I do not want to be reborn. But if have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled 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.

M.K. Gandhi

The power seekers and power brokers hardly engage themselves in creating a new social order. Rather they are ever engaged in vitiating, dividing and even destroying the social fabric. We firmly believe that the mind, social fabric and the culture of Maharashtra has been built up by our saints and sages. Even the mind of Indian society has been built brick by brick by ardent and high minded social reformers and spiritualists. But presently a number of political parties have undertaken the task of vitiating its social and cultural mind. It is also a part of such conspiracy that a faceless and mindless assertion is being made to say that the Mahatma was anti-Dalit and he even heaped insults on them by calling them harijans. This is nothing but a shameless attempt to promote their own interests by making caste Hindus and the rest (particularly the Dalit) to fight each other. There is no intention of doing any good to any section of the society, least of all to the Dalits in the entire game. This is just an attempt to butter their own bread. There is a
saying in Vidarbha that which of the bulls engaged in a fierce duel wins is hardly of any concern or consequence to the plot owner. The plot in any case, would be destroyed in the process. This is an undeniable truth.

We should never forget that Mahatma belonged to all of us, indeed to all humanity. He did not belong to any particular province or caste or language. One who belongs to all, in fact belongs to none. Hence everyone has the freedom to criticise or even condemn him without any rhyme or reason. Power seekers are hardly interested in any objective study of history. They pick up some stray points or incidents out of their historical context to support their allegation even against an innocent and pure person like Mahatma. But they could not change the glaring and truthful facts of history. It is much easier to attack Gandhi without making a close study of our freedom struggle or even his life and teachings. But such attempts do confuse the common man. That could be a serious cause for worry.

Kusumagraj, a leading poet, has a poem called *Akherchi Kamai*—the last earning. It depicts a scene where five phantoms sit together in a city place and engage each other in a kind of dialogue. The phantom of Jyotiba said that he ended by just being the leaders of the gardener caste. Similar sentiments were expressed by the phantoms of Shivaji, Tilak and Ambedkar who regretted that they too ended up by becoming only the leaders of Maratha, Chitpavan Brahmins and the Buddhists respectively. Then the Mahatma’s phantom cleared his throat and stated that all of you are fortunate that each one of you is the leader of at least one community. Thus at least a small section of the people are standing behind you. But behind me is only the wall of the government offices. It is a fact that the followers of Gandhi have done nothing more than putting his picture on the walls of the government offices. Could there be a greater punishment to the Mahatma than this?

The word *harijan* was used by the poet Narsi Mehta much before Gandhiji used it. Mehta himself was a Nagar Brahmin but
he was very close to the harijans. Shailendra Mahato, one of the prominent leaders of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, has come out with a new finding that poet Valmiki was the first to use the term harijan. Perhaps Valmiki himself belonged to an untouchable caste. Mahato has accused Ambedkar of being anti-adivasi. He put them in the category of scheduled tribes, just to obliterate their separate identity. Sometime back the Indigenous People's Conference was held in Geneva, which vehemently opposed the categorization of the adivasi as the “scheduled tribes.” Mahato also said that Ambedkar never wanted the adivasis to have their own representation in the Indian legislatures on account of his being small minded. It was Gandhi who fought for the rights of all categories of the deprived people including harijans and others. According to Mahato, but for the support of Gandhiji, Ambedkar could not have been appointed as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. In Mahato’s opinion, Gandhiji was never a supporter of the Varna Vyavastha in Hindu society. Mahato raises the question that if Ambedkar was a true protagonist of the Dalits, why did he marry a Brahmin woman and that too in his old age?

In short, if in the eyes of some Dalit leaders Gandhiji was anti-Dalit, Ambedkar was anti-adivasi in the eyes of the adivasi leaders like Mahato. This kind of biased comments go a long way to vitiate the social environment.

Gandhiji had drawn a comprehensive programme for rendering service to the harijans; though he was fully convinced that one could not achieve liberation through others. One has to work for it. He was aware that unless one eats, he could not have full stomach or one could not see heaven unless one meets his death. Basically his programme for the harijan liberation was for changing the hearts and minds of the caste Hindus. To that end, he and his ashram inmates engaged themselves in daily scavenging work in the ashram and even sometimes in the surrounding areas. He was firmly of the opinion that as part of their atonement for
the oppressions of harijans by their ancestors for centuries, the members of the upper caste must serve them in all earnestness. He did believe that the untouchables are true harijans—the children of God. These children of God dirty their hands and bodies so that people of other sections of the society could lead a clean and healthy life. If the untouchable fail to perform their work, how could Brahmans lead a life of purity and cleanliness? But all this must change and even the upper caste people would have to undertake their own scavenging work. Hence he prayed for the day when sweepers would hold the Bhagavad Gita in their hands, and the Brahmans would have broomstick in their hands. It is only through such change of social roles that a new social order based on equity and justice could be established.

Of late a very clever question has been raised by the people with vested interests: If harijans are the children of God, then are all others the children of Satan? This question itself is based on bad logic. All that Gandhi meant was that the untouchables are as much the children of God as others. Harijans may be the special children of God as they serve his creation with their all strength and sincerity. But he went a step further while replying to the above question. He asserted that when the caste Hindus would give up the practice of untouchability voluntarily, only then all “touchable” people would deserve to be truly called harijans. And in such a situation alone the grace of God would come over them. Gandhi worked for a society free from the scourge of untouchability based on equity, equality and justice.

He described himself as a scavenger, weaver, peasant and worker. In the course of his trial he described his profession as that of a scavenger. He turned himself into a scavenger on his own volition. We should not forget that the word “mehatar” (scavenger) is a derivative of the word mahatar (greater). He looked at the elimination of untouchability as his life’s work and for that he was willing to sacrifice his life. We know that the aim of his life was to attain moksha (salvation). But he asserted that if at all he
would have rebirth, he would prefer to be born as an untouchable so that he could feel their pain and suffering in his own persona. During a meeting at Ahmedabad in 1916 he said with all sincerity and seriousness at his command that he was even willing to offer his head in the course of his effort to eliminate the scourge of untouchability in the society.

For Gandhi broomstick was a symbol of revolution. He was of the opinion that society devoid of equality and brotherhood could never reach the state of revolution. Such a society can never fight against slavery. He believed that the Valmikis are the most downtrodden even among the Dalits. They occupy the same place in the society which the mother occupies in the family. He said:

‘By treating removal of untouchability as an Ashram observance, we assert our belief, that untouchability is not only not a part and parcel of Hinduism, but a plague, which it is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat. Every Hindu, therefore, who considers it a sin, should atone for it by fraternizing with untouchables, associating with them in a spirit of love and service, deeming himself purified by such acts, redressing their grievances, helping them patiently to overcome ignorance and other evils due to the slavery of ages, and inspiring other Hindus to do likewise....

Removal of untouchability means love for, and service of, the whole world, and thus merges into \textit{ahimsa}. Removal of untouchability spells the breaking down of barriers between man and man, ultimately leading to unity of all beings. We find such barriers erected everywhere in the world, but here we have been mainly concerned with the untouchability which has received religious sanction in India, and reduced crores of human beings to a state bordering on slavery.’

Gandhiji stood for \textit{sarvodaya} but the journey must start with \textit{antodaya}. He was never moved by the feeling of pity rather he was driven by a strong sense of duty. That was also true of his work for the harijans. That is why in his scheme of constructive programme, \textit{harijan seva} occupied a central position. In Gandhian perspective,
both Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. were the real messiahs of the poor and the downtrodden. Dr. King always underlined the fact that unless the mind of the Whites becomes pure and compassionate, the problems of the Blacks could not be solved. Gandhi exhorted the caste Hindus to undertake harijan seva as a matter of their self-assigned duty so that they could undergo a genuine change of heart and could reach a state of purity and piety.

Dada Dharmadhikari’s letters as a member of the Constituent Assembly have been published in a collection called Aapalya Ganarajyachi Ghadana! (The making of our Republic) In those letters Dada had written about Ambedkar’s contribution in the making of our Constitution and had underlined their centrality. He had described Ambedkar as the symbol of Indian identity and also called him the gem among men (nararatna). He further commended Ambedkar’s contributions by saying:

‘Ambedkar invested his extraordinary talent and ceaseless endevour towards the liberation of the Dalit samaj. He put in Bhagirath efforts towards uplifitment of the most oppressed sections of our society. In the process, he emerged as a rare personality whose reputation spread in all directions and about whom every Indian could take legitimate pride. His purusartha assumed an all India character. He would not remain just a symbol of Dalit identity, but his name would go down in history as a symbol of Indian identity. Towards the end of his life, he reached to the conclusion that the Dalits could never have the life of dignity while living in a chaturvarna ridden Hindu society. Finding no other way out, he opted for the religious conversion as the last resort. But here again he displayed a rare sense of patriotism and nationalism when he opted for Buddhism for his and his follower’s religious conversion. In the entire process, he never lost his deep sense of rationality and discrimination.’ As there was no scope whatsoever for caste conversion, hence he had to go in for religious conversion; but he did opt for Buddhism, a sister religion of Hinduism.
In Maharashtra, a deliberate attempt has been made to put Gandhi and Ambedkar against each other, as if they were always at hostile terms. But this is far from the truth. For instance, on 25 June, 1934 a bomb was thrown on Gandhi by an unidentified man. Fortunately he escaped unhurt. On 14 July, 1934, a meeting was held in Bombay to condemn that cowardly attack on Gandhiji. Ambedkar delivered a moving speech condemning it and wishing Gandhiji a long and purposeful life. He also paid a glowing and heartfelt tribute to Gandhiji in the Constituent Assembly after his assassination on 30, January, 1948. He even went to the extent of proposing that the money collected through salt tax should be put in a separate account and it should be called Gandhi Fund. He also suggested that the Fund should be used for the welfare programmes for the needy Dalits. In the course of his speech, he heartily acknowledged the tremendous contributions made by Gandhiji towards Dalit cause.

The truth of the matter is that the works done by Gandhiji and Ambedkar were complementary to each other. Gandhiji wanted to bring back the Dalits to the mainstream of the society through service and elimination of untouchability, primarily through a movement for the change of heart of the caste Hindu. On the other hand, Ambedkar wanted to achieve the same goal through getting them involved in a struggle for their liberation.

But many people forget that but for Gandhi’s support, Ambedkar would not have become the Law Minister of the country. Jawaharlal Nehru wanted to bring foreign experts for the making of the Indian Constitution. It was on Gandhi’s initiative that Ambedkar was made the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. Gandhiji wanted Ambedkar to work as a representative of all sections of the Indian society, instead of remaining just a representative of his own community. Thus transcending different castes and sub-castes, through the works of Gandhi and Ambedkar, a collective identity of the entire harijan community emerged. That was no small contribution. Gandhi’s
commitment and contribution to the *harijan* cause could be also illustrated by the fact that towards the end of his life he refused to bless any married couple if one of them was not from the untouchable community.

On the other hand, we must take into account what Ambedkar said on 25 September 1932 after signing the Poona Pact with Gandhiji. He said:

‘I must confess that I was surprised, immensely surprised when I met him, that there was so much in common between him and me. In fact, whenever any disputes were carried to him.... I was astounded to see that the man who held such divergent views from mine at the Round Table Conference came immediately to my rescue. I am very grateful to Mahatmaji for having extricated me from what might have been a very difficult situation’ (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, by Louis Fischer, Bhavan’s eighth edition, 2003, p. 407).

Gandhiji tried to make caste Hindus get rid of the feeling and practice of untouchability. Ambedkar, on the other hand, worked to organise Dalits to make them struggle to have their own dignity of life and identity. Thus their movements, though taking to different paths had the same goal—a new sense of dignity and identity for Dalits.

As stated earlier, their movements were complementary to each other. It was on account of such movements that a national consensus emerged which led to the abolition of untouchability as provided under Article 17 of our Constitution. It was also made a cognizable offence. It was for the same cause that the Mahatma treated himself as *harijans* for all practical purposes. He identified himself entirely with them.

Among the fundamental duties ascribed under our Constitution, it becomes the sacred duty of every Indian to work towards the spread of unity and brotherhood among the Indian people, transcending all differences and distinctions based on religion, language, region and class. That idea was also one of
the major contributions of Gandhi who not only had perceived such a dream for India, but also had worked tirelessly to that end. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that he lived and died for that cause. Ignoring all this, those who create unnecessary controversy by putting our leaders against each other are failing from their primary duty enshrined under our Constitution out of their small mindedness and selfish interests. Nay, they are also committing a crime against our society and against all Indian people. The whole country should realise this truth in the depth of its being.