

**FRACTURED HIERARCHIES: AMBEDKAR, GANDHI, AND THE DALIT
FEMINIST RECKONING WITH BRAHMINICAL PATRIARCHY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how caste and gender operate as co-constitutive axes of inequality in contemporary India through the foundational debate between M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar. While Gandhi defended varna as a non-hierarchical division of labor grounded in his allegorical reading of the Bhagavad Gita, Ambedkar rejected varna and jatis as instruments of Brahminical dominance codified in texts like the Manusmriti. Their divergent hermeneutics produced two irreconcilable models of social change: moral reform within Hinduism versus structural annihilation of caste. The paper argues that Ambedkar's theorization of endogamy as the mechanism linking caste to the control of women's sexuality provides the groundwork for understanding caste-patriarchy. It traces how this insight is extended by Dalit feminist scholars Sharmila Rege and Uma Chakravarti through concepts like "Brahminical patriarchy" and standpoint theory, and by literary interventions such as Bama's Sangati. Comparative engagement with W.E.B. Du Bois and E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar situates Ambedkar's critique within global traditions of anti-racist and decolonial thought. The analysis concludes that Gandhian reform, by retaining scriptural authority and gendered svadharma, could not address the structural entanglement of caste and gender, whereas Ambedkarite thought remains indispensable for contemporary Dalit feminist praxis and intersectional theory in India.

Keywords: B.R. Ambedkar; M.K. Gandhi; Caste; Gender; Intersectionality; Dalit Feminism; Brahminical Patriarchy; Bhagavad Gita; Manusmriti; Endogamy; Sharmila Rege; Uma Chakravarti; W.E.B. Du Bois; Periyar; Social Reform; India

In contemporary India, caste and gender remain deeply intertwined axes of inequality. Though formally outlawed, caste continues to shape social hierarchies, access to resources, marriage practices, and violence—particularly women and marginalised caste groups like the Dalits and the Adivasis. Gender inequality is not experienced in isolation but is inflected through the prism of caste. Dalit women, for example, face "triple oppression"—as women, as members of a lower caste, and often as economically disadvantaged individuals. In the complex landscape of Indian society, caste and gender intersect to form a matrix of

entrenched inequalities. Despite constitutional safeguards and social reform efforts, caste and gender hierarchies continue to dictate access to power, dignity, and opportunity—particularly for Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi women. This intersection cannot be fully grasped without turning to the foundational intellectual debate between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, whose divergent approaches to caste reform shaped both public discourse, and state policy. Their conflicting interpretations of *varna*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Manusmriti* continue to influence how caste and gender are theorized and resisted in contemporary India. This complex intersection of caste and gender cannot be understood without revisiting the intellectual and political debates between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, two of the most influential figures in modern Indian thought. Their sharply contrasting views on caste and social reform offer foundational perspectives for analyzing how caste and gender interact in both historical and modern contexts.

My paper here would explore the divergent interpretations of the *Varna* system by Ambedkar and Gandhi analysing their contrasting views on caste, gender and social hierarchy within the framework of Hindu religious texts, particularly The *Bhagwad Gita* and *Manusmriti*. While Ambedkar critiqued the Varna System as a source of oppression, Gandhi saw it as a moral and spiritual system of beliefs meant to propagate social harmony. Furthermore, the paper would investigate how the intersection of caste, class and gender create overlapping forms of discrimination. Through a comparative analysis of their text, speeches and actions- the paper aims to assess the theoretical underpinnings, enduring legacies and political implications of their views, including Dalits and women, whose rights and agency remain as the crux of the nation's struggle for equality.

Ambedkar was immensely critical of the celebrated Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmriti*, which he saw as the source of caste oppression. He rejected *varna* and *jati* entirely as tools of Brahminical dominance. For Ambedkar, *varna* was not a neutral division of labor but a system of graded inequality. In his critique of the *Gita*, especially the *karma yoga* doctrine and the emphasis on *svadharma*, Ambedkar argued that it reinforced caste by telling people to do their duty without questioning the morality of that duty—which meant internalizing one's subjugation. Ambedkar saw the *Gita*'s reinterpretation of *varna* as an ideological response to Buddhist egalitarianism, serving to reinforce Brahmin supremacy under the guise of spiritual detachment. Ambedkar's reading of the *Manusmriti* was even more damning. He viewed it as a text of systemic, institutionalized patriarchy and casteism, which explicitly subordinated women and legitimized the oppression of Dalits (then "Untouchables"). On gender, Ambedkar was more radical than Gandhi. He linked caste and patriarchy, arguing that endogamy was the key to caste's perpetuation, making women central to caste discipline and control. He promoted social mobility through annihilation of caste, education, inter-caste marriage, and conversion (ultimately to Buddhism), rejecting all scriptural authority that

upheld caste and gender hierarchies. Gandhi's reading of the *varna*, grounded in the *Gita* and idealized moral order, sought reform within tradition, imagining a society where caste existed without hierarchy. Ambedkar, drawing on his critiques of both the *Gita* and *Manusmriti*, saw *varna* as a mechanism of oppression that inherently restricted social and gender mobility. While Gandhi hoped to purify Hinduism of its excesses, Ambedkar sought to break with it entirely in the name of social justice and human dignity. On the contrary, Gandhi saw *varna* as a functional, non-hierarchical division of labour rooted in *svadharmā*, which he derived primarily from the *Bhagavad Gita*. For Gandhi, *Varna* was not about birth, but about qualities and aptitudes, ideally determined by one's nature and work, as articulated in the *Gita*. He saw *varna* as spiritually grounded and ethically necessary for social harmony, a way to prevent competition and conflict. Gandhi rejected the *Manusmriti's* rigid caste hierarchies and untouchability but upheld *varna* as a "natural" order if it were practiced according to its "pure" ideal. Gandhi believed in homogenisation or he believed in upholding the elements of Hinduism yet attempted to uplift the 'untouchables'. His renaming of the *chamar*, *dom*, *mushar* and *bhangias* 'Harijans' can be viewed as the denial to a history marked by viciousness and bestiality. However, reconciliation would remain untouched if it is entirely based on denial. Ambedkar being a Mahar himself was directly subjected to the abuses hurled at his community but did not follow his caste unlike Gandhi who cleans the toilets and glorifies the task of cleaning human faeces. Referring to them as 'Harijans' or the children of God also reveals his acceptance that the 'untouchables' are lowly born, and gives out a sense of dissimilitude as well as affinity. Ambedkar's approach to a complete negation of religion renders a more vehement voice to the complete annihilation of the *varna* system. On gender, Gandhi often applied *svadharmā* to women in a traditional sense, emphasizing their roles as caregivers and moral exemplars. Though he supported women's education and dignity, his framework limited their mobility by affirming gendered roles. In terms of social mobility, Gandhi's interpretation of *varna* allowed for some movement but within constraints. Gandhi had also interpreted the *Gita* as a spiritual guide emphasising on selfless action, detachment and non-violence. He saw it as a call to perform one's duty without attachment to results, advocating for personal transformation.

Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti* was essentially rooted in its codification of inequality. The ceremonial burning of the *Manusmriti* in Maharashtra during the Mahad Satyagraha symbolized the liberation of the oppressed from religious and moral servitude. The text divides the society into four *varnas*- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras while rendering those outside the system as "untouchables". The text even prescribes mutilation or even death sentence for non-compliance with Brahminical patriarchy. Ambedkar argued that texts such as these merely propagated social cruelty and thus cannot be rendered as the building block of any religion whatsoever. The burning of the so-called

sacred text in front of the thousands was more than just a mere protest. It marked Ambedkar's philosophical break from orthodox Hinduism. He opposed the text as manual for maintaining graded inequality, and paved the way for a constitutional vision of social justice. I would like to draw an inference here to Du Bois' confrontation with white supremacy in the United States that offers a distinctive parallel to Ambedkar's shaming of the Brahminical supremacy. In his work, *The Souls of Black Folk* he introduces the concept of 'double consciousness' that refers to the internal conflict of the African Americans, who were coerced to view themselves through the lens of a society which devalued them. Both Ambedkar and Du Bois did not view caste as social or economic but as cultural and epistemic sustained by law, institution and ideology. In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois further reclaims the historical agency of black people during and after the Civil War, contesting dominant narratives that vilified African Americans incapable of self-rule. Ambedkar's challenge to the Brahminical rewritings of the Indian history that rendered the Dalits invisible and subhuman, mirrors Du Bois' historiographic intervention in this regard. Du Bois' perspective bordering on the Critical Race Theory, anticipates how caste is socially constructed and embedded in legal and institutional frameworks. His understanding and critique of the US constitution as deficient in providing freedom to the Blacks align with Ambedkar's thought that formal legal equality in the country would be meaningless without structural societal reform. Liberation, for both, required not only reform in the state institutions but also in the moral and ideological functions in society.

A central figure in the Dravidian movement, E.V. Ramaswamy had launched scathing attacks on Brahminical dominance and the caste system in his work *The Cunning of Caste*, often advocating militant rationalism and aethism. On one hand Ambedkar had sought liberalism through alternative spiritual ethics and on the other Ramaswamy had held the *Manusmriti* as a symbol of theological tyranny. He agreed with Ambedkar on the fact that caste was not merely a social evil to reckon with but an institutionalised system of oppression justified by law and religion. His strategy however differed from the others in question. He stood for complete abandonment of Hinduism. For him, *Manusmriti* was not only a document for oppression but also a text to be ridiculed, destroyed and forgotten. His work can be read as a form of what Franz Fanon had coined "decolonising the mind"- a cognitive and cultural revolution against inherited structures of dominance. Ambedkar, Ramaswamy and Du Bois function in distinct historical and cultural context, yet reveal striking commonalities with each other. Also, these theories can be associated with broader intellectual tradition and decolonial thought. For instance, Ambedkar's rejection of the *Manusmriti* aligns with the idea that knowledge systems can legitimize oppression, as Foucault's concept of "power/knowledge" suggests. Du Bois' challenge to white historical narratives anticipates emphasis on Subaltern Studies, recovering suppressed voices. Ramaswamy's call for the

complete destruction of religious authority aligns with Enlightenment rationalism but also prefigures radical cultural critique in the Global South. Gandhi revered the *Bhagwad Gita* as the spiritual and moral guide. For him it was not a message for war or caste but about spiritual action, endless devotion and moral purification. He had interpreted the battle of Kurukshetra symbolically, as the human struggle between right or wrong. Gandhi often described the Bhagavad Gita as his “spiritual dictionary”. He turned to it in times of doubt and despair, finding in its verses a source of inner strength and moral clarity. Unlike literal interpretations that emphasize the Gita’s battlefield setting, Gandhi approached the text as an allegory for the human soul’s internal struggle between righteousness and desire. The Kurukshetra war, in his view, symbolized the ethical dilemmas faced by every person. In his own words, “When doubts haunt me, when disappointment stares me in the face, I turn to the Bhagwad Gita and find a verse to comfort me”(Gandhi) . This quote clearly indicates how intimately the Gita is woven into the fabric of his daily moral and spiritual practises. Ambedkar, conversely, was critical of the Gita, particularly its defense of varna (class/caste-based duties). Ambedkar argued that the Gita repackaged caste hierarchy in philosophical terms, particularly through Krishna’s defense of svadharma (one's duty according to birth). In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar called for a complete rejection of the scriptures that supported inequality, not merely reinterpretation.

Moving on to the intersection of caste and gender which remains central to the understanding of the Nation’s struggle for social justice and does not persist merely as a peripheral issue. Gandhi’s vision of caste as spiritual duty and Ambedkar’s call for radical structural change continue to frame how we understand inequality and resistance. In the modern Indian context, Ambedkar’s insights into the role of gender in sustaining caste hierarchies has proven to be especially prophetic. Moving toward true equity will require not only moral and legal appeal, but also a conscious dismantling of caste-patriarchy at every level of society as Ambedkar had envisioned. Gandhi believed in the dignity of labour and pushed for the upliftment of women and the so called “Harijans”, within the framework of Hindu orthodoxy. He opposed radical structural changes, and conception of women’s roles remained paternalistic, upholding their role as nurturers and moral guides. In stark contrast, Ambedkar saw caste as an instrument of oppression embedded in Hindu scriptures. In his early work, *Castes in India* he argued “The superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the enforcement of strict discipline on women”(Ambedkar). For Ambedkar caste and patriarchy were inseparable. He critiqued the Gita’s doctrine of *svadharma* as a means to entrench social rules, compelling the oppressed to accept their social rules as moral fate. His agenda was not to reform but annihilation or complete dismantling of caste through legal, educational social and religious means including the conversion to Buddhism. The Gandhi- Ambedkar debate continues to resonate in modern India. While Gandhian ideals of non-violence and moral duty remain

influential in state rhetoric, Ambedkarite critiques underpin much of the contemporary Dalit and feminist movements. Dalit women, in particular have drawn upon Ambedkar's work to challenge not only Brahminical patriarchy but also the limitations of upper-caste feminism, which often fails to address other caste. Gandhi's approach sought moral reform without dismantling the structure. As a result his view offered limited space for challenging the deeper, structural entrenchment of caste-gender hierarchies. On the contrary, Ambedkar viewed caste as a benign division of labour but a system of graded equality. He linked caste and gender directly, identifying endogamy as the mechanism that sustains caste across generations, primarily by controlling women's sexuality. In *Castes in India* he further states that that patriarchy was essential to the functioning of caste, with women as its 'gatekeepers' through the enforcement of endogamy. His radical critique made visible how gender oppression was embedded in the very logic of caste. His works laid the foundation for modern Dalit feminist thought, which continues to highlight how castebased patriarchy uniquely affects Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women.

Sharmila Rege's work directly builds on Ambedkar's intellectual legacy. In *Writing Caste, Writing Gender*, she argues that the experiences of Dalit women must form the epistemological foundation for any discourse on caste or gender. She critiques the upper caste bias within the mainstream Indian feminism for ignoring caste, and simultaneously points out that anti-caste movements often fails to address gender. In doing so, Rege synthesises Ambedkar's insights into a Dalit feminist standpoint offering an intersectional lens that challenges Brahminical patriarchy and patriarchal tendencies within cast-based politics. Rege further insists that Ambedkar's works must be canonized within academia, not simply as political documents but as serious theoretical texts. She saw Ambedkar not only as a political leader but as a philosopher of modernity, who critiqued both colonialism and traditional Indian society. Through her editorial work, *Against the Madness of Manu*, she highlighted Ambedkar's sustained critique of religious patriarchy, particularly his battle against *Manusmriti*, and the political resistance he faced during the Hindu Code Bill debates. Rege's insistence on recognizing Dalit testimonies as theory rather than mere "data" echoes Ambedkar's belief that experience is a legitimate source of knowledge. Her contribution help refrain Ambedkar's critiques in contemporary terms, making them essential to any discourse on intersectionality, social justice and feminist theory in India. She challenges the silos within academia and activism that treat caste and gender as separate domains. In bridging the thoughts of Ambedkar and Rege, there is a shared commitment to centering the most marginalized. While Ambedkar laid the foundation for a radical rethinking of caste and patriarchy, Rege carried forward that legacy by articulating a Dalit feminist pedagogy that calls for critical self-reflection, solidarity, and structurality. The work serves not merely as an interpretation of

Ambedkar's ideas but as their necessary reinvigoration through the lens of Dalit feminism. She reclaims Ambedkar as a feminist thinker and embeds his radical vision within the contemporary struggle within casteism and gender oppression. Together, Ambedkar and Rege offers a transformative lens through which Indian society can be understood- and potentially remade.

Uma Chakravarti had also built on Ambedkar's insights decades later, extending and deepening the analysis from a feminist historiographical perspective. In her work, particularly *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Chakravarti introduced influential concept of "Brahminical patriarchy" – a system in which caste and gender hierarchies are interlinked and mutually reinforced. Chakravarti argued that the control of women's sexuality was central to the functioning of Brahmanism, the ideological foundation of the upper-caste Hindu society. She emphasised how religious texts, epics and historical practises constructed a model of ideal womanhood rooted in obedience, chastity and domesticity. These ideals served not only to oppress women but also sustain the endogamous structure of caste. Her analysis is rooted in a close reading of Hindu mythological texts, scriptures and social practises, revealing how patriarchal control over women was systematized and justified in scriptural language. Chakravarti's analysis of the *Manusmriti* especially in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, traces how the ancient legal text institutionalised the subordination of women. In the *Mahabharata*, for instance, Chakravarti draws attention to how Draupadi is subjected to intense moral scrutiny- especially regarding her polyandrous marriage. While the epic frames this marriage as divinely ordained, subsequent retellings and cultural interpretations often portray Draupadi as licentious and morally ambiguous. Chakravarti argues that policing of female sexuality is central to patriarchal control. Draupadi is not forgiven for her multiple husbands though it was not her choice. Her humiliation in the disrobing scene is less a personal tragedy and more a symbolic act of restoring patriarchal order- one that warns against female transgression. Bama, in her seminal text, *Sangati* portrays the Paraiyer community's women enduring systematic discrimination. For instance, she writes, "It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home, they cannot bear the violence of their husbands"(Bama). This reflects the compounded oppression faced by Dalit women, resonating with the *Gita*'s endorsement of a social order that places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Though she does not explicitly critique the *Gita*, but her portrayal the oppression of Dalit women implicitly challenges the *Gita*'s endorsements of caste and gender hierarchies.

The Gandhi-Ambedkar discourse is not merely a clash of ideologies but it reflects two distinct approaches to caste, gender, religion and the social mobility. Through an intersectional and feminist lens, it becomes clear that Ambedkar's critique offers a more

radical and inclusive pathway for addressing the intertwined oppression of caste. Gandhi's contributions on the other end, are viewed as paternalistic, well-intentioned but failing to dismantle the structures that uphold caste and gender hierarchies. His advocacy for women often did not translate into meaningful structural reform for Dalit women. Ambedkar's views resonate with those of Du Bois and E.V Ramaswamy though they write decades later. Dalit feminism drawing from Ambedkarite thought, continues to challenge Brahminical patriarchy legitimised by religious texts and exposes the limitations of reformist approaches that fail to confront structural inequalities. The Dalit-feminist methodology does not adjoin gender but rethinks both, through one another. In a society where class, caste and gender continue to dictate the boundaries of dignity and rights, the legacy of Ambedkar and the voices of Dalit women remain central to any true endeavour of social justice.

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