

Key concepts

- The word 'Dalit' means oppressed and refers to a person outside the four varnas who is considered below them. They were formerly called 'untouchable'. They were given occupations that were regarded as ritually impure, such as handling dead bodies and disposing of refuse and human waste. The untouchables suffered extreme social oppression and restriction. The social rejection and spiritual stigma are still evident today, particularly in rural areas.
- Gandhi was a proponent of the varna system. He believed that varnashramadharma was the most important characteristic of Hindu society. Gandhi believed that varna had nothing to do with caste.
- Gandhi was completely opposed to the concept of untouchability and regarded it with contempt because it led to inequality and exploitation. Gandhi believed that the separation of a group of people from the rest of society was wrong and campaigned to have the concept eradicated from Hinduism. Gandhi called the untouchables 'Harijans', 'the children of God', and campaigned to have them placed within the fourth varna.
- Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar was born an 'untouchable'. In India, he devoted his life to improving the status of untouchables.
- He clashed with Gandhi on a number of issues at both symbolic and practical level. Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's suggestion of Harijan as patronising and preferred the term Dalit. He was also determined to wipe out the varna system which Gandhi supported. He believed that the way to achieve this was through politics as it was easier to change laws than people's hearts. Gandhi on the other hand believed that change would come through influencing Hindus to abandon untouchability.
- Ambedkar wanted separate electoral colleges for Dalits so as to ensure in the new independent India they had sufficient political power to ensure the destruction of the varna system.
- Since then, Independence India has taken affirmative action to help what are officially called the 'Scheduled Castes and Tribes'. In 1997, India elected its first Dalit president. Many Dalits have been successful in business and public life. These changes have come about through the efforts of various individuals and groups and especially through the work of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). However, Dalits still suffer from discrimination especially in rural areas.

Key quotes

"I draw, as I have always done; a sharp distinction between castes and varnas. Castes are innumerable and in their present condition they are a drag upon Hinduism. Therefore, you and I do not observe caste distinctions. Varna stands on a different footing, and it means profession. It has nothing to do with interdining and intermarriage. People belonging to the four professions used to formerly to interdine and even to intermarry and by so doing they naturally could not and did not leave their varna." (Mahatma Gandhi - Selected Letters part II)

"I am a 'touchable' by birth but an 'untouchable by choice.....What I want, what I am looking for and what I should delight in dying for is the eradication of untouchability, root and branch." (Gandhi - Press Interview Sept 1937)

"I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu." (Ambedkar)

"The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation." (Article 46 of the Indian Constitution)

Key words

Dalit	varna	untouchable	caste	Harijans
Gandhi	Ambedkar	constitution	Independence	oppressed
ritually	impure	varnashramadharma	Bahujan Samaj Party	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the varna system leads to exploitation and is socially divisive. Others would argue that it gives order and structure to society. Some would argue that there are opposing viewpoints on the issue within Hinduism.

Key questions

To what extent is varna relevant or practical in today's world?
Can the varna system be justified?
To what extent did Gandhi or Ambedkar succeed in changing the status of the Dalits?