



GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR IN THE IDEA OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract:

The 20th century India witnessed two interconnected struggles; on one front, against colonial exploitation and British rule, and on the other, within society, against poverty, untouchability, caste-based inequalities, and socio-religious oppression. If one goal was to establish Swaraj and political freedom, the other was to free society from the evils of the caste system and establish social justice, where everyone could be treated equally and live with dignity. In this context, Gandhi and Ambedkar stand at the core of the social justice discourse in modern India, which cannot be understood without engaging with their contrasting yet overlapping visions of equality, caste, religion, and social transformation. Gandhi's approach to caste emphasized moral and spiritual reform. While condemning untouchability as a "blot" on Hindu society, however he has defended Varnashramdharma, an idealized, non-hierarchical conception of varna and envisioned Ram Rajya as a morally governed society grounded in equality, justice, duty, and welfare. Ambedkar, in contrast, viewed caste as an inherently hierarchical system incompatible with liberty, equality, and fraternity. He therefore advocated its annihilation rather than its reform. His critique extended to Hindu scriptures and social institutions that, in his view, sustained caste inequality. This paper examines how Gandhi and Ambedkar conceptualized the idea of social justice, and how their approaches to addressing the untouchability in India shared commonalities while differing in their methods and perspectives. By using a qualitative, comparative, and interpretive methodology, this study analyses their writings, speeches, and political interventions, including the Poona Pact and Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste. It further explores the contemporary relevance of their ideas to caste discrimination, affirmative action, religious pluralism, and democratic participation by highlighting Gandhian moral reform and Ambedkarite constitutionalism as distinct yet significant frameworks for confronting social inequality and advancing social democracy in India.

Keywords: Gandhi, Ambedkar, Sarva Dharma Samabhava, Social Justice and Equality

INTRODUCTION

“An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change from one part to other parts. In an ideal society, there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there should be social ‘endosmosis’. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy which is not merely a form of government, but primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen.” (Ambedkar, 1937)

An ideal society, where every individual could enjoy basic rights, what we today recognise as fundamental rights, live under the rule of law, receive equal treatment, and enjoy equality before the law; a society founded on righteousness and justice, moreover where every individual could live with dignity. These principles remain at the core of how we conceive an ideal society even in modern times, where liberty, equality, justice, the rule of law, and human dignity constitute the fundamental ideals of a just and equitable social order. However, the vision of such an ideal society was not a product of modernity alone; it had long been expressed in the social and intellectual movements that sought to transform Indian society. The nineteenth and twentieth century India witnessed not only the anti-colonial struggle or the national freedom movement, but also a movement at the deeper level of society to fight against oppression based on caste and class inequalities. Despite the many socio-religious reform movements of eighteenth and nineteenth century; whether the work of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), Jyotiba Phule and the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (1873), the *Arya Samaj* (1875), the *Theosophists*, the *Ramakrishna Paramhansa Mission* (1897) etc., they all, in their own ways, worked to revive the dignity and status of every individual. They tried to liberate people from ritualism, superstition, and the rigid caste system, which had become a basis for the exploitation and marginalisation of those placed at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy and envisioned a more equitable society in which every individual could enjoy equal liberty, dignity, and social recognition. In this broader framework, the debate on social justice in the 20th century still did not come to an end. Indian society continued to be marked by deep inequalities, and the methods adopted during the socio-religious reform movements were insufficient in themselves to completely remove these inequalities from society. It is in this context that we encounter two great leaders, Gandhi and Ambedkar, in the history of social justice and democracy. Both understood the persistent inequalities within Indian society and addressed, in their own distinct ways, the question of establishing a just and equitable society in India.

Gandhi and Ambedkar stand as two beacons in Indian political history that remain not only relevant in every context of time and circumstance but are also considered as inexhaustible sources of inspiration and guidance. Although their views have been shaped by the backdrop of distinct events and differing psychological pressures, leading them to adopt divergent approaches

in the study, analysis, and interpretation of social and political theories in which despite of differing over the belief system, ideology and methods they shared a common bond of compassion for the marginalized and a commitment to their upliftment. Since every social structure comprises individuals of diverse natures, a difference in their perspectives is something of a very natural phenomenon, and its acceptance is essential for coexistence; indeed, the preservation of society and the world is possible only by rejecting extremism. Social change cannot be entirely novel, as the seeds of transformation are derived from the preceding order, a view supported by both materialist and non-materialist perspectives. Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence lies at the very heart of this concept, echoing the 'Middle Path' or '*Madhyama Marga*'; the path propounded by Gautam Buddha in his philosophy. Ambedkar emerges as a staunch advocate of transformative change in Hindu society specifically. Any change can truly serve the public interest only if it is embraced by society in some form and does not place the various strands of the social structure in a state of mutual conflict. When we attempt to evaluate the principles and concepts of both Gandhi and Ambedkar, in light of the ideas around social justice, the towering figure of Gautama Buddha comes to the fore; it appears that both of them have formulated their ideas and concepts with Buddha's ideas as their guiding reference. However, a distinction arises, while Gandhi's approach was more based on traditional Hindu philosophy where he wanted to bring to moral and spiritual reform in order to remove the problem of caste. He condemned the untouchability as a "blot" on Hindu society, however he has defended *Varnashramdharma*, an idealized, non-hierarchical conception of varna and envisioned *Ram Rajya* as a morally governed society grounded in equality, justice, duty, and welfare. Ambedkar, in contrast, viewed caste as an inherently hierarchical system incompatible with liberty, equality, and fraternity. He therefore advocated its complete annihilation from society rather than bringing reform in it. On the one hand where Gandhi centering his approach on practical dimensions, Ambedkar appears steadfast on the theoretical aspect; a stance that could face numerous obstacles during implementation. The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar were therefore not simply a matter of personal or political disagreement; they reflected deeper differences concerning the nature and methods of social change. Gandhi emphasized moral transformation, social harmony, reform within society, and the removal of untouchability, while Ambedkar placed greater emphasis on rights, representation, legal safeguards, and institutional restructuring. This study presents a comparative review of their methods of addressing the socio-economic problems of India at that time, particularly the major obstacles to individual freedom and the establishment of social justice. Taking the aforementioned factors into account, and for the sake of clarity, the analysis is divided into two parts: first, we discuss the socio-economic dimensions of social justice, followed by a detailed discussion of the question of caste in India, examining how the caste system contributed to social inequalities, and hindered the establishment of an equitable society..

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar agree that the work of emancipating a society must begin at the grassroots level based on the approach of holistic development that enables the upliftment of the not only backward and the downtrodden sections but also the orphans, the helpless, and those who are victims of social injustices. For Gandhi, upliftment doesn't refer merely to material progress of an individual but, the ultimate goal is his moral and spiritual elevation. Nevertheless, he strongly advocates for material upliftment insofar as it meets an individual's basic needs and guides the individual towards spiritual transcendence; in essence, material possessions should be utilized for sustenance rather than for indulgence. Thus, in the vision of Gandhi, India should therefore fundamentally be considered as a Karmabhumi (a land of action and duty) rather than a Bhogabhumi (a land of hedonistic indulgence). (Young India, 6 Feb, 1925) Deeply distressed by the inequalities and injustices embedded at the socio-economic, religious, and political sphere of Indian society at that time, Gandhi stated, that "I shall strive for a constitution, which will release India from all thralldom and patronage and give her, if need be, the right to sin. I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country, in whose making they have an effective voice; an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in harmony. There can be no room in such India for the curse of untouchability or intoxicating drinks and drugs. The women will enjoy the same rights as men. Since we shall be at peace with the rest of the world, neither exploiting nor being exploited, we should have the smallest army imaginable. All interests not in conflict with the interest of the dumb millions will be scrupulously respected, whether foreign or indigenous." (Young India, 10 Sept., 1931) Here release means both liberation from the social evils as well as from the foreign rule. Gandhi had a vision to organise society in such a way that its economic structure would be strong enough to ensure that no one suffered from a lack of food or clothing. Everyone, he believed, should be assured of sufficient work to meet their basic livelihood needs. He argues, "And this ideal can be universally realised only if the means of production of elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses. These should be freely- available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others." (Young India, 15 Nov., 1928) In Gandhi's view, such an economic structure is possible only in a non-violent society. But how can economic equality be achieved through non-violence? By limiting their material needs, individuals can attain greater self-restraint, Gandhi said; every individual should practice non-accumulation of wealth, renounce the speculative mindset, and should exercise restraint in every aspect of their lives. (Harijan Sevak, 24 August, 1940) Thus, unlike the west, Gandhian economics is not limited merely to production, distribution, and exchange; rather, it is a comprehensive approach to a more stable life rooted in the ancient Indian ideas of ethics and morality. In his views, true economics never contradicts the highest ethical ideals. Economics that focuses on the accumulation of wealth and enables the strong to amass riches by exploiting the weak cannot be termed a true science; it is a fallacy that yields no benefit to the society and embracing it would be tantamount to inviting our own

destruction. True economics champions social justice, strives for the well-being of all, including the vulnerable on an equal footing, and is essential for a dignified human life. (Harijan Sevak, 9 Oct., 1938) By offering such a humane and scientific interpretation of material life Gandhiji has laid the foundations of his idea of Antyodaya, which

ensures the upliftment of even the "last person" in society. In British India, the majority of the population is condemned to live the life of the "last person", those whose condition is the most wretched in society. He categorized those situated above the "last person" as the second stratum; the third stratum comprised those above them, and the fourth consisted of those at the very top. Consequently, Gandhi initiated his great mission of Sarvodaya (universal upliftment) by focusing on the upliftment of the last person (Antyodaya).

Gandhi observed that a significant segment of society, particularly Dalit communities and women, was cut off from the social mainstream. It was evident that the goal of Sarvodaya could not be achieved while abandoning this vast section of society which represented a significant social force yet suffered from various forms of deprivation to its plight. Therefore, Gandhi opposed social inequality in all its manifestations similar to that of Ambedkar. Gandhi firmly believed that the Savarna (upper-caste) Hindus were responsible for a social order built upon inequalities, injustices, and distortions. In Gandhi's view, the greatest obstacle to achieving social justice was the stigma of untouchability afflicting Hindu society. For the eradication of untouchability, he clearly stated that "I take an interest in the upliftment of Harijans solely to cleanse myself of the stigma of untouchability and to atone for this sin. Removing this artificial barrier that hinders Harijan progress will lead to rapid improvements in their spiritual, moral, social, economic, and political conditions. Eradicating untouchability will bring us closer together and foster genuine unity among the diverse communities of India." (Gandhi, 1974, p. 45) Gandhi was very well aware about how upper castes hold control over the majority of resources in the current social order of the 20th century, while the victim; the untouchable castes were treated like animals and systematically kept away from essential societal resources. He seeks to transform these social conditions, for which he had suggested a two-way process. He states, "The internal reform of the untouchables and atonement by the touchables, both these tasks must proceed simultaneously." (Gandhi, 1975, p. 489) This can only be possible to achieve by bringing about a change of heart among the Savarnas (upper-caste Hindus) through various constructive activities as per Gandhian view. He openly argues that the disabilities from which Harijans are suffering today have been imposed upon them by the Savarnas; therefore, upper-caste Hindus ought to repay this debt, regardless of whether the creditor demands it or not. (Gandhi, 1973, p. 287) However, it is equally important for the Harijans themselves to become conscious of their rights and duties. They must denounce to accept exploitation, oppression, and misconduct as their destiny, and lead themselves to choose the path to their liberation. In Gandhi's view, when the exploitative class of society awakens and repents for its inhumane acts, and the exploited class reforms itself by renouncing degrading vices to achieve liberation, then, through the cooperation of both, a

society will be created that is entirely suited to the ideals of social justice; such a society would be free from both liberal human frailties and the Marxist concept of class struggle. Dr. Ambedkar also believed that establishing social justice in India is impossible until the downtrodden, the oppressed, those suffering from various disabilities, the silent spectators, the outcasts, and those viewed with contempt are granted protection for their civil and political rights. In his book *States and Minorities*, Ambedkar advocated for 'State Socialism' to achieve socio-economic upliftment in India, wherein the government's primary duty is to address the problem of poverty. State socialism involves intervention in economic structures alongside political structures to promote public welfare. (Dharamvir, 2004, p. 7) In his view, for the majority of Indians who lack economic and social safeguards, political freedom has no meaning. He argued, how many people still have to sacrifice their constitutional rights to earn a livelihood? How many are suppressing themselves to be exploited by private employers? Fundamental rights hold no value for an unemployed person. If an unemployed person is presented with a choice between a low-paying job with unregulated working hours coupled with restrictions on joining a union and limitations on freedom of speech, association, and religion and nothing at all, what choice will they make? The fear of hunger, the fear of losing one's home, the fear of exhausting all savings, the compulsion to pull children out of school, the fear of relying on charity for survival, and the fear of being cremated or buried at public expense after death; these are the factors that outweigh fundamental rights, thus, in order to secure the privilege of employment and the safety of survival, the unemployed are compelled to relinquish their fundamental rights. (Dharamvir, 2004, p. 71) That is why Ambedkar favoured the state ownership of the resources, mainly the key industries, because "freedom outside state control is, in the true sense, the dictatorship of private employers." The State should plan the economic life itself by treating all its people on an equal footing, ensuring the equitable distribution of wealth while simultaneously achieving peak productivity, without stifling the potential for private enterprise. To this end, Ambedkar particularly proposed the nationalization of arable land and the implementation of a collective farming system, whereby, by acquiring the rights to agricultural land held by private individuals, the State should then divide all arable land into farms of a standard size and distribute them among village farmers, without discrimination in such a way that there would be no landlords, no tenant farmers, and no landless labourers. (Nagar, 1995, pp. 40-41) Thus, we find that Dr. Ambedkar was a proponent of industrialization, modernization, and urbanization. Though he had a very narrow view about the villages of India, which Gandhi considered as where (village) the very soul of India resides, but in Ambedkar's view, villages were synonymous with superstition and backwardness, and were opposed to rural progress. No matter how much progress villages might achieve, they could not break free from tradition. In his opinion, the contemporary village is a den of parochial attachment, ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism. Discrimination based on caste, social hierarchy, and untouchability is clearly visible in village

life. The rural structure offers neither equal rights nor justice to Untouchables; if they speak of rights and justice, they are subjected to oppression. (Singh, 1994, pp. 115)

Here while addressing the problem of caste, Ambedkar stands in direct Contradiction with Gandhi. On the one hand Ambedkar was in favour of bringing fundamental change in the social order rather than mere reforming it, Unlike Gandhi, he advocated for the abolition of the Varna system, as Varna gave rise to Caste, which eventually evolved into the practice of untouchability. Hindu caste system based on Chaturvarna was created by Hindu religion. Manu said, “for the prosperity of the world, He (the Creator) from His mouth, arms, thighs and feet created the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and the Shudra.” Moreover, Manu also affirmed that “Veda is the only and ultimate sanction for the Dharma.” (Ambedkar, 1947). Varnashrama Dharma forms the base of Hindu society, therefore, for Ambedkar it is impossible to build a just and equitable society based on the modern values of liberty, equality, and fraternity without completely eradicating the Varna system, the root cause of all these evils.

Ambedkar holds the firm view that the upliftment of Dalits is not possible within Hinduism. He has argued that religion is essentially universal, applying equally to all races and nations across all eras, but this element is absent in Hinduism; or even if it does exist, it does not govern the lives of Hindus. (Ambedkar, 1998, p. 100) The greatest evil of the Hindu religion lies in the fact that the laws in the form of Varnashrama Dharma prescribed within it remain static, unchanged from the past to the present and for all time that has turned the faith orthodox. Hindu community adheres to the caste system not because it fosters unjust behavior, but rather because of their deep religious belief. Therefore, the true adversary is not the people who uphold the caste system, but the religion itself, which gave rise to the very concept of caste. (Ambedkar, 1998, p. 91) This is the reason why Ambedkar not only refused to accept such a religion but also wanted to destroy it. Ambedkar states, "In my view, the proper way to abolish the caste system is to blow up the Vedas and Shastras with dynamite, at any cost." (Ambedkar, 1998, p. 99) From the point of Social Justice, we found Gandhi advocating for the righteous faith at the same time, he agreed that certain social evils prevalent in Hindu society give rise to social discrimination. In his article titled "The Stain on the Forehead of Hinduism," Gandhi wrote, "Creating a separate class of 'untouchables' is a stain on the forehead of Hinduism. Caste is a restriction, not a sin; but untouchability is a sin- a grave crime- and if Hinduism does not kill this serpent in time, it will devour the religion itself." (Paliwal, 1996, p. 35) Like Ambedkar, Gandhi also cautioned people against considering every word of the ancient scriptures as binding upon them. He argued that no scriptural authority should be accepted if it is not supported by reason; anything that goes against the principles of morality, no matter how ancient it may be, cannot be regarded as scripture. Like Ambedkar, Gandhi had clearly made people cautious about the fact that we should not consider every single word of the ancient scriptures binding upon us if it doesn't back by reason anything that goes against the principles of morality, no matter how old it may be- cannot be considered scripture." (Gandhi, 1970, p. 102) Gandhi even said that, "Scriptures that appear

contrary to truth and non-violence should not be regarded as scriptures.”. (Gandhi, 1975, p. 405) We find similar ideas of rejecting the rigid and orthodox scriptures, in Ambedkar's book *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*, published in 1946, where he has concluded that "the Shudras belonged to one of the Solar dynasties of the Aryan communities." In his other book *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*, published in 1948, Ambedkar concluded that "there is no racial distinction between Hindus and Untouchables." We have seen a clear divergence in perspective regarding Hinduism between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Both social thinkers regard the caste system as detrimental to social justice. However, Ambedkar views the caste system as a man-made institution that ought to be completely eradicated, whereas Gandhi considers it a natural institution that cannot be entirely abolished. The Chaturvarna system advocated by Gandhi is based on qualities (Guna) and actions (Karma); free from notions of hierarchy, it appears entirely appropriate from the standpoint of social justice. Ambedkar was skeptical of Gandhi's constructive programs and the associated methodology. He viewed the various programs for the upliftment of untouchables initiated by Gandhi as attempts to mislead and misguide Dalit communities. For this reason, Dr. Ambedkar urged Dalits not to be swayed by Gandhi. (Jatav, 1996, p. 28) He strongly argued that the progress of Dalits would not come about through the favors and 'benevolence' of others (especially Congress and Gandhi). (Keer, 1990, p. 104) He opposes Gandhi by saying that it is futile to expect the Savarna (upper-caste) section of society to come forward for the upliftment of the Dalits (non-caste/lower-caste) section. Therefore, for the progress of the downtrodden, exploited, and untouchable classes, self-help is considered the best form of assistance. (Jatav, 1996, p. 36) He appealed to these castes to organise themselves to become prosperous, and work for the cause of their own selves rather than sitting idly and relying on anyone's benevolence or waiting for any God.” (Keer, 1990, p. 225)

Thus, we find that both Gandhi and Ambedkar social justice signifies equal opportunities and equal treatment for everyone in society. This goal can be achieved only by integrating the downtrodden, the exploited, and those deemed 'untouchable' into the societal mainstream. However, the two thinkers differ on the question of how this objective is to be attained. In Gandhi's view, untouchability defies reason and logic, and is incompatible with compassion, mercy, and love; therefore, the task of eradicating untouchability requires the joint effort of both upper castes and those outside the caste hierarchy. Gandhi emphasizes the purity of the means alongside the purity of the ends; consequently, he does not endorse any struggle waged in the name of rights if it eliminates one form of social evil only to give rise to another. (Chaturvedi, 1992, p. 6) Gandhi's vision of society is one of Sarvodaya, where progress is not achieved through the suppression of others but through mutual cooperation and collaboration, grounded in Ahimsa rooted in compassion, mercy, and love. While it is indisputable that Ambedkar advocated for the advancement of all sections of society, his primary objective was to liberate Dalit communities, who were socially ostracized and held in contempt from the shackles of social bondage.

Consequently, the society envisioned by Gandhi appears more comprehensive from the perspective of social justice; its scope extends beyond humanity to encompass non-human beings, including animals, birds, and plant life. This society emphasizes just conduct and behavior towards all living creatures. It can unequivocally be termed a 'Sustainable Society.' Gandhi's society is founded on the concept of Gram-Swaraj (village self-rule), wherein power flows from the bottom up. Thus, every village is entirely self-reliant; the villagers meet their basic needs through their own labor. In this framework, even the humblest individual in society is self-sufficient, requiring no parasitic dependence on others to maintain a minimum standard of living. In contrast, Ambedkar places the individual almost entirely in the hands of the State. The state-socialism envisioned by Ambedkar grants the State unlimited authority to intervene in every aspect of personal life, forcing the individual to rely completely on the State for social and economic advancement. As a result, their creativity, capacity for critical thought, and sense of self-respect gradually diminish. Therefore, it can be concluded that a society based on Gram-Swaraj is eminently suitable for ensuring social justice.

CONCLUSION

From the study, we can conclude that neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar harbored any ulterior political self-interest. Consequently, both regard civil and political rights as indispensable for the positive development of those denied justice, deprived of political rights, and socially marginalized. However, there is a marked difference in the means they adopted to achieve this goal; while Gandhi emphasizes establishing a "stateless democracy" based on his idea of Gram Swaraj (village self-rule) to attain the objective of Sarvodaya and Antyodaya; on the other side Ambedkar places his faith in "representative democracy", where he focused on the constitutional means to provide liberty, equality, and fraternity to the citizens, equally ruled and protected by the state. However, their disagreements over caste, representation, social reform, democracy, and the means of achieving social justice reflected fundamentally different approaches to the transformation of Indian society. Gandhi's emphasis on ahimsa, moral responsibility, social reform, constructive work, and decentralised political participation highlighted the ethical foundations of political life. Ambedkar's emphasis on constitutionalism, legal safeguards, political representation, institutional reform, and substantive equality provided a framework for addressing historically entrenched forms of social exclusion. Their continuing relevance becomes particularly evident in contemporary debates concerning caste inequality, affirmative action, representation, social dignity, democratic participation, and institutional accountability. Constitutional provisions and legislation concerning reservations and the protection of historically disadvantaged communities demonstrate the continuing institutional significance of questions that were central to Ambedkar's political thought. At the same time, the persistence of social conflict and political polarisation keeps alive questions associated with Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence, dialogue, ethical conduct, and reconciliation. Rather than reducing Gandhi and Ambedkar to completely compatible thinkers, their differences should be recognised as

intellectually productive. Their approaches illuminate different dimensions of social justice where Gandhi's perspective foregrounds ethical and social transformation, whereas Ambedkar's perspective foregrounds structural change, constitutional rights, and institutional safeguards. Contemporary democracy may therefore be better understood by examining the productive tension between these approaches rather than assuming that one can simply substitute for the other. Ultimately, the enduring significance of Gandhi and Ambedkar lies in their sustained engagement with the questions of human dignity, equality, justice, freedom, and democratic citizenship. Their ideas continue to provide important conceptual resources for analysing how a democratic society can address historical inequalities while simultaneously preserving individual dignity, political participation, and constitutional rights. In this sense, their intellectual legacy remains relevant not because their answers can be mechanically applied to present circumstances, but because the questions they raised continue to shape the ongoing debate over the meaning and practice of social justice in India.

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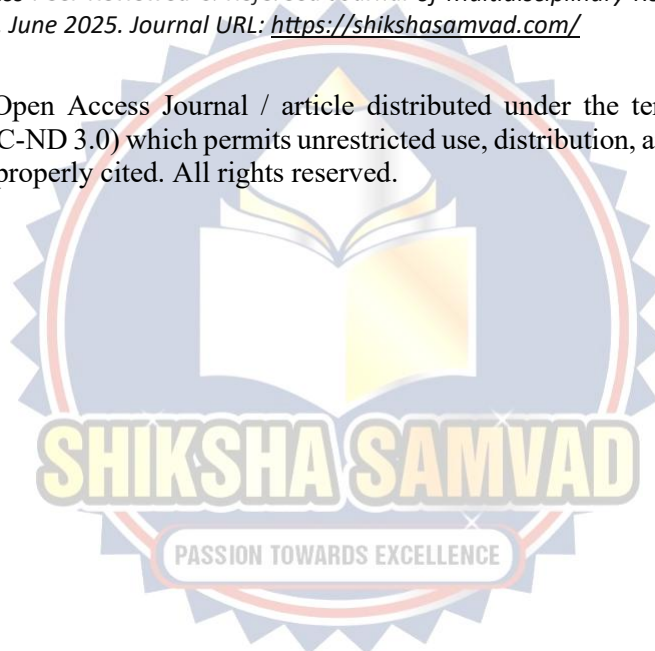
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