely based on agriculture but now it is increasingly dependent upon industry and services. An overwhelming majority of Indians lived in the villages but now the trend is changing. More and more people are migrating to towns and cities. India, which was once a territory ruled over by Europeans, now is an independent nation state. The political culture of India has also changed from feudal and differential to combative and participatory. The social system of India which was earlier governed by community and patriarchy is in the process of transformation in terms of making space for assertion of individual rights as well as the rights of previously subordinated groups such as lower castes and women.¹ There have been individuals who not only lived through the struggles leading to these transformations but themselves struggled to facilitate and reshape the changes through their participation as well as through their reflections on those changes. Both Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar belong to this category of individuals. Their lives have been a combination of political activism and theoretical reflection.

Gandhi was undoubtedly the organic leader of the nationalist movement who mobilized the masses into action and broadened the base of the national movement which in its earlier phase was urban centric. He

created an ideology of national struggle which transcended class divisions and also devised a political strategy to achieve this ideal. His ideas as well as his political strategy developed in the context of the colonial rule. Gandhi also launched simultaneous movements against the atrocious social structures, customs and norms of Indian society such as untouchability and discrimination of women. Gandhi, however, has been criticized for not paying adequate attention to these social evils, presumably because the political goal of national freedom took priority over any other goal.

B.R. Ambedkar, who also is a combination of political activist and a theoretical reflectionist, was not involved in the nationalist struggle as organically as Gandhi. Ambedkar’s priority as being the leader of the depressed classes was to organize these classes to fight against the dominance of the higher castes. He was the first person who identified a major flaw in Gandhi’s conceptualization of dalit and the issues relevant to their social, political and economic existence. Gandhi struggled to achieve the emancipation of the untouchables as well as the unity of the Hindu society. He was accommodative of the dalit issues in the nationalist agenda whereas Ambedkar endeavoured to carve out an independent space for the dalits while negotiating with the British government as well as the dominant nationalist groups, including the Indian National Congress. He wanted to established a separate identity for the untouchables in the Indian body politic and obtain for them the maximum political power in proportion to their population, which would enable them to influence legislative and executive action for securing justice. Ambedkar was not for merely political and economic freedom from colonialism but he wanted a complete transformation of the society with significant socio-political package in order to improve the conditions of those outside the Hindu fold.
It is alleged that Ambedkar manipulated the dalit agenda in order to undermine the efforts of the Indian National Congress to achieve freedom. He was sceptical of all attempts to portray democratization as a process independent of caste emancipation. It is in this context that Gandhi and Ambedkar’s vision of social transformation has to be evaluated. As regards the social melody of deprivation and exclusion of a very large section of Indian society – the untouchables and the backwards, both Gandhi as well as Ambedkar sought to fight against this social evil. Ambedkar fought against this evil, risking personal isolation from the then all encompassing mainstream of political movement of freedom struggle. This was reflected in his bitter strategic dual with Mahatma Gandhi, sense of disillusionment with India’s independence devoid of social justice and equality and his note of caution on the contradictions between political equality and social inequality that the constitution sought to provide.

The inclusion of the so called untouchables into the mainstream was also argued by Mahatma Gandhi along with Ambedkar. But both of them had different views in every aspect, right from the term to refer to the scheduled castes to the measures to be adopted for changing their life styles. Ambedkar was deeply suspicious of Gandhi’s motivations and frequently saw his activities as detrimental to the cause of upliftment of people. Gandhi, who considered the Varna institution as integral part of Hindu religion, also tried hard to bring untouchables into the mainstream of society through his theory of change of heart. He did not believe in coercion or in legislation to usher in a new egalitarian society. Ambedkar, however, wanted to annihilate the caste system and believed in the efficacy of legislation and struggled to evolve a constitutional mechanism for protecting the fundamental rights of the depressed classes as also their economic and political interests.
Ambedkar, while engaging himself with the issue of untouchability in the public domain, grasped important insights which he often shared with his people. He firmly believed that social, religious and economic freedoms were of even greater importance than freedom from foreign rule. He feared that without social and economic equality, caste Hindus would continue to oppress the untouchables in free India. It is in this context that Ambedkar has been criticized by Arun Shourie in his book, *Worshipping False Gods*. According to Shourie, a quarter century of Ambedkar’s public career overlapped with the struggle of the country to free itself from British rule, but there is not one single instance in which Ambedkar participated in any activity connected with that struggle to free the country. Rather, Ambedkar declared that the movement which Gandhi had been leading was unjustified, unnecessary, because in his opinion the British did not want to stay or rule India in any case, and indeed were anxious to leave. They were being compelled to stay by the fact that Indians were not able to come to an agreement among themselves about the form that the new country, the new constitution should take.

Shourie is of the opinion that far from trying to hide his working for and with the British, those days Ambedkar used to recall these facts at every opportunity to convince the British of his loyalty and his continuing usefulness.²

Shourie too has been criticized for his critique of Ambedkar. The attempt of a well-known journalist to lower the stature of such a gigantic personality is seen in the context of hatred of upper castes towards the dalits and the depressed classes.

Ambedkar’s strategies for dalit emancipation need to be seen in the specific historical context in which he worked and lived. He has collaborated with the British because he wanted to ensure for his community the access to education and representation in legislative bodies so that they could be protected from social oppression and inequality. Even in collaborating with Congress, while writing the constitution he was able to prevent the dominance of Gandhian ideas which privileged tradition over modernity. Moreover, he saw the constitution as the framework for social transformation, an embodiment of the right to equality, and by safeguarding the rights of untouchables he laid the foundation stone of a new social revolution in India which brought lower castes and oppressed sections into the mainstream politics.

Ambedkar’s idea of separation from Hinduism was also an idiom for the emancipation of dalits. His conversion to Buddhism was also imbued with the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity thus interpreting Buddhism in the modernist framework and also as a tool to conquer Hinduism.

It was Ambedkar’s initiative as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution that the numerous safeguards to the untouchables and the other weaker sections were enshrined in the constitution. These safeguards and the ethos underlying them are by far the most important and lasting of his legacies.

Gandhi, too was for the emancipation of the untouchables but his focus was on reforming the Hindu society in order to give equal respect to all castes including untouchables. Since for him the priority was the national movement against the British rule, he did not want to weaken Hindu society by dividing the society into various sub-castes.
Despite their different approaches for emancipation of untouchables the fact cannot be contested that both helped in uplifting the social and political status of the untouchables.

Women are one social group who despite constituting half of the human population and contributing equally to the sustenance of human society are being discriminated all over the world in varying degrees of severity. Gandhi and Ambedkar both avowedly fought against the unequal status of the women.

Gandhi denounced in unequivocal terms the evil social practices that were prevalent at that time and were supported by Hindu orthodox society such as child marriage, dowry system, widowhood, purdah system and the system of devadasis. He was for the formation of a strong public opinion to discredit these evil practices along with legislation. He had strong belief in equality between sexes but he had equally strong belief in differentiation of their social roles. This also suggests that the approach towards women even in the glorious days of struggle had not gone beyond the men-centric traditional role that women donned. But on the other hand, it also seems erroneous to judge the events of the past from the present standards. Gandhian approach in regard to women emancipation needs to be understood from this perspective. His contribution in this regard cannot be undermined.

In his writings Gandhi moves with ease between seeking support of tradition and scriptures where they support women on the one hand and rejecting them outright where he finds that their dictates are oppressive tools in the context of women. Gandhi needs to be appreciated in the context that he not only represented in himself the spirit of several great reformers but also gave a fresh momentum and a broader perspective to the
movement for women's emancipation by interlinking social reform movements with national movement. He believed that swaraj would be impossible without women's association in the freedom movement for which they needed to be conscious of their own power. In this sense, Gandhi seems to be far ahead of his time, because the nineteenth century consciousness of women's problem was limited to their position within the traditional family structure. Gandhi led freedom struggle in India ushered in a new era of consciousness on the part of the Indian women. Gandhi considered women power as a constructive force in social reconstruction. This is true that Gandhi failed to evolve a concrete programme for economic empowerment of women but he succeeded in raising the question of their depressed condition as a moral question for society to reckon with.

Ambedkar too, like Gandhi was for social reforms with respect to the problems of sati, widow remarriage, child marriage etc. but it was he who related women's exploitation with that of the caste system. He believed that Varna system not only subjugated untouchables but also women. It was he who initiated to raise the status of women through legal measures such as Hindu Code Bill, bill for maternity leave for working women and the principle of gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution. However, both Gandhi and Ambedkar believed in providing good education to women along with men as tool to social transformation and the idea that holds good even today. Education has always been and will always be an important tool for social change.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both had vision of economic transformation of society as both of them believed that unless the economic disparity was removed there could be neither social justice nor the upliftment of the
downtrodden. Both aimed at egalitarian society but their respective approaches towards this goal were different.

Gandhi believed in the relativity of economic doctrines and it is in this context that he talks about cultural differences of the west and the east. According to him western civilization is based on self-indulgence whereas the Indian civilization is based on self-control or self-restraint. Gandhi’s vision of economic reforms mainly is based upon his philosophy of compatibility between individual good and the social good through self-restraint. For this he recommended the principles of Swadeshi and the trusteeship. Swadeshi needs to be interpreted in terms of the primacy of village economy and the socially responsible behavior of the individual in relation to his society and the larger world.

Swadeshi was his plan for reconstructing a village centred policy, with an emphasis on restricting the use of products to those manufactured in the immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. He opposed the craze for that machinery which either enriched the few at the cost of many or led to unemployment. Trusteeship emphasizes the role of non-violent means in establishing economic equality by which Gandhi means approximate equality. It is about bringing economic equality by converting the people to his point of view, by the change of heart.

With respect to his denunciation of machinery Gandhi has been interpreted as anti-modern. While interpreting Gandhi as anti-modern it needs to be seen in the context of the meaning of the term modernity. The modernity frame is so deeply entrenched in our minds that persistently Gandhi is seen as opposed to industrialization, to modern medicine or to science in general. The fact, however, is that Gandhi’s critique is directed not against modernity but against structures that obstruct experience or
truth which he considers necessary for the development of dharma. Truth, in the Gandhian sense, cannot be learnt or transmitted through sentences or propositions. It has to be learnt through one’s own experience. Experience, according to him is the only truth bearer.

He was convinced that colonialism is destructive of the very integrity of experience or truth. He considered modern civilization undesirable because of the ceaseless activity it represents aiming at the annihilation of time and space. In his opinion the things or objects that embody speed or destruction of time and space undermine or destroy the necessary slow work of establishing the good or dharma which takes a long time.

A comparison is made between Gandhi and Foucault in this context. Foucault also talks about ‘ethics of the self’ by which he means experimental knowledge or spiritual knowledge and he believes that this knowledge disappears in the west. Foucault talks about political rationality by which he means norm generating practices that are going to be different under different times and different context and hence the ideas and institutions cannot be taken for granted. Thus, both Gandhi and Faucault believe that true knowledge is based on experience and different cultures access experience differently.³

Ambedkar too, was for elimination of inequalities in the society and was of the firm view that the economic equality must precede political equality. He recommend land reforms in terms of nationalization of agricultural land to be given to the landless people for cultivation. Along with this he propagated state socialism with parliamentary democracy for

the rapid industrialization of India. Being an economist he also realized that the size of the land was not the only decisive factor for efficient production. Along with enlarging holdings there is need of increasing capital and capital goods. Industrialization according to him, unlike Gandhi, is complementary to consolidation of land as this would lessen the premium on land. He was for state socialism with parliamentary democracy in order to bring reconciliation between individual freedom and egalitarian society. The main aim of his philosophy was the upliftment of the downtrodden classes. Despite various government policies this aim, he believed, cannot be fulfilled until and unless the laboring and the downtrodden classes become conscious of their plight and organize themselves to put pressure on the government. Here, Ambedkar sounds like Marx that the exploited class needs to be aware of its plight and needs to organize. However, beyond this Ambedkar does not follow Marx as he wants to uplift the downtrodden masses through legislative reforms within the state. He preferred industrial development within the framework of a mixed economy.

Ambedkar’s vision of economic transformation under the given circumstances was very realistic. After independence, India needed rapid industrial development which could be possible through state regulation. In the contemporary scenario of free market economy his idea regarding nationalization of land seems redundant but the idea of state regulation seems relevant and needs to be contextualized. After economic slowdown the western capitalist societies once again have started debating about the significance of state regulation because the real cause of this crisis is considered to be the increasing deregulation of the financial markets and the excess of free market capitalism.
The current global economic crisis has brought to the forefront not only the ideological debates on the perils of free market capitalism and the role of government in the economy, but also deeper questions about the susceptibility of human nature to greed and avarice. It is in this context that Gandhian vision of trusteeship which is based on the premise that man should not have beyond what is necessary for his needs and should use the resources for the welfare of the society as a trustee of these resources, would always remain relevant. Gandhian vision is based on his concept of human nature that man is inherently good but sometimes he can be swayed by passion and self-interest, but there is always a chance of redemption. The present world would be a better place to live in if every individual goes back to one's basic nature by having control over greed and unnecessary wants.

Gandhi had a vision of a village oriented decentralized polity ruled by selfless individuals where equality and freedom both could be pursued. Gandhi laid emphasis on equality but also wanted that equality should be compatible with individual freedom. His concept of democracy is based on consensus and cooperation transcending the majority principle leading to the welfare of all. He was for substantive democracy where the weakest had the same opportunity as the strongest. It also meant the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist the authority which denies justice to people. In contrast to the western liberal democracies he has given his own concept of integral democracy that is the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority and a social order promoting the welfare of all. Gandhi firmly believed that state was an instrument of coercive power and violence was an inevitable phenomenon associated with the state. He conceived of an ideal polity where there would not be any state or government to regulate the rights of individuals. Since Gandhi realized that
this ideal polity would not be possible, therefore he was for that
government which ruled the least.

Ambedkar, on the other hand assigned many significant and positive
functions to the state than mere protection of life, liberty and property. However, despite this he did not consider the state absolute. He considered parliamentary democracy as the best option under the given circumstances. He had firm belief in constitutional methods to bring change in society. He had put a greater confidence in the impartiality of law than Gandhi. Very important contribution of Ambedkar was his recommendation that political democracy should be based on social democracy which means that it should be based on liberty, equality and fraternity that are compatible with each other.

However, he also acknowledged that in Indian society there is graded inequality which is dangerous for the structure of political democracy. Like Gandhi, he also insisted on the moral order as a requirement of democracy and believed that people should not be complacent. They should always be prepared to join the aggrieved to secure justice. Thus, he conceptualized the state in purely functional and instrumental terms, as an instrument of both individual good as well as the collective good and rejected Gandhian utopanism based on a mythical rural democracy.

Like Ambedkar, political scholars are also sceptical about relevance of Gandhian vision of polity of substantive democracy in the contemporary world with all its complexities.

Rajni Kothari, one of the authorities on Indian government and politics, has tried to evaluate the relevance of Gandhian polity in the context of the complexities of the modern world. He is of the opinion that
political participation is declining while cynicism is increasing; hard choices assert themselves between full employment and a generous state; drugs and crime climb to troubling levels; the family is under siege; people live longer but many seem neither secure nor satisfied; the world’s population is increasing; and because of technology and fast-deteriorating nexus between man and nature, environment is degraded. Technology is generating forces that deny opportunities for a meaningful life to large number of human beings and condemns them to a state of dependence and indignity. They are forced to live under conditions of stress, overcrowding and despair.

Special problems await the youth of the world especially in poor countries. A large proportion of this age group is expected to live in urban areas, acquire some education and skill, but be unable to find jobs, leading to unemployment or underemployment. They are likely to be socialized in modern and cosmopolitan ways of thought, more away from the traditions of their parents, and less deferential to authority. They are also likely to be more mobile and restless and less tolerant of inequalities. The upshot of these various converging trends is likely to be seething discontent, certain rootlessness, and a widespread feeling of futility and rejection among millions of men and women.

Rajni Kothari further believes that all this may lead to unrest and violence and that may further lead to strong, disciplinary governments trying to check this unrest and violence with harsh police measures attacking the basic rights of human beings. The political leaders may manipulate the frustrations of people into ugly, violent nativist movements. The poor may be intimidated and humiliated in the harsh realities of their urban slums.
Under these complexities of the modern world assaulting the autonomy of the individual human beings, leading to the centralization of power in the hands of few i.e. the political leaders, the so-called representatives of people, application of Gandhian vision of polity in totality seems impossible e.g. with respect to selfless individuals, truth, non-violence, decentralization of power, resistance to globalization and modern technology. But from Gandhian perspective such outcomes were inevitable. These are the outcomes of intense demands of individualism, decayed traditions and continued devaluation of persons in the economy.

Ronald Tercheck who has done a seminal analysis of Gandhian philosophy, believes that in opposition to Gandhi Western democratic societies have become stronger. Their dangerous totalitarian opponents have been vanquished, technology today continues to move at a dizzying pace and their culture is becoming globalized. Modernity and modernization provide the standards for understanding success and failure. In this context Gandhian vision of polity seems utopian.

He also believes that although, many support autonomy and decentralization, however, as the post-modernist impulse to question is extensive, these Gandhian concepts do not seem to be the priorities of the late modern world. According to him, this does not mean that the twenty first century promises to be hostile to Gandhi’s theory and his idiom, more likely, it will be unconcerned. The metaphors of the future are likely to be revolved around globalization, the market and consumerism. In his opinion, Gandhi’s walk into the twenty first century may be lonely one.\(^4\)

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Another view regarding the relevance of his vision on polity is that this is true in the modern context that it is impossible to return to the period when Gandhi wrote and lived, but the complexities of the modern world can be avoided to some extent, if not completely, by attempting to apply ethical standards to contemporary practices and institutions.

Undoubtedly, there is need for greater diffusion of economic and political power, greater equality in social relationships and a wide concern for moral values. This is true that Gandhi's specific proposals like trusteeship may not be applicable in the crowded polity of the contemporary world, but his political critique signals what has traditionally been at the heart of the democratic project, namely, that people ought to govern themselves, decentralization of political and economic power, increased participation throughout society, and harmony in one's life and community.

This is true that the modern temper is preoccupied with matters far removed from much that Gandhi wanted to promote and although some of his specific proposals are anachronistic in the present complex society, his legacy comes with the issues he raises about individual autonomy and social harmony, economic security, participatory communities and the non-violent resolution of the conflict. In this context Gandhian vision of polity can neither be applied in totality nor ignored in totality. The only need is to relate his vision to the present circumstances and keep striving for it. However, both Ambedkar and Gandhi believed in the basic belief of human equality.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both despite differences in their respective visions towards social transformation of society aimed at egalitarian society with upliftment of downtrodden classes, women emancipation,
reconciliation between individual liberty and equality as well as between individual liberty and social harmony. As a result of their ceaseless efforts today women as well as the dalits, two most depressed groups in Indian society have been provided safeguards against atrocities in the provisions of the constitution. The culture of equality enshrined in the constitution also embraces strategies such as reservation in the area of education and public services for dalits (officially known as scheduled castes). There has been thirty three percent reservation for women in local bodies such as Panchayats and Municipal Corporations.

Despite various provisions of the constitution, the fact is that the path to gender justice is an arduous one. The women’s reservation bill to reserve one third of all seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies for women, in its tumultuous life so far of nearly sixteen years, has sparked off debates and reactions but has not been through. It corroborates the fact that women face difficulties as well as opposition in entering and advancing in the decision making bodies. The practices like child marriage, discrimination against women, female foeticide and illtreatment of widows are still prevalent, although, not at that large scale as they used to be in the 19th century India. The crimes against women are on the rise. Thompson Reuters Foundation global poll of experts (2012) found India to be amongst the five most dangerous places for women in the company of Afghanistan, Congo, Pakistan and Somalia. Although, these searing indictments are passed off as flawed reports and a western plot to malign India. The fact is that there is enormous awareness of the risks Indian society poses to women.

The Indian state has acknowledged some of these issues. But these cannot be addressed by abstract administrative or legal fixes. There is need
for inducing profound ethical or social change which can be managed only when there is synergy between three sites for the reproduction of moral values: the family, civil society and state. One of the great legacies of the national movement and particularly of Gandhi, was that he grasped the fundamental fact that unless these move in tandem, all social transformation will be short lived. Social reform movements initiated by Gandhi or Ambedkar paved the way for a reconfiguration of social values. Their efforts should not be crowded out by politics and administrative rationality. Women should be seen as agents who can do effect things – both individually and jointly.

Similarly despite the efforts of great men like Gandhi and Ambedkar, atrocities are being committed today against dalits. Caste is a compulsory identity today and its reality is still socially produced. The attempts to transcend caste lines have rather strengthened it. The government is moving with unusual alacrity, to amend the constitution to overturn court rulings that restrict reservations in promotions. At the time of independence there was a consensus that despite any criteria or objective of affirmative action, dalits should be beneficiaries and should continue to remain so. But the experience that was specific to dalits has been generalized into an indiscriminately expansive category of backwardness. Reservation is no longer about justice. It has become a political category for accessing power through some claims to representation. It has created a new politics of conflict between the beneficiaries and those who are left out. Fault lines have developed even amongst various dalit groups.

Social justice is possible with equality of opportunity which requires a change in a whole range of background conditions such as access to quality primary education, access to public goods, financial support in
terms of scholarships, loans, and a robustly growing economy that provides opportunity for mobility. These changes may not address all the problems of discrimination but they will create conditions for genuine empowerment. That larger mobility is necessary for what Ambedkar called “endosmosis”.

Ambedkar’s defense of social democracy and Gandhian vision of substantive democracy through his faith in non-violent resistance have a resonance even in this age of globalization, not only in India but even in other parts of the world where democracy is being established. Their ideas, although, were constructed during their encounter with colonialism, they appear to be transcendental both in connotation and application.

There is a tendency of sectarianism and partisanship while understanding the ideas of these two great men. Gandhi is considered only as a freedom fighter and Ambedkar as a dalit icon alone. There is also a tendency amongst their respective admirers to study them as each other’s opponents. Infact, there is need to follow a catholic approach to study and appreciate both Gandhi and Ambedkar as co-workers as their legacies are equally relevant and significant although in different and arguably complementary ways.