Accordingly, the thesis aims at the basic views of Gandhi on caste and its
different structures and practices. The present thesis intends to throw some
light and reinterpret the Gandhian understandings on the notion of caste and
its removal from the society. Gandhi in his fight against inequality of caste
issued a series of press statements and a number of letters to educate the
people regarding the evil of untouchability. Gandhi doubted whether there
was any support for untouchability in Hindu scriptures but even if it was
possible, Gandhi did not feel bound by it. Eternal truths, he asserted, could
not be confined to the covers of a book, however sacred it might be.

But before we critically evaluate Gandhi on his views of caste, we must
have an understanding of caste in both Indian and western context.

The word caste can be used in variety of ways- as a noun to denote an
abstract principle or to designate a particular kind of social group, and as an
adjective to denote the quality of this principle or the character of the group.

The Portuguese seafarers who traded mainly on the west coast
of India in the 16th and 17th centuries described groups they
called castas (from which derive the English and French words
caste), meaning ‘species’ or ‘breeds’ of animals or plants and
‘tribes,’ ‘clans,’ or ‘lineages among men.’

Some noted definitions of caste or the caste system

A good deal has been written by way of defining and explaining the
complicated and unique institution of caste. According to E.A. Gait, “the main
characteristics of a caste are the belief in a common origin held by all the
members and the possession of the traditional occupation. It may be defined
as an endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common
name, having the same traditional occupation, claiming descent from the
same source, and commonly regarded as forming a single homogenous
community.” According to Emile Charles, “Caste is a corporate group,
exclusive and in theory at least, rigorously less hereditary. It possesses a
certain traditional and independent organization, a chief and a council, and as
occasion demands, it meets in assemblies endowed with more or less full
authority. Often united in the celebration of certain festivals, it is further bound
together by a common profession and by the practice of common customs,
which bear more especially upon marriage, food, and various cases of
impurity. Finally, it is armed, in order to assure its authority, with a jurisdiction of fairly wide extent, capable by the infliction of certain penalties, especially of banishment, either absolute or revocable, of enforcing the power of the community.³

Ripley defines it as a "collection of families or group of families bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside of that circle, but within the circle, there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous."⁴ The encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines caste as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of ethnic group occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with such other divisions. N.K. Dutt refrain from defining caste, but describes its features: members of a caste cannot marry outside it; there are similar but less rigid restrictions on eating and drinking with a member of another caste; there are fixed occupations for many castes; there is some hierarchical gradation of castes, the best recognized position being that of the Brahmins at the top; birth determines a man's caste for life unless he be expelled for violation of its rules; otherwise transition from one caste to another is not possible; the whole system turns on the prestige of Brahmín.⁵

Hutton sums up comprehensively the extent to which caste rules govern every member of any caste. From the point of view of the individual member of the caste he says, "the system provides him from birth with a fixed social milieu from which neither wealth nor poverty, success nor disaster can remove him, unless of course he so violates the standards of behavior laid down by caste that it spews him forth temporarily or permanently. He is provided in this way with a permanent body of associations that controls almost all his behavior and contacts. His caste canalizes his choice in marriage, acts as his trade union, his friendly or benefit society, his social club.
and his orphanage; it takes the place for him of health insurance, and if need be provides for his funeral. It frequently determines his occupation, often positively, for in many castes the occupational tradition is very strong indeed, commonly negatively, since there are many pursuits, at any rate, in the case of all but the lowest castes, which he cannot follow, or can follow only at the cost of ex-communication from the society to which he belongs.6

Caste Vs Varna

Caste is an institution of great complexity. It is popularly understood as the division of society into a fivefold hierarchy with the Brahmins at the head, followed in order by kshatriyas, Vaishyas or traders, Shudras or servants and labourers, and, lastly, the Untouchables. The first three castes are called ‘twice-born’ (dvija) as they alone are entitled to undergo the ceremony of Upanayana, which constitute spiritual rebirth. Only the twice-born castes are entitled to study the Vedas and to the performance of Vedic ritual on certain occasions. Caste in the above sense is referred to as varna. The idea of caste as the fivefold division of society represents a gross over-simplification of facts. The real unit of the caste system is not one of the five varnas but jati, which is a very small endogamous group practicing a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy. Every jati, or the members of a jati in a particular village or a group of neighbouring villages, constitutes a caste court which punishes caste offence. The varna-system represents a scale of values, and jatis occupying the lower rungs have throughout tried to raise their status by taking over the customs and ritual of the top jatis.

A man is born into a sub-caste (jati) and this is the only way of acquiring membership. According to the traditional view, however birth is not an accident. Certain Hindu theological notions like karma and dharma have contributed very greatly to the strengthening of the idea of hierarch, which is inherent in the caste system. The idea of Karma teaches a Hindu that he is born in a particular sub-caste because he deserves to be born there. The actions he performed in a previous incarnation deserved such a reward or punishment, as the case might be. If he had performed better actions in his previous incarnation, he would have been born in a higher caste. Thus, the
caste hierarchy comes to be an index of the state of an individual’s soul. It also represents certain milestones on the soul’s journey to God. A man is born in a high caste because of the good actions performed by him in his previous life, and another is born into a low caste because of bad actions performed in his previous life.

The other important concept in the Indian philosophical and theological arena is the concept of dharma, which has manifold meanings, one of which is ‘that which is right or moral’. The existing moral code is identified with dharma. A man who accepts the caste system and the rules of his particular sub-caste is living according to dharma, while a man who questions them is violating dharma. Living according to dharma is rewarded, while violation of dharma is punished, both here and hereafter. If he observes the rules of dharma, he will be born in his next incarnation in a high caste, rich, whole and well endowed. If he does not observe them, he will be born in a low caste, poor, deformed and ill endowed. Worldly position and successes indicates the kind of life a man led in his previous incarnation.

The concept of pollution governs relations between different castes. This concept is absolutely fundamental to the caste system, and along with the concepts of karma and dharma, it contributes to make caste the unique institution it is. Every type of inter-caste relation is governed by the concept of pollution. Contact of any kind, touching, dining, sex and other relations between castes, which are structurally distant results in the higher of the two castes being polluted. However, the polluted member of the higher caste has to undergo a purificatory rite in order to be restored to normal ritual status. Contact is culturally defined. Touch is contact in all cases. Frequently the maintenance of a minimum distance between castes is insisted upon.

The ban on contact between castes and the solidarity of a sub-caste, express themselves in the spatial segregation of castes in a village. The Untouchables live everywhere at some distance from the others, while each of the other sub-castes occupies a street or a quarter of the village or town. Normally, a man may accept cooked food and water from a member of the same or equal or superior caste. Food cooked by a member of a lower caste may not be eaten because such food defiles a man belonging to a higher
caste. Mutual acceptability of cooked food denotes equality between the castes concerned, while the movement of food in one direction only indicates that the acceptor is inferior to the giver.

There is general correlation between diet and status. Brahmins are usually vegetarians, abstaining even from eggs. The shudra castes eat eggs and meat. Pork is inferior to mutton, and usually pork-eaters, mutton-eaters and beekeepers are the lowest of all.

**Caste: Autonomy to Community**

Caste guarantees autonomy to a community, and at the same time it brings that community into relation with numerous other communities all going to form a hierarchy. Nowhere is caste better exemplified by degree of complexity and systematic operation than in India. The Indian term for caste is jati, which generally designates a group varying in size from a handful to many thousands. There are thousands of such jatis, and each has its distinctive rules, customs, and modes of government. The term varna (literally meaning “color”) refers to the ancient and somewhat ideal fourfold division of Hindu society: (1) the Brahmins, the priestly and learned class; (2) the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers; (3) the Vaisyas, farmers and merchants; and (4) the Sudras, peasants and laborers. These divisions may have corresponded to what were formerly large, broad, undifferentiated social classes. Below the category of Sudras were the untouchables, or Panchamas (literally “fifth division”), who performed the most menial tasks.

The explanation that Indian castes were originally based on color lines to preserve the racial and cultural purity of conquering groups is inadequate historically to account for the physical and cultural variety of such groups. Castes may reflect distinctiveness of religious practice, occupation, locale, culture status, or tribal affiliation, either exclusively or in part. Divergence within a caste on any of these lines will tend to produce fission that may, in time, result in the formation of new castes. Every type of social group as it appears may be fitted into this system of organizing society.
The present thesis aims at the Gandhian approach to the study of caste, ‘an institution, which has occupied a predominant attribute of Hindu social organization. Though the term is quite difficult to explain, yet it can be said that the term stands/connects a set of ideologies and practices. Caste as a social category can be comprehended at three levels: Firstly, caste as a descriptive term, which accounts the foundation of social hierarchy and emergence of institutions, based on caste indicators. Secondly, caste is understood as a normative and ethical and evaluative category by which a set of rules, practices and social order are justified. Thirdly, caste is used as an analytical category to evaluate and interpret the aims and aspirations of democratic polity. Therefore, the term ‘caste’ has always been a complex term in evaluating the ideas of specific thinkers of particular age, times and epoch and how they have contributed in the making and unmaking of Indian polity with the aim of social justice, equality and human dignity.

The word ‘caste’ as used in various European sources, is an extremely unhappy translation of two quite different indigenous concepts, varna and jati, which are generally believed, both by Hindus and by outside observers, to correspond in some way. In a sense, the history of the debate about the nature of caste can be viewed as the attempt to discover what exactly the correspondence between varna and jati is.8

The sense of jati is of those people who are in some fundamental way alike because of their common origins, and fundamentally different from those who do not share these origins. One cannot choose one’s jati; it is defined by birth. But one can choose whether one’s jati refers to a more or less inclusive group: this is going to depend on context. In one context, one’s jati is one’s lineage; in another, it may be all the lineage with whom one can intermarry; in yet another, it may refer to those whose common ethnic or cultural heritage sets them apart from their neighbours.

Jati is the essence, a relative term. The following definition gives some idea of the range and flexibility of the concept.

One of the commonest words for genus in most Indian languages, jati, is derived from an Indo-European verbal roots meaning 'genesis,' ‘origin,’ or ‘birth.’ It is applied to any species

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of living things including gods and humans. Among humans, jati can designate a distinct sex, a race, a caste, or a tribe; a population, the followers of an occupation or a religion, or a nation.9

The sense of varna is quite different. The basic idea is not of birth but of function, and not simply any function, but one that is necessary to ensure social harmony and cosmic stability. '...The feature (of the varnas) which most contrasts with the caste system is perhaps the stress laid on function rather than birth'10 In the later Hindu Law Book Which is often referred to as the Code of Manu (c.200BC–AD 200) each varna is represented as fundamentally different in function. Just as four varnas were created through an initial sacrifice, further sacrifices are necessary to maintain the order of the universe. In these, each varna is required to perform a particular function as its divinely ordained duty:

Manu lays down that the duty of the Brahmin is to study and teach, to sacrifice, and to give and receive gifts; the ksatriya must protect the people, sacrifice and study; the vaisya also sacrifice and studies, but his chief function is to breed cattle, to till the earth, to pursue trade and to lend money; the sudra's duty is only to serve the three higher classes

Varna and Jati

There has been much confusion between jati and varna that are different in origin as well as in function. Varna is neither a group nor a collectivity in the current sociological senses of the terms. It is a category of those identifiable as manifesting a guna in their psychical make-up and the karma resulting there from. Conceptually, the term varna-vyavastha stands for a fourfold categorization of social members based on the classification of guna and karma placed on the idealistic scale of the precedence of the gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas) which gives rise to the corresponding scale of social precedence (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra). Socially, the order of the varnas is a stratified division of labour which is functional-historical but idealistic and symbolical as well, besides being mystical and allegorical.

Varna is not a class, race, caste or even tribe. As a concept, class is the product of materialistic-empirical thought whereas varna comes from
idealistic thought. The varna system in Indian thought is the ideal social stratification of the ideal society. It may be an ideal to be cultivated, conserved and promoted as dharma both by the citizen and the state. As we know, the various castes in any given region of India are hierarchically organized, with each caste corresponding roughly to one or the other of the varna categories. Traditionally, caste mobility has taken the form of movement up or down the varna scale. Rituals rigidly differentiate Indian castes and are differentiated by rituals and beliefs that pervade all thought and conduct (see dharma). Extreme upper and lower castes differ so widely in habits of everyday life and worship that only the close intergrading of intervening castes and the inter-caste language communities serve to hold them together within the single framework of Indian society.

The varna and jati are two quite different concepts, yet both have been translated as ‘caste’. What exactly is the correspondence between them? Perhaps the most widespread opinion is that varna is simply a theoretical category never actually encountered on the ground while jati is the ‘real’ operational unit, so to say, the real caste.

Caste is a term, which is used to specify a group of people having a specific social rank and dates back to 1200 BCE. The Indian term for caste is jati and generally designates a group that can vary in size from a handful to many thousands. There are thousands of jatis each with its own rules and customs. The various jatis are traditionally arranged in hierarchical order and fit into one of the four basic varnas the (Sanskrit word for “colours”).

“Seeking social origin is a particularly unproductive type of endeavor... A social order does originate it evolves.” there are many theories of the origin of caste. The earlier European observers like Abbe Dubois regarded it as an artificial creation, as a device of a clever priesthood for the permanent division and subjection of the masses. It was regarded as the ingenious device of Brahmins, made by and for them. “But it is impossible to accept such a view. So deeply rooted and pervasive a social institution as the caste system could hardly have been imposed by an administrative measure.” The most common story based on the Divine Theory says that the castes are originated from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of Brahma.
John C. Nesfield has put a more coherent and developed theory of caste forward. He has discussed caste from the occupational point of view. Nesfield emphasizes the fact that artisans working in metals rank higher than the basket makers and other primitive callings, which do not involve the use of metals. He is of the opinion that priesthood was not, in the beginning at least, an exclusive monopoly of the Brahmins. Even Kshatriyas could be priests when sacrifices were performed. After a long time, when sacrifices with their hymns and rituals became more and more complex, specialization was necessary. The section of the people, who specialized in this occupation, became the Brahmins. Since sacrifices were very important in the social life, the Brahmins became the most important and respectable people in the society. Later on the tendency was for the priesthood to become hereditary. When the Brahmins organized themselves as an exclusive privileged class, other classes in the community, by way of precaution for the sake of self-defense and privileges, organized themselves into different castes.

A theory of the origin of caste which combines both functional and racial origins has been put forward by Slater. He suggests that caste arose in India before the Aryan invasion as a result of occupations becoming hereditary and marriages being arranged by parents within the society of the common craft because trade secrets could thus be preserved. These are thus the various theories of the origin of the caste system. There is no doubt that the Indian caste system represents a confusion of all manner of distinction, which reflect occupational differences, racial and ethnic differences, cultural differences, etc. Perhaps for this reason, there are so many theories on the origin of the caste system in India—some seeking its roots primarily in the racial and ethnic differences, some only in the occupational differences, some merely in the spiritual beliefs of the pre-Aryans and Aryans in India and so forth. It is likely that several factors working jointly led in the course of time to the emergence of the Indian Caste system, its social, economic and ideological facets being specifically influenced by several factors.

Gandhi and the Notion of Caste

Gandhi as a theorist as well as a sage tried to understand the metaphysical and ontological meaning of caste and its consequences in the
creation of a more compassionate and charitable world. However, how far Gandhi's ideas on caste have contributed in the making of a humanitarian world has been a subject matter of philosophical and analytical investigations in theories. The striking observation about caste-organized communities is that Brahmins enjoy the highest status, untouchables have the lowest status, and all other castes have engaged a space in between.

A reading of Gandhi's philosophy in the context of caste seems to be of much complexity than what we generally accept. It is important to discuss Gandhi on the issue of caste because his philosophy questions the deep-rooted problems that are related to the stratification of the human society, especially to the out caste or untouchables. We find a dichotomy between Gandhi's view on caste and the elimination of untouchability, for that it is important that we should have a fairer understanding of Gandhi's view on caste.

Gandhi has narrated in his autobiography as to how he came face to face with untouchability in his home. His mother shared the caste prejudice, which were common among vaishnava Hindus. The children had orders not to defile themselves by touching the family sweeper Uka or by playing with 'untouchable' classmates. Gandhi was an obedient child, but he visibly chafed at these restraints; even at an early age, he sensed the inconsistency between the practice of untouchability and the beautiful anecdote of the epic Ramayana, in which he had heard of the hero Rama being ferried across the Ganges by a low-caste. In South Africa, Gandhi's associates belonged to all classes and communities. To the first ashram at Ahmedabad, which he founded after his return to India in 1915, he welcomed an untouchable family; this action outraged the rich merchants of Ahmedabad, who were contributing to the upkeep of the ashram. Consequently, several associates deserted him in protest.16

Gandhi maintains that the spirit of untouchability must have come to us from our lowest ebb. It is the curse for the society. So long as this curse prevails in the society, people will be committing crimes. Further, according to Gandhi, the idea of untouchability does not have any religious sanction. Religion does not provide any room for untouchability. He says,
“Untouchability is not a sanction of religion, it is a device of Satan.”¹⁷ He again says, "I regard untouchability as the greatest blot of Hinduism."¹⁸ He further goes on to argue: "It is against the shastras. It is against the fundamental principles of humanity, it is against the dictates of reason that a man should, by mere reason of birth, be for ever regarded as an untouchable, even unapproachable and untenable.. The tragedy is that millions of Hindus believe in this institution as if it was enjoined by the Hindu-religion."¹⁹ Gandhi regarded untouchability as a great hindrance in the way of attaining swaraj and also for the reorganization of the society. He emphatically proclaimed that so long as the Hindus will fully regard untouchability as part of their religion, so long as the mass of Hindu consider it a sin to touch a section of their brethren, Swaraj is impossible of attainment."²⁰

Gandhi himself was busy in abolishing this evil practice of the Hindu society. He did not allow anyone to be an untouchable. Consequently, he laid stress on the purification of caste. The purification of caste depends upon the abolition of untouchability. As soon as untouchability goes, the caste system is purified and the true conception of Varnashramadharma, the four divisions of the society, will come to light. Gandhi is not opposed to caste system. He maintains that the four divisions of caste as complementary to one another, and none inferior or superior to any other.

Untouchability was a recurrent theme in his speeches during his countrywide tours in the twenties. Gandhi issued a series of press statements and a stream of letters to his numerous correspondents to educate the people on the evil of untouchability. He arranged for the publication of a weekly paper, Harijan, to promote his campaign. ‘Harijan’ means ‘children of God’;²¹ it was Gandhi’s name for the outcastes, the untouchables. All the religions of the world, Gandhi wrote, describe God pre-eminently the friend of the friendless and help of the helpless, and the protector of the weak.

Gandhi doubted whether there was any support for untochability in the Hindu Scriptures. But even if it were possible to cite a sanction for this tyranny from any ancient manuscript, Gandhi did not feel bound by it. Eternal truths, he asserted, could not be confined within the covers of a book, however sacred it might be. Every scripture had contained certain universal truths, but
it also included injunctions relevant to the contemporary society; the latter, if they did violence to human dignity, could be ignored. Gandhi wrote a good chunk in Harijan. He took the lead in pulling out the skeleton of untouchability from the Hindu cupboard and publishing graphic pen-pictures of the miserable condition in which the ‘outcasts’ lived. Thus Gandhi says:

The removal of this sin does not mean only its removal from the Hindu society but its removal from all walks of life. It should be removed from all levels of society, be it a Christian, Mohammedan and Parsi society. Gandhi said, “There should be not only no untouchability as between Hindus and Hindus, but there should be no untouchability whatsoever between Hindus, Christians, Mussalmans, Parsis and the rest.”

What is meant by removal of untouchability then? What would be the shape of the society after its elimination? Gandhi tried to preach the gospel of love to the whole world. According to him, all men, irrespective of their caste affiliations, belong to one God and are His expressions. He says that removal of this great sin means, “love for, and service of, the whole world, and thus merges into Ahmisa. Removal of untouchability spells the breaking down of barriers between man and man and between the various orders of Being. We find such barriers erected everywhere in the world.”

According to Gandhi, the practice of untouchability in any form is not desirable to any progressive society. The ideal of sarvodaya would remain unrealized if the society is not reformed. The idea of being high and low should be banished. There should thus be a radical change in the society. The right to equality in every sphere of life should be enforced. Sarvodaya established on the presumption of the welfare of all should be the aim, and it is in this way that we can establish Ramrajya in the society. Therefore untouchability must be stopped forthwith. Closely connected with the problems of untouchability is the problem of inter-caste marriage, which has certain social implication too.

**Jati-Vyavastha: The Ontological Moorings**

Gandhi as a political activist engages with certain beliefs and convictions about the notion of jati-vyastha and in his reflections, he has tried
to establish two important ontological and epistemological connections between caste and its manifestation on individual’s well being and its consequences on humanity and Indian society at large. Intriguing enough, Gandhi’s ideas on the inter-caste marriages are evaluative indicators through which he has always been keen to figure out the disruptions and the rigidity of Indian society. He observes in his plethora of writings, how inter-caste marriages have played very important and effective roles in the eradication of untouchability. However, Gandhi’s ideas on inter-caste marriages and elimination of untouchability have been a subject matter of critical engagement of philosophers and political theorists of contemporary Indian political philosophy in India and the west at large.

According to Gandhi, the problem of inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning are important social problems, which deserve consideration at the hands of the people engaged in reorganization of masses. Can inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning be regarded as the effective means of removing untouchability? Gandhi’s answer to this question is both affirmative and negative. He says:

“My answer is, no and yes. ‘No’ because it is no part of the programme of the Harijan Sevek Sangh. Generally, marrying and dinning are the matters of individuals concern. No one has a right to ask another to choose a girl for wife or to dine with anybody against his will. But my answer at the same time ‘yes’, because if a person refuses to take food touched by another person on the ground of untouchability or inferiority, he is observing untouchability. In other words, untouchability cannot constitute any ground for restraint on inter-dining or marriage.”

So long as one thinks that one belongs to higher caste and regards others as belonging to lower castes, the question of doing away with inter-marriage and inter-dinning cannot even be thought of. The idea of “highness” and “lowness” would be there as long as there does not remain any check on the question of inter-marriage and inter-dinning. Gandhi is of the opinion that, “in Varnashrama there was and should be no prohibition of intermarriage and inter-dinning. The existing practice is therefore doubly wrong in that it has set up cruel restrictions about inter-dining and inter-marriage and tolerates anarchy about choice of occupation.” But at the same time Gandhi holds the view that there is no compulsion in marriage and dinning because they
depend upon the choice of individuals. If they like it, it is all right, if not, it is not wrong. Therefore, Gandhi said: "Though there is in Varnashrama no prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dinning, yet there can be no compulsion. It must be left to the unfettered choice of the individual as to where he or she will marry or dine."\(^{26}\)

After having stated Gandhi’s views with regard to inter-caste and inter-dinning, let us now make some observations on the topic here. Gandhi’s views on inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning are broad and wide. Though there are certain merits in his arguments, yet the question is whether our society is ready to accept this? In India we have not been able to popularize inter-caste and inter-dinning. The fact is that, unless we are religiously and socially advanced, we cannot think of the idea of inter-caste marriages. So long as there prevail blind religious beliefs and rituals and customs, there cannot occur this change.

Caste was to Gandhi an extension of the principle of the family, as both were governed by blood and heredity. He stated that caste was essential for the best possible adjustment of social stability and progress, but he wanted that it must not connote superiority or inferiority. It must only recognize different outlooks and corresponding modes of life. But castes as an institution had degenerated to a great extent and have stratified social life on the basis of caste, which has become the order of the day. Therefore, for Gandhi, the practice of caste was not in consonance with its theory. He gradually became more convinced with its theory and declared thus:

"**Varna** has nothing to do with the caste. Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of **varna**. It is this travesty of **varna** that has degraded Hinduism and India. Our failure to follow the law of **varna** is largely responsible both for our economic and spiritual ruin....In ancient times there were automatic trade guilds, and it was an unwritten law to support all the members of the profession. A hundred year ago, a carpenter’s son never wanted to become lawyer. Today, he does, because he finds the profession the easiest way to steal money...... In ages gone by there was not the ambition of encroaching on another’s profession and amassing wealth. In Cicero’s time, for instance, the lawyer was an honorary profession. And it would be quite right for any brainy carpenter to become a lawyer for service, not for
money. Later, ambition for fame and wealth crept in. Physicians served the society and rested content with what it gave them, but now they have become traders and even a danger to society. The medical and legal professions were deservedly called liberal when the motive was purely philanthropic.  

A ‘Shudra’ has every right to knowledge, Gandhi admits but he does not want that after getting education and acquiring knowledge a ‘Shudra’ should go in search of a job other than one ordained for him by God. “The only profession after his heart should be the profession of his fathers.” Gandhi is strictly seems to be in favor of the parental profession. Thus he made a distinction between the ideal caste system, which called the Varna Dharma and the caste system practiced in India and its distorted practices.

The varna vyavastha symbolizes the fourfold division of the social order and all these divisions are members of one body. Therefore the question of which one is superior or inferior to another does not arise. The moment the question of superiority and inferiority arises the social order is bound to go to pieces. It is, in Gandhi’s view, the canker of superiority and inferiority that is at the root of the various ills of our time, especially class wars and civil strife can be ended only by observing the law of the varna. Accordingly, Gandhi perceives that a social order based on the varna vyavastha is oriented towards enabling the individual to work for self-realization. Thus Gandhi argues:

“Varna means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. The law of varna is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. Varna therefore is in a way the law of hereditary. Varna is not a thing that is superimposed on hindus, but men who were trustees for their welfare discovered the law for them. It is not a human invention, but an immutable law of nature.”

Gandhi further claims that

“Varnashrama, as I interpret it, satisfies the religious, social and economic needs, because a whole community accepting the law is free to devote ample time to spiritual perfection. Observance of the law obviates social evils and entirely prevents the killing economic competition. And if it is regarded as a law laying down, not the rights or the privileges of the community governed by it, but their duties, it ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth, though it may not be an ideal, i.e. strictly equal,
distribution. Therefore, when people in disregard of the law mistake duties for privileges and try to pick and choose occupation of self-advancement, it leads to confusion of varna and ultimate disruption of society. In this law, there is no question of compelling any person to follow the parental occupation against his or her aptitude; that is to say there can be no compulsion from without as there was none for, perhaps, several thousand years, during which the law of varnashrama worked without interruption. By training, the people had recognized the duty and the justice of the law, and they voluntarily lived under it. Today, nations are living in ignorance and breach of that law and they are suffering for it. The so called civilized nations have by no means reached a state, which they can at all regard with equanimity and satisfaction.\(^{30}\)

Gandhi was to emphasize repeatedly the theme that personal character was not always hereditary, that not all Brahmins were virtuous.

"Varna is determined by birth but can be retained only by observing its obligations. One born of Brahma parents will be called a Brahma, but if his life fails to reveal the attribute of a Brahmin when he comes of age, he cannot be called a Brahmin. He will have fallen from Brahminhood. On the other hand, one who is born not as Brahmin but reveals in his conduct the attribute of a Brahmin, though he will himself disclaims the label."\(^{31}\)

Though Gandhi claims that both varnasyastha and jativyastha are separate categories, yet he fails to explain where and how the theory of pollution emerges from. Gandhian philosophy in its metaphysical construct does not allow questioning the basic presuppositions of varnasyastha and jativyastha and hence, remains a contested terrain, which has been pointed out by Bhikhu Parekh and Ronald J. Terchek in diverse ways. For Ronald Terchek, caste is not a metaphysical construct; rather it is a reality that merges out of daily experiences. He points out that Gandhi’s position/stand on caste is very much based on presumptions of Hindu worldview. Bhikhu Parekh on the other hand critiques Gandhi’s position but at the same time provides reasons to justify Gandhi’s views on metaphysical foundation of varnasyastha. However, Bhikhu does not accept Gandhi’s distinction between ontology and epistemology of varnasyastha, and hence it is still pertinent to know the philosophical hermeneutics of caste system and its evaluations that emerge from Gandhian Scholarship on the notion of varnasyastha and
Jativyastha, though the dichotomous relation between the two is completely mistaken, if one analyze Gandhi on varnavyastha and caste.

Gandhi’s ideas of varnavyastha and caste system have been critiqued and criticized by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The critique of Ambedkar offers us new insights and dialogical rationality to re-evaluate Gandhi’s ideas and efficacy of Gandhian understanding of caste system, though it would be separate question to address as to how far Ambedkar’s critique of Gandhian understanding is justified. However, it supplements Gandhi and opens up the new possibilities of emancipation and liberation of untouchables. At the same time Ambedkar’s critique also highlights the limitations and contradictions of Gandhi’s ideas on caste system.

Gandhi places great importance to the values and duties attached to one’s varnas. Gandhi maintains his faith in the varna system but condemns the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system. We find a very interesting debate between Dr. B R. Ambedkar and Gandhi in criticizing the caste system. Ambedkar stated in a message to Gandhi:

“The outcaste is a bye-product of the caste system. There will be outcasts as long 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 the Hindu faith of this odious and vicious dogma.”

To which Gandhi replied

“I do not believe the caste system, even as distinguished from the varnashrama, to be an ‘odious and vicious dogma’. It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability, and, if it is a by-product of the caste system. It is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body, or weeds of a crop. It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of the weeds. The outcaste-ness in the sense we understand it, has, therefore, to be destroyed altogether. It is an excess to 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-lowness’. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified.”
Gandhi seems to nowhere compromise that the varna-system has done any wrong to the society. But if we closely study the work of Ambedkar, we find that Gandhi seems to be living in an idealized world where he wants the reform in the society should come from the upper caste Brahmins. Gandhi seems to be biased in his approach towards the caste hierarchy. Gandhi gives no space to the active participation of the outcaste or the untouchables for their emancipation.

Here it is important to discuss Ambedkar's ideas in which he critiques Gandhi's views on caste, religion and its consequences for untouchables and Indian society at large. In modern times, Ambedkar emerged as a powerful philosopher and political leader to philosophize the Indian social reality from Dalit perspective and led different struggles to liberate dalits from the clutches of the caste system. As a pragmatic thinker, he has devised many strategies for the emancipation of dalits.

Ambedkar's philosophy is essentially 'ethical' and 'religious'. He worked out social relations and politics from the point of morality. His idea of democracy based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity are derived from Buddhism. His conception of religion is humanistic rather than authoritative and God centered. His religion is civilized rather than antique and is rationalistic and based on irrational faith. Thus, his religion is not discriminatory. He is concerned more about the philosophy of religion rather than mere religion. He has seen the source for politics and law in the religion, which is moral. The pragmatic thinker, John Dewey, and the British intellectual and conservative thinker Edmund Burke influenced him to place religion in political discourse. Among the historical religions, he considered the indigenous and humanistic religion Buddhism as the ideal for dalits against the dominant Brahminical Hinduism, after weighing down all other options. In this connection, he placed Buddhism as spiritual value for mankind requires rather the materialistic socialism. However, he appreciated the ends of both Marxism and Buddhism are same, only means differ.

In other words, religion occupied the central place in the political discourse of the struggles of the dalits. Dalit writers' identification with religion is complex in understanding as the case with dalits. In this situation, they are
many claims on religion. Dalits religion and culture is different from hegemonic brahminical Hinduism. Their religion is most naturalistic than super natural, more democratic than authoritarian, more humane than oppressive. To certain extent, Kancha Ilaiah’s ‘why I’m not Hindu’ may represent this position.34

The reformed Hinduism is the prominent position offered by Gandhi. He advocates hindusm of varnasramadhrama by reforming it by fighting against the practice of untouchability. As Ambedkar too initially made an attempt to reform the Hinduism and finds this is a wasteful effort. Later, he made his mind to convert in to buddhism, the indigenous religion after a careful evaluation. There is another position that goes against the very idea of religion itself by identifying it as a false consciousness. This is generally identified with the Marxist position. Apart from this, dalits are also converted into religion like Islam in the Nizam state and into Christianity in the time of British for the sake of human dignity and material benefits.

In the writings of upper caste people Hindu religious world prominently reflects. As the Brahmanism valorizes the nationalist movement, so it is the case with Brahmin intellectuals and writers. The project of reforming within Hinduism of Gandhi and outside the Hinduism by Ambedkar testifies different positions in the situation of nationalist movement. In tune with Gandhi, most of the brahminal nationalist intellectuals are worried about the dalits opting out of Hinduism and especially converting into Christianity.

Gandhi wished to save Hinduism by abolishing untouchability, whereas Ambedkar saw a solution for his people outside the fold of the dominant religion of the Indian people. Gandhi was a rural romantic, who wished to make the self-governing village the bedrock of free India; Ambedkar an admirer of city life and modern technology who dismissed the Indian village as a den of iniquity. Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured non-violent protest while being suspicious of the state; Ambedkar a steadfast constitutionalist, who worked within the state and sought solutions to social problems with the aid of the state.

Perhaps the most telling difference was in the choice of political instrument. For Gandhi, the Congress represented all of India, the Dalits too.
Had he not made their cause their own from the time of his first ashram in South Africa? Ambedkar however made a clear distinction between freedom and power. The Congress wanted the British to transfer power to them, but to obtain freedom the Dalits had to organise himself or herself as a separate bloc, to form a separate party, so as to more effectively articulate their interests in the domains of electoral politics and Indian democracy.

Gandhi further claims that

“I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra, but as an Atishudra.”

Here Gandhi’s deep sense of sympathy and sensitivity towards down trodden and untouchables, underlies how he thought about the possibility of emancipatory political agenda through which the caste system can be wiped out but Gandhi does not question the theory of re-birth and its metaphysical foundations to eradicate the untouchability. Therefore, we find Gandhi a very humanist yet he does not offer a concrete solution free from any metaphysical beliefs which can be practiced in everyday life of individuals, who are victim of the age old inequalities and consequently, which denied the basic human dignity and social justice.

Gandhi further observes

“The claim advanced on behalf of the Brahmins as to vegetarianism is not wholly true. It is true only regarding the Brahmins of the south. But elsewhere they freely eat fish, and in Bengal, Kashmir, etc., even meat. Moreover in the South all meat-eaters and fish-eaters are not unapproachable. And even an ‘unapproachable’ who is severely pure is an out caste because he is born in a family lawfully regarded as ‘untouchable’ or ‘unapproachable’. Do not Brahmins brush shoulders with meat-eating non-Brahmins if they happen to be persons in authority? Do they not pay respect to the meat-eating Hindu royalty?”

Here we find Gandhi’s deep sense of solidarity towards the diversity of Brahmins and their eating habits but it does not devalue and disrespect the
Gandhi further differentiated between untouchability and varna. He notes that “the difference, therefore, between the caste system and untouchability is not one of degree, but of kind. An ‘untouchable’ is outside the pale of respectable society. He is hardly treated as a human being. He is an out caste hurled into an abyss by his fellow-beings occupying the same platform. The difference, therefore, is somewhat analogous to the difference between heaven and hell.

There is one thing more to be remembered about the caste system. For me, it is not the same as Varnashrama. Whilst the caste system is an answer to the social need, Varnashrama is based upon the Hindu scriptures. Not so the caste system. While there are innumerable castes (some dying out and new ones coming into being), the Varnas are, and have always been, four. I am a firm believer in Varnashrama. I have not hesitated before now to consider it as a gift of Hinduism to mankind. Acceptance of that Dharma is, so far as I have been able to see, a condition of spiritual growth. The four divisions are not a vertical section, but a horizontal plane on which all stand on a footing of equality, doing the services respectively assigned to them.”

But if we critically see, we find that in human history religion has multiple functions. Religions evolved through human societies. Religion has always been a contentious point in many occasions. In the conflicts between ‘tradition and modernity’, ‘religious and secular’, ‘irrational and scientific’, ‘conservative and revolutionary’ – religion has been placed central in all its discourses. As a result, religion has not only endured from past and also undergone into many changes with changing times.

There is no doubt that religion carries tradition and culture and offers specific value system. In simple terms, it regulates human life. Whenever human beings and their societies are under crisis and facing uncertainty, then the idea of God and religion become powerful. Where the power of reason ends, there the faith in God emerges so powerful. Naturally, for the poor and
weak people, religion meets as their social imagination as a way out from suffering and everyday oppression.

On the other hand, rich people, whether it is feudal or capitalist class used religion as an instrument to exploit the masses. Invocation of religion helps in maintaining the status quo. It reveals that same religion has different meanings based on the identification of social agency or community. Here Gandhi’s stands on the varna-ashrama become paradoxical. Dalits in India are poor and exploited by the dominant castes/classes in all possible ways. They are victims of the caste system. Their freedom often goes restricted. Their access to resources, knowledge and public space got denied for centuries. They are discriminated, insulted and humiliated in the name of caste.

The Hindu social order keeps them forever subordinate to the brahminical forces. The Hindu religion through its philosophy and social practices committed to maintain the hierarchical, discriminatory and exploitative and inhuman system. Against this, there are many struggles took place in different forms in different times.

When we critically see Gandhi from the point of view of Ambedkar we find that there was a vast difference in points of view, with Ambedkar stressing the need for political power for the Dalits, and with Gandhi arguing for reform and protection from above: Gandhi feared that Ambedkar’s claim for the whole of the untouchable of India would create a division in Hinduism which Gandhi rejects. Gandhi says: "Those who speak of the political rights of untouchables do not know their India, do not know how Indian society today constructed, and therefore I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing I would resist with my life."38

Ambedkar was burningly aware of the real issue of power politics in the process, and continued to view the fundamental difference as that between Gandhi’s claim to represent the interest of untouchables by reforming Hindu Society and the need of the Dalits to liberate themselves through political power. The difference between the two surfaced as soon as Gandhi started
his League Against Untouchability (Which was to become the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*) and Ambedkar attempted to intervene. There were two issues: whether the League/Sangh would be controlled by the caste Hindus or whether the *Dalits* would have at least a share in control; and whether it would seek only to ‘abolish ‘untouchability’ or aim at the abolition of *chaturvarnya* itself. Gandhi firmly held out for caste Hindu control on the grounds that since untouchability was an ‘evil’ of Hinduism that had to be purged, Hindus themselves must do this; thus he also stressed that he was not against *chaturvarnya* as a system.

Ambedkar is a figure that commands great respect from one end of the social spectrum. But he is also, among some non-*Dalits*, an object of great resentment, chiefly for his decision to carve out a political career independent of and sometimes in opposition to Gandhi. Ambedkar was confirmed in his belief that the caste system was exploitative and that autonomy was necessary. ‘untouchability was not just a peripheral evil that could be removed without basic changes in the system; the system was inherently exploitative. Since only the exploited can remove exploitation by destroying a system and fighting their exploiters, autonomy was necessary; ‘the emancipation of *Dalits* had to be the act of *Dalits* themselves’. This gave Ambedkar a natural tendency to look to Marxism, the theory and practice of historical materialism, which also stressed exploitation, contradiction and the self-emancipation of the exploited.

The tragedy, from Gandhi’s point of view, was that his colleagues in the national movement either did not understand his concern with untouchability or even actively deplored it. Priests and mostly *shankaracharyas* considered that he was going too fast in his challenge to caste - and why did he not first take their permission? Communists wondered as to why he wanted everyone to clean their own latrines when he could be speaking of class struggle. And Congressmen in general thought Harijan work came in the way of an all-out effort for national freedom.

The only way with Gandhi to eradicate the evils of untouchability was the non violent way. He was a man who practiced first and then preached. But there is difference of opinion in Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s position.
One of the few Gandhians who understood the cogency of the Dalit critique of the Congress was C. Rajagopalachari. In the second half of 1932, Rajaji became involved in the campaign to allow the so-called untouchables to enter the Guruvayoor temple in Kerala. That doughty fighter for the rights of the dispossessed, K. Kelappan Nair, led the campaign. In a speech at Guruvayoor on December 20, 1932, Rajaji told the high castes that it would certainly help us in the fight for Swaraj if we open the doors of the temple (to Harijans). One of the many causes that keep Swaraj away from us is that we are divided among ourselves.

In this chapter, we have mapped out Gandhi’s ideas on the caste system and his justification of the distinction between the varnayastha and jativyastha. We also made an attempt to pin point the limitations of Gandhi’s thinking on varnayastha and caste, through the multi layered critiques that emerged from the philosophy of Ambedkar and recent contemporary scholars. However, it is still quite puzzling where we do not find the clear-cut answers of complete annihilation of caste system from the Indian society. However, Gandhian ideas are premised on the principles of non-violence and the theory of moral action that emerges from these principles elaborately speaks for the end-means account. Subsequently, we have seen that caste system is a category of social experience through which different kinds of exclusions, deprivations and disadvantages have been practiced. But there are other social categories of experiences through which Indian society has been going through the ages; they are based on gender disparity and class inequality. Therefore, in order to address these issues, we need to analyze the categories of deprivation and see whether Gandhi’ method is adequately tackle the problems of the caste system and provides practicable solution and ways to wipe out the dehumanizing and discriminatory practices associated with this menace. At the same time, we would like to maintain that Gandhian method is quite unique and novel in the history of political philosophy; but it needs to have an interwoven dialogue with other modes of critical inquiries and engagements where it limits the ontology of social emancipation.
Notes and References


17. *Young India*, January 11, 1921, p.3.

18. *Young India*, April 27, 1921, p.645.


25. Ibid., p.82.

26. Ibid., p.82.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., p. 139.

30. Ibid., p. 141.

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32. Ibid., p. 318.

33. Ibid., pp. 319-20.


35. Gandhi, M.K. *All Are Equal In The Eyes Of God*, Selections From Mahatma Gandhi, Publications Division New Delhi, Young India, May 4,1921, p. 9.

36. Ibid., p. 11.
