Was Gandhi a ‘Champion of the Caste System’?
Reflections on His Practices

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s views on the caste system is sought to be understood through three approaches: by exploring his personal practices with regard to caste; by studying how community life was organised in Gandhi’s ashrams, since the way of life in these ashrams reflects his philosophy of life; and by reflecting on some explanations that have been put forward to explain the inconsistencies between Gandhi’s practices and his writings, where he explicitly defends caste.

I am a much misrepresented man if I am also a somewhat esteemed man. —(Gandhi 1958: Vol 95, p 169)

There is no dearth of work on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the caste system—a vast literature is already available on this subject but, with some variations, most of these works can be roughly divided into two groups. The first group includes the works of those scholars who believe that Gandhi accepted the caste system in toto as the “natural order of society”—as a system that promotes control and discipline and is sanctioned by religion. The second group includes the works of those scholars who believe that Gandhi’s attitude towards caste evolved over time. However, the common limitation of both these views is that they are largely derived from some of Gandhi’s writings or speeches, and in the process of reaching these conclusions, Gandhi’s practices are neglected. But as Raghavan N Iyer (2000: 4) suggests, political thinkers cannot be properly studied without paying attention to their personalities and practice but when we turn to Gandhi, we find it peculiarly difficult to study his nature and activities. Gandhi also very categorically says, “What you do not get from my conduct, you will never get from my words” (1958: Vol 73, p 145). He goes one step further and suggests, “As a matter of fact my writings should be cremated with my body.” This does not mean, however, that Gandhi’s writings are not to be carefully examined; he wanted his writings to be taken seriously, but what he meant was that he can be best judged or understood by his conduct rather than his writings; and if some contradictions or inconsistencies appear in his writings, then they should be resolved in light of his practices. Gandhi himself says, “To understand what I say one needs to understand my conduct …” (1958: Vol 51, p 352). Hence, in this paper, his approach towards caste restrictions and ritual obligations will be examined to better understand his views on caste.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part explores Gandhi’s personal practices with regard to caste restrictions and religious obligations; the second part explores how community life in Gandhi’s different ashrams was organised, since it reflected the basic principles of Gandhi’s philosophy of life and can be seen as an extension of his own practices; the third part reflects on some explanations that are generally put forward to clarify some of Gandhi’s writings in which he explicitly defends and validates caste, varna, and some of its restrictions. This paper argues that there are inconsistencies between Gandhi’s writings and practices, and writings that

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fail to do justice to his general philosophical outlook must be rejected.

Gandhi’s Personal Practices
Lavanam Gora and Mark Lindley (2007: 105) write that in Gandhi’s days, traditional Hindu caste distinctions involved four basic rules:

(i) Untouchability: to avoid touching or, in Malabar, avoid even looking at “untouchables” if you were not one yourself.
(ii) Restriction on commensality: to avoid eating with anyone of a lower caste than oneself.
(iii) Endogamy: to marry within one’s own caste.
(iv) Hereditary occupation: to follow one’s parent’s vocation.

Gandhi’s personal attitude towards the practice of such caste restrictions, as well as his observance of other religious obligations, will be analysed in this section.

Untouchability: The Hindu masses practised untouchability as part of their caste obligations. In general, the practice revolved around avoiding physical contact with particular groups to save oneself from being “polluted.” Gandhi, at a conference in Ahmedabad on 13 April 1921, narrated an incident from his childhood when he was hardly 12 years old. The story was of Uka—a scavenger—who used to visit Gandhi’s house to clean the latrines. Gandhi recounted that although he (Gandhi) had been a very dutiful and obedient child when it came to respecting his parents, he had often had tussles with them when they asked him to perform ablutions after accidentally touching Uka (1958: Vol 19, pp 569–75). Referring to this story, Pyarelal Nayyar, Gandhi’s personal secretary and biographer, writes that this event planted in Gandhi’s soul a seed of rebellion against the institution of untouchability (1965: 217). Another story which brings to light Gandhi’s attitude towards the practice of untouchability is contained in his autobiography. When his wife refused to clean the chamber-pot of his Christian clerk, a man born to untouchable parents, he declared that he would not stand this nonsense in his house and caught her by the hand and dragged her to the gate with the intention of pushing her out (Gandhi 2001: 225). In his autobiography, he also writes that “In South Africa untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me” (Gandhi 2001: 360).

A different kind of untouchability related to maleses is generally practised among many Hindu orthodox communities. Here, women are treated as untouchable during their periods. During this time, they are not allowed to enter places of worship or even the kitchen. Also, their touch is considered to be polluting. In one of his letters to Miraben, Gandhi described his views on these practices: “I think I told you that so far as I am concerned, I never respected the rule even with reference to Ba herself. And when I began to see things clearer, I never felt the call to have the rule observed” (1958: Vol 34, p 401). Several of his letters to different persons show that he did not practise this kind of menstruation-related untouchability with other women either.

Apart from all this, it is important to know that when he returned to India from South Africa, he brought with him an “untouchable” boy name Naiker. He also adopted an “untouchable” girl, Lakshmi, as his daughter. She used to live in his ashram and often travelled with him. Therefore, it can be argued that Gandhi showed a remarkable irreverence towards the practice of untouchability based on notions of purity and pollution from a very young age.

Inter-dining and inter-caste marriage: Hindus also observed several rules pertaining to endogamy and commensality. Endogamy forbids marriages among persons of different castes. One could only marry within one’s own caste. Commensality restrictions stipulated that neither should the members of one caste eat in the company of any other caste, nor should they eat food cooked by any person of a lower caste. Gandhi’s family belonged to the Vaishnava sect of Gujarat, which followed strict restrictions with regard to meat-eating. However, in his autobiography, Gandhi writes that in his childhood days he had had “not more than half a dozen meat-feasts” in the company of a friend, a Muslim boy identified as Sheikh Mehtab by many of his biographers (Tendulkar 1960: 26–27; Nayyar 1965: 209–10). Also, he admitted that during his stay in England, he had eaten at restaurants as well as at the home of an Englishman. He declared that he had no objections to eating food prepared at European hotels or by a Christian or a Mohammedan, as long as it consisted of ingredients edible by him (Gandhi 1964: 92–100). In his autobiography, Gandhi says that he used to invite English friends and Indian co-workers to eat at his home. He would also regularly visit a Christian family for dinner and eat his vegetarian food in their company while they ate their non-vegetarian food. When Gandhi started living in Segaon near Wardha, Govind, a man who was an untouchable by caste, generally prepared food for him (Sinha 1962: 93). All these examples reveal that from the very early years of his life, Gandhi disregarded caste restrictions that dictated that one should dine only within one’s own caste. They also reveal that throughout his life, he ate with people of different faiths and castes, including untouchables. In his autobiography, Gandhi states: “I had no scruples about inter-dining” (Gandhi 2001: 96).

While in South Africa, Gandhi was instrumental in orchestrating the marriage of Henry Polak, a Jew, with Millie Graham Downs, a Scottish Christian. After their marriage, the couple lived in Gandhi’s Johannesburg house for almost a year. They also shifted to the Phoenix settlement when Gandhi moved with his family there (Weber 2011: 156). Recalling their marriage in his autobiography, Gandhi writes: “They needed no religious rites to seal the bond. Mrs Polak was a Christian by birth and Polak a Jew. Their common religion was the religion of ethics” (Gandhi 2001: 282). It is worth noting that Gandhi not only allowed his son Ramadas1 to marry someone from a different sub-caste, but also allowed his son Devadas2 to marry a girl who was from another varna altogether. He also, by design, married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was untouchable by birth, to a Brahmin boy3 in 1933. On many
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occasions, Gandhi expressed his support for inter-caste marriages.4

Hereditary occupations: Hereditary occupations are understood to be one of the most important characteristics of the caste system. Each caste is assigned a particular type of work, and every Hindu is expected to follow his hereditary occupation. In the first paragraph of his autobiography, Gandhi writes that over the last three generations, his family has not been pursuing their hereditary or traditional duties. He himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors’ calling. He also let his children choose their own professions and never pressed them to follow any pursuits prescribed by their caste. Moreover, he tried to learn skills associated with activities prohibited to his caste, such as the work of a scavenger, barber, washerman, cobbler, tailor, and barber. He also taught many of these skills to his children, wife, and co-workers. It is also interesting to note that at two occasions when Gandhi was arrested (first on 10 March 1922 and second on 1 August 1933) and asked about his occupation, he replied saying, “I am by occupation a spinner, a weaver and a farmer.”

In 1908, Gandhi opened a school for the children in the Phoenix settlement as well as for Indian children from outside the settlement. In the school curriculum, there was no emphasis on teaching children their ancestors’ calling. On the other hand, every student had to learn to perform and respect manual labour. After returning to India from South Africa in 1917, Gandhi started a national school at his Indian ashram where every student was taught agriculture, hand-weaving, carpentry, and metalcraft. In this school too, there was no emphasis on preserving one’s hereditary occupation. Around 1937, Gandhi introduced a plan for basic education that Congress was expected to implement if it came to power after the general elections held under the Indian Act, 1935. Though Gandhi’s basic education scheme was craft-centred, there was no insistence that one follows one’s hereditary craft. On the other hand, every individual, irrespective of their caste and religion, was expected to learn more than one craft depending on the individual’s circumstances and environment. In short, Gandhi’s educational scheme promoted respect for manual labour without promoting the idea of hereditary professions.

Sacred books or the question of religious authority: In general, the Hindu masses accept the authority of the shastras, which include the four vedas, the upanishads, the puranas, and the two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. In Hinduism, the shastras—especially the vedas—are considered to be the word of god, and thus, are thought to be sanatani (eternal) and are accepted as the highest authority to determine truth. However, Gandhi, who proclaims himself a sanatani Hindu says, “No one can convince me, with the help of quotations from Shastras” (1958: Vol 27, p 21). He also says, “Early in my childhood I had felt the need of a scripture that would serve me as an unfailing guide through the trials and temptations of life. The vedas could not supply that need” (1958: 271). Though Gandhi has said on several occasions that he believed in the shastras, it is true that he did not accept them as the ultimate authority or the word of god. When he was asked, “Where do you find the seat of authority?” Gandhi, pointing to his breast, said, “It lies here.” He also explains: I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly. (1958: Vol 64, p 75)

It appears that although Gandhi speaks very highly of different religious scriptures and had great faith in the Hindu shastras, he never accepted them as the ultimate authority on life and never let them override his rationality and morality. On the other hand, “When Gandhi turned to Hindu (Vaishnava) texts,” Ananya Vajpeyi writes, “what he [Gandhi] sought from them was a moral—possibly even a didactic—vision that could help an individual to cultivate self-mastery and acquire self-knowledge” (2012: xix).

Some other caste restrictions and Gandhi’s practices: Gandhi, who at the age of 12 years opposed the doctrine of untouchability, also opposed other codes of the caste system at a very early age. His autobiography tells us that during his time, his caste was prohibited from travelling abroad. Although his fellow caste members were agitated and the caste head—Sheth—declared that if he went to England for studies he would be treated as an outcaste, he still sailed for England to study law. In Hinduism, every man of the upper three varnas is expected to wear the sacred thread—upavita—after going through a religious ceremony. Gandhi, as a boy belonging to one of the three upper varnas, had had such a religious ceremony in his childhood and had worn this sacred thread. But in his autobiography, he writes, “Later, when, the thread gave way, I do not remember whether I missed it very much. But I know that I did not go for a fresh one” (Gandhi 2001: 335). Gandhi’s family belonged to the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism, and in his childhood, he had worn the shikha and the tulasi-kanthi (necklace of tulasi beads) that were considered obligatory. He writes, “On the eve of my going to England, however, I got rid of the shikha.” He also says, “I got my cousin Chhaganlal Gandhi, who was religiously wearing the shikha, to do away with it” (Gandhi 2001: 335). While in South Africa, he also gave up his tulasi-kanthi.

Temple visits, idol worship, and public prayer: Regular temple visits and idol or image worship are a part of the religious activities of a regular Hindu. Usually, Hindus visit a temple close to their homes and worship an idol of their individual preference. Joseph Lelyveld (2011: 194), in his recent biography of Gandhi, notes that “Gandhi hardly ever prayed in temples.” Gora and Lindley (2007: 91) also state that “Gandhi was not the kind of Hindu who accepts the authority of priests or even attends temple.” Gandhi explains his thoughts on temple worship in his autobiography:

Being born in the Vaishnav faith, I had often to go the haveli (temple). But it never appealed to me. I did not like its glitter and pomp. Also I
heard rumours of immorality being practised there, and lost all interest in it. Hence I could gain nothing from the haveli. (2001: 45)

This does not mean that he never visited temples later in life, but that his attitude towards them remained the same. Later, in 1933, he also very explicitly said, “I do not visit temples. I feel no need to go to temples; hence I do not visit them” (Gandhi 1958: Vol 54, p 129). His approach to idol worship was similar. He never used idols or images during his prayers. He once said, “An idol does not excite any feeling of veneration in me” (Gandhi 1958: Vol 21, p 249).

It appears that the only caste restriction he observed consistently was vegetarianism, and the only traditional ritual he performed regularly was prayer. He was no doubt a man of prayer, and he was very particular and sincere about his prayers which followed a very strict timetable. However, his way of praying was his own creation and does not match anything in the Hindu tradition. No images or idols were used in Gandhi’s prayer meetings, which were held not in a temple or any special place, but more often than not under the open sky. Devotional songs from different religions and readings from a variety of religious holy books made up the core of his public prayers. Gandhi would make a “prayer address” instead of a sermon which would usually dwell on the political events of the day or the social challenges that needed to be met (Chatterjee 1983: 111–13). It should be remembered that his numerous public prayers were part of his political struggle; and for him, political struggle was part of his search for God. As far as religious practice is concerned, Gandhi was neither a temple-goer nor an idol-worshipper. And though he used to pray every day, his style of prayer was very different from the traditional manner of prayer.

Gandhi did not practise vegetarianism because of religious or caste-based obligations. Although a vegetarian, Gandhi comfortably ate in the company of meat-eaters. In his autobiography, he confesses that he had gone to London as a convinced meat-eater, but had all along abstained from actually eating meat in the interest of truth and keeping in mind the vow he had made to his mother. However, he wished at the same time that every Indian were a meat-eater, and he declared that he looked forward to being one openly some day and to enlisting others in the cause. He tells the reader that after reading Salt’s book, Plea for Vegetarianism, he became a vegetarian by choice (Gandhi 2001: 59). At another point in his autobiography, he writes that his views on vegetarianism were not influenced by any religious texts (Gandhi 2001: 297). Hence, though he practised very strict vegetarianism, it was a personal commitment for him rather than a matter of religion or caste.

In this section, this paper has presented an analysis of Gandhi’s personal practices and his attitude towards several caste restrictions and other important Hindu religious observations and beliefs. It can also be seen that Gandhi’s practices cannot be considered signs of orthodoxy in any way. He seems to be a reformer if not a revolutionary in breaking caste restrictions and other Hindu religious traditions and beliefs. To emphasise the same point further, a brief account of how life was organised in Gandhi’s ashrams is presented in the next section.

Life in Gandhi’s Ashrams

Another way to examine if Gandhi was a reformer or an orthodox Hindu is to look at the way of life practised in Gandhi’s different ashrams. Here, life was organised along the basic principles of Gandhi’s philosophy, and the ashrams can be seen as an extension of Gandhi’s personal practices. Once Gandhi himself said, “The Ashram is the measuring rod by which people can judge me” (1958: Vol 53, p 291). In his lifetime, Gandhi founded four ashrams at different times and at different places and with different objectives. The first was the Phoenix settlement founded in 1904 near Phoenix station, South Africa; the second was Tolstoy Farm established in 1910 near Johannesburg, South Africa; the third, Satyagraha Ashram (also known as Sabarmati Ashram), was set up in 1915 near Ahmedabad, India; and the fourth, Sevagram Ashram was founded in 1936 near Wardha, India. Gandhi’s own writings as well as other biographies reveal that the first ashram, Phoenix, was set up to save money to ensure the success of India Opinion, a weekly journal published by Gandhi. The second—Tolstoy Farm—was meant to be a home for imprisoned satyagrahis and their families. The third—Satyagraha Ashram—aimed at training young men, women, and children to serve the motherland. It appears that initially there had been no plans for a fourth ashram, but Wardha came up spontaneously and can be considered an extension of Satyagraha Ashram, its objective being similar. While each ashram had its own objectives, they shared a common aim of experimenting with living a simple life to realise the dignity of human labour, as explained in John Ruskin’s Unto This Last. These ashrams were clearly not established with the aim of building an ideal community along the principles of the Hindu caste system or varnashrama dharma.

Not only were the settlers at each of Gandhi’s ashrams a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals from different castes and religions, but there was also no strict division of labour amongst them. Every settler, irrespective of caste, religion, or gender had to do daily manual labour. Everyone had to perform every kind of work including cooking, gardening, cleaning, scavenging, shaving, and cutting hair on a rotational basis. Untouchability was not practised in any form in the ashrams; even the common practice of treating women as untouchable during their menses was not practised in the ashram (Gandhi 1958). Though every inmate had to observe the vow of celibacy, many inter-caste marriages were organised in the ashrams. At Sabarmati Ashram, on the occasion of his son Ramadas’s marriage, Gandhi said,

The wedding just celebrated would perhaps be for the Ashram the last as between parties belonging to the same caste. It behoved people in the Ashram to take the lead in this respect, because people outside might find it difficult to initiate the reform. The rule should be on the part of the Ashram to discountenance marriages between parties of the same caste and to encourage those between parties belonging to different sub-castes. (1958: Vol 35, p 500)

Gandhi also allowed the solemnising of the wedding of a Brahmin, A G Tendulkar, and an untouchable woman, Indumati, at Sevagram Ashram on 19 August 1945.5

In all of Gandhi’s ashrams, there was a single kitchen, and all dined in a single row. The food was simple and strictly
vegetarian. But at Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi was determined that “If the Christians and Musalmans asked even for beef, that too must be provided for them.” However, Gandhi was happy because “neither the women nor the men ever asked for meat” (Gandhi 2003: 216). Just as there was a common kitchen at every ashram, there were also common prayers. All the ashram inmates were expected to participate in the common prayer, which was held in the morning from 5:00 am to 5:30 am and in the evening from 6:30 pm to 7:00 pm. Devotional songs and readings from the holy books of different religions constituted the core of the prayer sessions. No idols or images were used during these prayers. Therefore, it is clear that Gandhi’s experiments with simple living and community life cannot be seen as a sign of religious orthodoxy. In no way can they be interpreted as an effort to organise human life along the basic principles of the caste system or varanashrama dharma. On the contrary, the experiments are to be seen as an effort to break caste, community, and religious arrogance and discrimination.

The above exploration of Gandhi’s personal practices and of cooperative life in his ashrams shows that from a very young age, Gandhi revolted against the practice of caste restrictions. He himself violated every restriction assigned to his own caste. In no way can his actions be seen as a sign of orthodoxy or conservativeness. However, some of his writings, where he explicitly defends and validates some aspects of caste and the restrictions that come with it, reveal an entirely different picture of Gandhi’s attitude towards caste. However, no proper and final conclusion about this can be drawn without providing an appropriate explanation for it.

Overview of Literature/Mystery of Gandhi’s Writings

There are many scholars who have contemplated and wondered about some of Gandhi’s writings where he defends and validates caste and some of the practices associated with it. Some of them have seen it as evidence of Gandhi’s faith in the caste system; they have also tried to provide possible justifications for why Gandhi finds caste, varna, and some of its restrictions useful. Some other scholars believe that the inconsistencies in his writings reveal that there were gradual changes or a slow development in his ideas on such subjects. There are also some scholars who have argued that Gandhi’s defence of the caste system in some of his writings is part of a larger strategy. Here, in this section, an effort is made to examine some of such explanations of Gandhi’s writings in which he defends and validates the caste system. This paper argues that explanations that fail to not only explain the inconsistencies between Gandhi’s practices and some of his writings, but which also fail to do justice to his general philosophical outlook, must be rejected. This section presents a reflection on the following explanations.

Gandhi’s belief in the caste system in toto: There are a good number of scholars who sincerely hold that Gandhi believed in the caste system in toto. These scholars can be further divided into two groups for our analysis—the first are Dalit scholars and the second are Gandhian scholars. Most Dalit scholars argue that Gandhi was an outstanding product of the Hindu orthodox milieu. According to them, he resisted any change in the basic social structure of Hindu society, and he was the one who, more than anyone else, defended and validated the caste system when its legitimacy was being seriously challenged and its existence seemed precarious. For instance, Parimala V Rao writes “Gandhi inherited a Congress which already had a powerful pro-caste group. Added to this was the personal commitment that Gandhi himself had vis-à-vis the defence of the institution of caste” (2009: 64–70). Another scholar, Braj Ranjan Mani, writes He [Gandhi] was a bania more brahmanised than Brahmins; his world-view and life philosophy were moulded and shaped by the age-old brahmanic values and way of life. […], he never gave up his basic belief in the brahmanic fundamentalism which is evident from his constant evocation of varanashrama, Ram-raja and trusteeship. (2008: 348)

One of the important limitations of this view held by Dalit scholars is that the primary objective of their study is not to understand Gandhi and his views on caste and other related issues; their primary field of study is Ambedkar or the Dalit movement and they see Gandhi and his movement in relation to it or in contrast against Ambedkar to better understand Ambedkar and his contribution to the upliftment of the Dalits. For instance, Kancha Ilaiah writes, “The fundamental difference between these two thinkers lies in positioning themselves from their own communities.” He adds further that “Ambedkar was not only born in an untouchable Mahar family but all through his life stood for the suppressed, oppressed and exploited masses. Gandhi on the other hand, was born in a Baniya family and stood for the oppressor and exploiting upper castes” (Ilaiah 2001: 126). Therefore, most Dalit scholars’ studies assume that Gandhi believed in the caste system because of his personal belief in the Brahmanical world view which he inherited by virtue of being born in an upper caste Hindu family.

However, these views appear problematic when we consider Gandhi’s personal practices which show that he openly violated most of the important restrictions of the caste system, and that he built ashrams which were founded on principles that rejected all the basic rules of varanashrama dharma. It is also important to note that the purpose of the present study is not to engage with the Dalit scholars’ critique of Gandhi’s approach to caste. This section aims to identify the different justifications given by different scholars to vindicate their claims regarding Gandhi views on the caste system. This paper argues that in the light of Gandhi’s actual practice, the Dalit scholars’ view that Gandhi believed in the caste system because he personally believed in the Brahmanical world view seems to be problematic. In contrast to Dalit scholars, Gandhian scholars focus on Gandhi’s life and provide different reasons for holding the view that Gandhi believed in the caste system. The following sub-section analyses some of the justifications offered by Gandhian scholars to argue that Gandhi believed in the caste system in toto.

Caste provides a livelihood for millions of villagers: Prominent Gandhian scholar, Margaret Chatterjee, makes some
passing references to Gandhi’s views on caste and the possible justifications for it. She writes:

Gandhi spoke in favour of following one’s hereditary occupation. What was behind it, I believe, was his perception of the undeniable fact that industrialisation would gradually erode the network of traditional occupations that had provided a livelihood for villagers for centuries. […] Industrial civilisation would never be able to provide a livelihood for the teeming millions of India. (Chatterjee 1983: 19–20)

Although it seems to be a very unorthodox and fairly convincing argument, both of Chatterjee’s claims—first, that Gandhi rejected industrialisation because he believed that it would not be able to provide a livelihood for millions of Indians; and second, that he preferred and propagated hereditary modes of occupation over industrialisation for resolving India’s economic problems—need to be examined before they may be accepted as appropriate explanations for Gandhi’s defence of the caste system and hereditary occupations in his writing.

It is a fact that on many occasions Gandhi criticised industrialisation because he was afraid that it would lead to unemployment in India. It is also a fact that for more than two decades, Gandhi had sought to persuade the masses to adopt the charkha and khadi, which he hoped would serve as an alternative to industrialisation and would provide a livelihood to millions in India. But in 1944, Gandhi altered his position somewhat and proposed a “New Khadi Philosophy.” This new philosophy was based on the principle that rural production must be primarily for self-consumption and not for sale. He says:

At least this much should be clear to all that khadi is not an occupation or a craft merely for earning a livelihood. None of us should harbour this idea. For, if khadi is an industry it would have to be run purely on business lines. The difference between khadi and mill-cloth would then be that while a mill provides employment to a few thousand people in a city, khadi brings a crore of rupees to those scattered about in fifteen thousand villages. Both must then be classified as industries, and we would hardly be justified in asking anybody to put on khadi and boycott mill-cloth. Nor can such khadi claim to be the herald of swaraj. (Gandhi 1958: Vol 78, p 192)

Indeed, what Gandhi suggested was completely different from the idea that spinning would provide a livelihood to millions of Indians. Instead, he made an attempt to immediately stop the spinning of yarn for sale. He believed that khadi work-ers should persuade and educate people to spin for their own use. Moreover, when Srikrishandas Jaju, secretary of the All India Spinners' Association (AISA), pointed out that this would mean the khadi stores in cities would have to close down and that three lakh spinners connected with the khadi organisation would lose their income, Gandhi insisted, “Close them down.”

It is obvious now that for Gandhi, the danger of industrialisation was not that it would gradually erode the network of traditional occupations that had provided a livelihood for villagers for centuries, but that it would destroy values and create alienated individuals in an industrial society. He was afraid that industrialisation would turn a person into a mechanical part in the production machine. He writes,

It seems that the “issue of unemployment” was a “practical” argument that he used to persuade those who did not share his moral presuppositions. But he fundamentally viewed industrialisation with suspicion because it destroyed the autonomy of the individual and the dignity of individual labour. Since he was also aware that hereditary occupations could crush individuality,6 he did not advocate for their continuance as an alternative to industrialisation to solve the economic problems of India. Defining caste or varna as hereditary occupations and appreciating it for several reasons is one thing, and proposing that it could solve the economic problems of India is quite another. There is hardly any evidence that suggests that Gandhi advocated for traditional hereditary occupations (caste or varna) to resolve India’s economic problems. He did not set up any organisations to persuade people to follow their hereditary occupations. In addition, there are no references to hereditary occupations in his constructive programme to create an ideal village. As argued above, Gandhi used the charkha to challenge the belief of educated Indians that industrialisation would solve all of India’s economic problems; the charkha was not a symbol of hereditary occupations for Gandhi, as he did not ask a particular caste alone to spin, but tried to persuade everyone across caste, religion, gender, and economic boundaries to spin every day. For him, the charkha was a symbol of self-sufficiency and dignity of labour. Therefore, Chatterjee’s argument that Gandhi was in favour of hereditary occupations because it would provide a livelihood for the teeming millions of India is problematic.

Caste as outcome of belief in rebirth and karma: Bhikhu Parekh is another scholar who attempts to explain Gandhi’s views on caste and offers possible reasons for why Gandhi may have defended caste in his writings. He writes,

Since Gandhi believed in rebirth and the law of karma, he thought that the characteristic occupation of an individual’s caste corresponded to his natural abilities and dispositions and represented a necessary moment of his spiritual evolution. (Parekh 1989: 226)

If it is true that Gandhi in his writings expresses his faith in the doctrine of karma, it is also true that it is difficult to demonstrate that his interpretation matched the orthodox version where the occupation practised by a caste is thought to necessarily correspond to their natural abilities and dispositions due to their past karma. A close look at his writings where he evokes the doctrine of karma reveals that he does it often for pragmatic reasons and that, most of the time, it goes against the orthodox interpretation. The following quote from Gandhi, defending temple entry for untouchables, is one of the best examples of his pragmatic interpretation of the doctrine of karma. He writes,

If you believe that Harijans are in their present plight today as a result of their past sins, you must concede that they have the first right of worship in temples. God has been described by all the scriptures of the world as a Protector and Saviour of the sinner. (Gandhi 1958: Vol 55, p 304)

On other occasions, Gandhi simply rejects the orthodox understanding of the doctrine of karma—that one’s destiny is the fruit of one’s past karma. He writes,
The law of karma is no respecter of persons, but I would ask you to leave the orthodoxy to itself. Man is the maker of his own destiny, and I therefore ask you to become makers of your own destiny. (Gandhi 1958: Vol 26, p 294)

Not only his writings, but his practices also confirm his rejection of the belief that one’s present suffering is a result of one’s past karma. For instance, his decision to end the life of an incurable calf to cut short its agony is a clear rejection of the belief that one has to suffer to atone for one’s past karma. In 1928, Gandhi euthanised an incurable calf in his ashram, and when some people objected to this, he vigorously defended his act and argued that he would apply the same principle to human beings in similar circumstances (Gandhi 1958: Vol 37, p 297). It is evident that although Gandhi for some reason did not reject the doctrine of karma, he did not believe in its orthodox interpretation either. And even if Gandhi believed in rebirth, Parekh’s argument that Gandhi defended caste because he believed that one’s past karma is linked to one’s natural abilities and dispositions which represent a necessary moment of one’s spiritual evolution, seems to be problematic.

Arrangements for self-realisation and social harmony: Ramashray Roy is another scholar who has examined Gandhi’s views on caste and has proffered possible reasons why Gandhi may have advocated for the retention of the varnas or hereditary occupations. He holds that “Gandhi advocates retention of the varnas or hereditary occupations. He believes in rebirth, Parekh’s argument that Gandhi defended caste because he believed that one’s past karma is linked to one’s natural abilities and dispositions which represent a necessary moment of one’s spiritual evolution, seems to be problematic.

Arrangements for self-realisation and social harmony: Ramashray Roy is another scholar who has examined Gandhi’s views on caste and has proffered possible reasons why Gandhi may have advocated for the retention of the varnas or hereditary occupations. He holds that “Gandhi advocates retention of the varna vyavastha” because “in his view, varna vyavastha is natural and affords greater opportunities than other arrangements for self-realisation and social harmony” (Roy 1984: 111–12, 2006: 140). Roy argued that “Gandhi’s rejection of modern civilisation is total,” and this was because he believed that the goal of modern civilisation, especially in its most utilitarian forms, is simply the satisfaction of one human desire after another. Self-gratification is not only accepted but encouraged, and the higher purpose of life, which for Gandhi was self-realisation, gradually becomes obsolete. On the other hand, “A social order,” Roy adds, “of Gandhi’s conception must be treated as a yajna. As an instance of yajna, society signifies an order that is based on the phenomenon of extended selves; it must reflect the values that promote harmony, non-exploitation, equality, and participation.” Roy adds, “He [Gandhi] finds this possibility to exist only in a social order that is based on varna vyavastha. Given the ultimate end of life, that is, self-realisation, and yajna as the exclusive means of realising this end,” Roy reminds the reader that “It is in this context that we can understand why Gandhi lays so much emphasis on varna vyavastha, in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular” (2006: 140).

There are different levels of misunderstanding in such an analysis of Gandhi’s views. First, though it is true that Gandhi criticised modern civilisation because it encourages the proliferation of human wants and desires and makes the acquisition of more and more goods and material comforts the core of human life and renders obsolete the idea of self-realisation, it does not mean that Gandhi completely rejected modern civilisation and uncritically advocated for the retention of varna vyavastha. Second, Gandhi’s conception of society was based on the concept of extended selves—it must reflect values that promote harmony, non-exploitation, equality, and participation. However, Roy’s argument that Gandhi believed that this form of social harmony could exist only in a social order that is based on varna vyavastha—given the ultimate end of life, which is self-realisation—needs to be examined properly.

Indeed, Gandhi attacked all kinds of violence and domination, irrespective of whether he discovered it in the traditional (varna vyavastha) or the modern (modern civilisation) way of life. However, his criticism of modern civilisation was more explicit than his censure of traditional practices due to the historical context—Indian’s struggle against colonialism—in which he found himself. He also chose to idealise the traditional way of life for the same reason, and argued that it is the path to individual dignity and social harmony. But this does not mean that he rejected modern civilisation entirely and advocated a return to varna vyavastha.

Gandhi’s criticism of modern civilisation shows that he believed that individual dignity, social harmony, and the ultimate end of life—self-realisation—can be achieved within the boundaries of modern civilisation. As A J Pareek observes,

The correct Gandhian metaphor for modern civilisation is not ‘disease’ but ‘curable disease’: ‘civilisation is not an incurable disease.’ Hind Swaraj, in this respect, is a short treatise on ‘the malaise of modernity’ and Gandhi is one of its physicians. (1995: 62)

Gandhi’s efforts to reform modern civilisation should not be understood as him preferring modern civilisation to a traditional society that is organised on the basic principles of varna. For Gandhi, it was not a matter of preference; being a practical man, he accepted that modern civilisation is going to stay here, and hence needs to be improved. Indeed, the dominant passion of Gandhi’s life was neither improving modern civilisation nor retaining varna vyavastha through the rejection of modern civilisation. He firmly believed man to be a finite being incapable of developing social arrangements that are perfect for self-realisation; therefore, he saw no value in hankering after any specific arrangement. He had also learnt from Indian tradition that there were and will be different yugas, and therefore for Gandhi, the real work was defining yougadharma (self-realisation) that is relevant to and practicable within the context of the modern yuga. As Pareek writes:

"If we were to pick out the one dominant passion, the central organising principle of his [Gandhi’s] life, it would have to be his search for and his struggle to establish dharma appropriate to India in the modern age. (1989: 11)

Hence, to hold that Gandhi rejected modern civilisation in total and was in favour of retaining a social order that is based on varna vyavastha, because he found that “it is natural and affords greater opportunities for self-realisation and social harmony,” may not be appropriate.

Moreover, it is also not correct to say that Gandhi emphasised varna vyavastha in general, and the caste system grounded in it, in particular. Replying to a question, Gandhi
himself said, “If varnashrama goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear” (1958: Vol 35, p 522). Responding to another question at a different point, he explains that his adherence to the idea of varnashrama should not be taken very seriously:

I have gone nowhere to defend varnadhrama, though for the removal of untouchability I went to Vikom. I am the author of a Congress resolution for propagation of Khadi, establishment of Hindu–Muslim unity, and removal of untouchability, the three pillars of swaraj. But I have never placed establishment of varnashrama dharma as the fourth pillar. You cannot, therefore, accuse me of placing a wrong emphasis on varnashrama dharma. (1958: Vol 35, p 523)

Likewise, Gandhi can be neither be accused of—nor appreciated for—an emphasis on varnashrama dharma, as his practices speak otherwise. It is known that Gandhi was a man of action, and if he really believed that a society based on varna would be conducive to self-realisation, he would have lived a life in alignment with the basic principles of varna and would have organised his ashrams too along those lines. But as explained above, Gandhi neither lived his life, nor organised the way of life in any of his ashrams, on the principles of varna. One can thus conclude that Gandhi did not place undue emphasis on varna vyavastha nor on the caste system grounded in it.

**Changes in Gandhi’s opinions on caste:** Bipan Chandra, in his paper “Gandhiji, Secularism and Communalism,” makes some passing remarks on Gandhi’s views on caste. He writes,

Many quote his [Gandhi’s] statements on the caste system, inter-caste and inter-religious dining and marriages […], and so on, from his early writings. But the fact is that, while his basic commitment to human values, truth and non-violence remained constant, his opinions on all these and other issues underwent changes—sometimes drastic—and, invariably, in more radical directions. (2004: 3–4)

To justify his point, Chandra quotes from two of Gandhi’s writings, one from 1933 and the other from 1938. In the first, Gandhi says:

In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things … and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject. (Quoted in Chandra 2004: 4)

It is a fact that on more than one occasion Gandhi has mentioned that he is not at all concerned about appearing to be consistent and suggests that his last opinion be taken as final. Therefore, many scholars like Chandra have argued that there was a gradual evolution or radical changes in Gandhi’s opinion on caste and other related issues. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, which had the copyright on Gandhi’s writings, prints this quote in many of its collections of Gandhi’s writings and speeches (Gandhi 1964: 2; Gandhi 1951: 2), to make the reader aware that there were considerable changes in Gandhi’s views over time. But surprisingly enough, Gandhi never accepted that there were inconsistencies or changes in his opinions, not to speak of radical changes in his position. Before he made the above-mentioned comment, “In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things,” in the same piece of writing Gandhi also says, “As I read them [own writings] with a detached mind, I find no contradiction between the two statements, especially if they are read in their full context” (1958: Vol 55, p 60). Indeed, whenever Gandhi was charged with inconsistency in his writings—although he said that he was not at all concerned about appearing consistent and suggested that his readers take his last opinion as final—he made it very clear that he personally did not find any inconsistencies and this suggestion was for those friends who did find inconsistencies in his writings. He also suggested that before making their choice, these friends should try to perceive an underlying or abiding consistency between his two seemingly inconsistent statements at different times. He wrote:

Whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to take the meaning that my latest writing may yield unless, of course, they prefer the old. But before making the choice they should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies. (1958: Vol 70, p 203)

Gandhi seems to be right in denying any inconsistencies in his position on caste because he, from a very young age, violated most caste restrictions. His attitude towards the caste system remained more or less consistent throughout his life. It is obvious that any inconsistencies in his writings were deliberate and conscious and were not due to any changes in his opinion. Hence, it may not be appropriate to say that there were gradual changes or a line of development over a period of time in Gandhi’s opinions on caste and other related issues.

**Gandhi’s Defence of Caste Was a Matter of Strategy**

B R Nanda, a biographer and Gandhian scholar writes, “Gandhi’s reluctance to make a frontal assault on the caste system in the early years may have been a matter of tactics” (1950: 36). Apart from Nanda, there are other scholars like Ramchandra Guha (2001: 94), Judith M Brown (1990: 205), and Joseph Lelyveld (2011: 185) who have argued that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to caste. They argue that in South Africa, as early as 1909, Gandhi had publicly decried the caste system, but shortly after returning to India, he understood that a conservative but powerful section of Hindus was not yet ready for radical reforms. And, for strategic reasons alone, he emphasised on the generally beneficial. As Judith M Brown writes:

Though he had rejected the whole idea far earlier and inveighed and worked against it even in South Africa, once home in India, having tested the temper of public opinion, he was aware of the strength of Hindu orthodoxy and he took care not to equate his campaign against untouchability with the question of caste as a whole. (1990: 205)

At this juncture, it seems to be a more convincing justification than any of the others cited above. Apart from this, the argument that Gandhi was a strategist in his approach to caste resolves the seeming contradiction between Gandhi’s personal practices where he violates several caste restrictions, and his emphasis on some of the positive aspects of the caste system in
some of his writings and speeches. Therefore, this paper argues that the best way to understand Gandhi's writings—where he defends and validates caste—is to see them as a part of his long-term strategy to combat caste, because unlike other explanations, it does not contradict either his practices or his general philosophical outlook.

NOTES
1 On 27 January 1928, Ramdas married Nirmala who belonged to a different sub-caste.
2 Devadas married Lakshmi, a Brhama girl who belonged to a different varna, in 1933.
3 Lakshmi married Marui, a Bhaman orphan boy on March 1933.
4 Though it is a fact that Gandhi did not force his children to marry within their own caste, he did not allow one of his sons to marry a Muslim girl.
5 See Gandhi's letter to Nagesh V Gunaji dated 17 July 1944 (Gandhi 1958: Vol 84, p 202). See also the letter to Indumati Gunaji.
6 Nicholas F Gier writes, “Gandhi wants to protect the individual from dissolution either in a pre-modern totality or the modern bureaucratic state” (2004: 22).

REFERENCES

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