



Ambedkar and Gandhi- Two Parallels Who Can Never Meet

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Abstract:

The Indian polity of late is divided into two political strains: Gandhian Socialism and Ambedkar's modernity. Ambedkar's idea of modernity was influenced by Western and Indian thought. In contrast, Gandhi was an ardent Vaishnavite, even though he was educated in the West. Ambedkar and Gandhi are two stalwarts who had not only influenced the Indian Political scene in the last century but when alive were engaged in the most interesting and longest-running debates on the Caste system in India. These two contemporaries who were entirely different and opposed to each other when alive, find themselves in the reconciliatory efforts of the academicians after their death [Guha:2010, Partha Chaterjee:2004]. Ambedkar and Gandhi were not only political opponents of each other but were also methodologically different in their approaches. We can see their religious inclinations were also diagonally opposed to each other as Ambedkar was opposed to Hinduism and finally renounced Hinduism to adopt Buddhism. In contrast, Gandhi was a staunch Hindu who upheld the Brahminical Varna system throughout his life, with a few exceptions found in the last year of his life. In Ambedkar's words, it was a struggle of two individuals and two traditions—Buddhism and Brahminism.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Gandhi, Caste, varna system, Prabuddha, Bharat, Ram Rajya, reconciliation

Intruduction:

Ambedkar and Gandhi are those two stalwarts who had not only influenced the Indian Political scene in the last one century but when alive were engaged in the most interesting and longest-running debates on the Caste system in India. These two contemporaries who were entirely different and opposed to each other when alive, find themselves in the reconciliatory efforts of the academicians after their death [Guha:2010, Partha Chaterjee:2004]. Ambedkar and Gandhi were not only political opponents of each other but were also methodologically different in their approaches. We can see their religious inclinations were also diagonally opposed to each other as Ambedkar was opposed to Hinduism and finally renounced Hinduism to adopt Buddhism, whereas Gandhi was a staunch Hindu who upheld the Brahminical Varna system throughout his entire life, with a few exceptions which were found in last year of his lifeⁱ. In Ambedkar's words, we can say that it was not only a struggle of two individuals but was a struggle between two traditions- Buddhism and Brahminism.

Ambedkar's lifelong struggle was to fight against the Caste system and to Annihilate it, which was aimed to change the social structure of society since it was based on inequality. Because of the different views on Caste and Varna, Ambedkar and Gandhi have different understandings of the nation too. Ambedkar invoked ideas such as *Bahishkrut Bharat* and *Prabuddha Bharat*ⁱⁱ, which form the emancipatory project. In contrast, Gandhi invoked

the ideas of Ramarajya, a welfare state in his imagined India, which was influenced by the *Ramayana* of Tulsidasⁱⁱⁱ. But he doesn't deal with the question of equality and the position of Untouchables in *Ramarajya*. Gandhi upheld the Varna system because he believed there should be an inner arrangement in society to enable every member to do his share of the work^{iv}. Ambedkar was a modernist who invoked ideals associated with the Enlightenment. At the same time, Gandhi was a romantic anti-modernist, spinner and wearer of khadi who believed in the self-governing of the village and had nostalgia for the pre-modern organization of human society. Ambedkar and Gandhi were different in their approaches to achieving their ends. Ambedkar was a steady constitutionalist who worked within the state and sought solutions to state problems with the aid of the state. In contrast, Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favoured non-violent protest while being suspicious of the state^v.

In this paper, I will be dealing with the two most important contrasting points between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Firstly, their Idea of Nation is visibly contrasting when Ambedkar invokes *Bahishkrut Bharat* and *Prabuddha Bharat*, and Gandhi invokes ideas of *Ramarajya*, a welfare state just like Lord Rama's. Secondly, their understanding of Caste and Varna also forms the core of their differences since it has clearly affected their imagination of a Nation. And our final aim will

be to look for any reconciliation or constellation between the two stalwarts.

Prabuddha Bharat of Ambedkar and Ramarajya of Gandhi

Ambedkar initially invoked *Bahishkrut Bharat* (the India of the ostracized) in his struggle for self-respect while registering his voice in the Indian scene. This may sound negative to many people. But we had seen that this category of self-respect was transcended into *Prabuddha Bharat*^{vi} in the later part of life, with the help of Historical and emancipatory tools which Ambedkar successfully deployed till the end of his life. Ambedkar's voyage across the country landed him in different Dalit colonies where he experienced that ostracized India. Gandhi on the other hand invoked *Ramarajya*, a welfare state which is a mythical and ahistorical state. Gandhian idea of *Ramarajya* came from his journeys throughout India, and his meetings with the peasants, most of them were upper caste who can connect with Gandhi on social and religious beliefs. His *Ramarajya* came from the sameness in the experience with the peasantry^{vii}. *Ramarajya* for Gandhi is a state where power is decentralized at social, political and economic levels.

Now coming to the content of Ambedkar's Bahishkrut Bharat (ostracized India) and Prabuddha Bharat. When Ambedkar talked about ostracizing India, he was looking at the Untouchables, Adivasis and Women whose grievances and troubles did not concern the majoritarian political schemes of Gandhi till Ambedkar confronted him in the Round Table Conference. Ambedkar invoked *Bahishkrut Bharat* to bring focus on the people who were the oppressed, treated as Untouchables due to religious scriptural sanctions, which form the central core of Indian society. As per Ambedkar, the concept of a Nation is impossible without equality and Fraternity. This is visible in his statement when he met Gandhi in his ashram. Ambedkar said, "Gandhiji, I do not have a homeland"^{viii}.

This statement develops two understandings. Firstly, it shows that Ambedkar faced Discrimination on the basis of caste and he feels because of his caste he does not belong to this land. The second understanding is the missing fraternity from the Caste Hindus who discriminate against the Untouchables and Adivasi. Untouchability is against fraternity which is a central concept in forming a Nation, and his understanding of fraternity was central to his arguments that's why he defines fraternity as equal to Democracy. When he invokes Ostracized India, he is bringing attention to the missing ideals of society without which even Independence from the British doesn't mean a thing as the social structure of society remains the same for the exploited ones and only the government changes. So, we can say Ambedkar was aiming at the root cause of the

societal problems to bring change in society instead of superficial changes at the top. Then Ambedkar also invoked Prabuddha Bharat which is a transcending category from Bahishkrut Bharat. Prabuddha Bharat invokes self-sufficiency and it was the emancipatory project of Ambedkar to change the social order of the Depressed classes after renouncing Hinduism. Through Prabuddha Bharat Ambedkar invokes self-respect and social justice^{ix}. Ambedkar's imagination of the nation is not triggered by universal and dominant conditions but his imagination lies in oppressed, weak and minorities. He focused on the pain and sufferings of the Untouchables, Adivasi and women who were neglected for thousands of years just like Buddha who focused on Pain and Dukkha. Ambedkar's focus and target were different. His ideology was not limited to Depressed classes but his focus on ideals shows that it was everlasting and betterment of full Indian society. Ambedkar did not exclude or forget any sections of society but tried to emancipate the oppressed ones.

Now, coming to the content of Gandhi's *Ramarajya*, we see that Gandhi regarded the coercive state as a necessary means to bring about nonviolent social order^x. He accepted violence and coercion in the human affairs of the nation-state^{xi}. Gandhi believed that civic virtues with the cooperation of the State is required to create a nonviolent social order. Gandhi summed up his conception of Nation through *Sarvodaya* which says that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. Here Gandhi's 'welfare for all' implies the meaning of universal welfare and integrated development of all. Here Gandhi's imagination of the Nation is exactly opposite to Ambedkar and is focused on Universal and dominant conditions.

The goal of such imagination was ultimately the self-realization of every individual. However, he did not specify the procedure on how should a nation help those individuals who exist but do not form the part of Nation. He talks about the upliftment of all but never bothered to think about depressed classes until Ambedkar confronted him. His coercive state can become an aggressive state for those who are asserting their fundamental rights since they are not part of the dominant imagination. Ambedkar feared that a decentralized state could become a tool in the hands of dominant authorities who could take away the fundamental rights of the depressed classes which are being given after political and legislative measures. Thus, we can say that both Ambedkar and Gandhi invoked the emotion of the Nation but their focus differed and their purpose of invoking the nation also differed as Gandhi through *Ramarajya* tried to reconfigure Indian society to forge intra-group solidarity^{xii} whereas Ambedkar was trying to change the complete political, social and economic order of

Indian society by focusing on equality and fraternity.

Ambedkar and Gandhi on Caste and Varna

Ambedkar and Gandhi's opposition started with the untouchability practised in Indian society which gave rise to differences on separate electorates and finally culminated on the caste and varna system. Before the Poona Pact, Ambedkar met Gandhi only once, when Ambedkar told Gandhi that he had no homeland, which Gandhi couldn't understand. At that time Gandhi thought Ambedkar was a progressive Brahmin from Pune^{xiii}. This debate was furthered in Ambedkar's book-Annihilation of Caste, where Ambedkar strongly criticized Hindu society and the Caste system prevalent in it. To which Gandhi replied with his understanding of caste and varna. But this debate never ended and Ambedkar was very critical of Gandhi's method throughout his life. Even after Gandhi's death, Ambedkar in a 1955 BBC interview said Gandhi was a cunning politician rather than Mahatma^{xiv}. Ambedkar said "Gandhi was very much afraid that the scheduled castes would be sort of as independent a body as the Sikhs and the Muslims were. And that the Hindus would be left alone, to fight a battle against a combination of these three sections"^{xv}. So, we can make out that the differences between these two stalwarts never got resolved.

Ambedkar's writings and speeches are thoroughly filled with the question of caste and cannot be overlooked. Ambedkar always argued that untouchability is an expression of the caste system with scriptural sanctions. That's why Ambedkar studied the caste system and its genesis and critically analyzed the sanctions it received from Hindu scriptures. His thought does not deal merely with the removal of untouchability which was but one part of the anti-caste movement. He was also concerned with the overall annihilation of caste. Ambedkar was critical of Gandhi even in 1925 when he pointed out that "Gandhi is not that serious in the removal of untouchability but just speaks of social injustice half-heartedly. Had he been serious, he would have made it compulsory for all Congress workers to remove untouchability as a precondition to voting.

There are two more reasons for the criticality of Ambedkar towards Gandhi's methods. Firstly, Gandhi did not extend the scope of satyagraha to caste and caste-based inequality. Gandhi extended support to temple entry movements but did not allow such movements to occupy centre stage in his movement. Secondly, Gandhi used his 'Fast unto death' as a wicked act to take away the separate electorates from the Depressed classes^{xvi} but Why has Mr. Gandhi not fasted even once for the sake of the Untouchables?^{xvii} So, as per the understanding of Ambedkar, Gandhi never wanted to fight the caste

system and Untouchability in a real sense but he was always pretending.^{xviii} Apart from these differences, Ambedkar argued that the caste system presents a number of other cases of injustice where different caste groups may be located in conflicting situations of animosities^{xix}. And Gandhi's discourse does not even engage in challenging the question of the caste system and more importantly against caste groups deriving advantages from the caste system. Instead, Gandhi tends to search for possible areas of cooperation and integration of castes. Therefore, he refuses to recognize caste divisions even at the analytical level to at least address them. So, that's how we see Ambedkar was up against the Annihilation of caste when compared with Gandhi whereas Gandhi was not even addressing such debate.

Ambedkar's major criticism of Gandhi on caste and varna can be summarized by following two points of Gandhi^{xx} which he published in his journals *Young India* and *Harijan*:

1. [A Shudra] may not be called a Brahman in this birth. And it is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *varna* to which he is not born. It is a sign of true humility.^{xxi}
2. I do not believe the caste system...to be an "odious and vicious dogma." It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it...^{xxii}

Ambedkar responded to these two points with great contempt in his book in Chapter 10 of *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*^{xxiii}. He writes that:

For in India, a man is not a scavenger because of his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth irrespective of the question of whether he does scavenging or not. If Gandhism preached that scavenging is a noble profession with the object of inducing those who refuse to engage in it, one could understand it. But why appeal to the scavenger's pride and vanity in order to induce him *and him only* to keep on to scavenging by telling him that scavenging is a noble profession and that he need not to be ashamed of it? To preach that poverty is good for the Shudra and for none else, to preach that scavenging is good for the Untouchables and for none else and to make them accept these onerous impositions as voluntary purposes of life, by appeal to their failings is an outrage and a cruel joke on the helpless classes which none but Mr. Gandhi can perpetuate with equanimity and impunity.

Gandhi on the other hand, would accept the empirical reality of caste, but he was not prepared to fight it on the ideological basis of anti-caste struggle. Hence, he always insisted on identifying the untouchables as part of the Hindu fold. This indifference to the caste question is also prominent in the writings of almost all Gandhian intellectuals who tend to exclude the issue of caste from their

expositions of Gandhism.^{xxiv} The difference between Ambedkar and Gandhi on Varna and caste has been explained by various scholars like Gandhi's adherence to an idealized form of varnāshramadharmā, which Ambedkar called 'Gandhism', and Ambedkar's understanding of Varna was based on contemporary socio-economic differentiations associated with practices of caste^{xxv}. Ambedkar himself clarified on his understanding of Gandhism in his book and rejected such false interpretations of varna and caste in Chapter 10 of *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Ambedkar notes that:

That Mr Gandhi changed over from the caste system to the varna system does not make the slightest difference to the charge that Gandhism is opposed to democracy. In the first place, the idea of *varna* is the parent of the idea of *caste*. If the idea of caste is a pernicious idea it is entirely because of the viciousness of the idea of *varna*. Both are evil ideas and it matters very little whether one believes in *varna* or in *caste*...

But Mr. Gandhi has given a new interpretation of the *varna* system. He has changed it out of recognition. Mr. Gandhi by his own whim has given a new connotation to the *varna*. With Mr. Gandhi *varna* is determined by birth and the profession of a *varna* is determined by the principle of heredity so that *varna* is merely another name for *caste*.

Ambedkar's interpretation of Gandhian understanding of Caste and Varna was based on Gandhi's statement as early as 1945 in newspapers such as pointed out by Ambedkar in his book- *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables? He writes that:*

1. There is a new Gandhism, Gandhism without caste. This has reference to the recent statement^{xxvi} of Mr Gandhi that caste is an anachronism.
2. The above statement shows that Ambedkar doesn't share the grounds of similarities with Gandhi on Caste and varna, instead, Ambedkar was its bitter critique. Ambedkar was bitter in his criticism as he felt that Gandhi was fooling Depressed classes. Ambedkar criticizes Gandhi because "Gandhi does not say it is an evil. He does not say it is anathema. Mr Gandhi may be taken to be not in favour of caste"^{xxvii}. Thus, we have seen throughout their life Ambedkar and Gandhi had different views on Caste and Varna which cannot be reconciled as Ambedkar always refuted such interpretations of Gandhi even after the death of Gandhi.

Conclusion:

As we have seen since the arrival of Ambedkar in the Indian political scene, he always fought for the Depressed classes trying to bring change from the bottom. His thoughts and struggles

were dedicated to a change in exploitative social order. His focus was on the transformation of the Indian social, political and economic system. He knew that freedom from Britishers would mean nothing if the social structure which is based on the caste system didn't get transformed or changed. Interestingly he entered into a political scenario during the time of Gandhi and found Gandhi to be on his opposite side. Their views differed substantially whether it was on the Concept of *Bahishkrut Bharat* or *Ramarajya*. Their understanding and approaches to solving the Caste problem were totally different and Ambedkar throughout his life believed that Gandhi didn't want to solve the inequality in the Caste system and he also believed that Gandhi took away the separate electorates of Depressed classes which could have given equal opportunity to Depressed classes and that too through a wicked act of 'Fast unto Death'. So, we can conclude that Ambedkar and Gandhi were two parallels that can never meet as Ambedkar himself burnt that bridge of reconciliation during his lifetime.

Academicians who are trying to reconcile these stalwarts are selectively quoting Ambedkar and Gandhi by not looking the Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi on Caste and Varna and also avoiding investigating Gandhi's silence on the questions of Ambedkar, which he raised in his books when Gandhi was alive. The only thing similar in Ambedkar and Gandhi was the time they shared which was most important and Historic in nation-building. Now a few have argued for a position lesser than reconciliation and called it Constellation^{xxviii}. And constellation is defined as "a juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle"^{xxix}.

The argument supporting the constellation between Ambedkar and Gandhi gives scope of susceptibility to the dynamics of preservation and change, the porosity of stability that renders possible the exchanges and cross-influences between the labour, thought, and action of Gandhi and Ambedkar^{xxx}. But the question should be where are the Gandhians who fight against the caste system and where is that zeal to remove Untouchability? Is it only in rhetoric? And with whom should the Ambedkarites exchange labour, thought and action? And, how that exchange is possible if Ambedkarites still do not agree with Gandhi's position on caste and Varna since Ambedkar was talking about their emancipation whereas Gandhi was talking about their assimilation^{xxxi}. After 73 years of Independence, Gandhi's stance has been only getting weaker whereas Ambedkar's thoughts and ideology are being embraced by young minds.

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