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Ideological Differences between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar both are renowned figures in India's freedom struggle and social reform movement. While both sought to uplift the oppressed and combat caste-based discrimination, their methods and philosophies diverged significantly. Gandhi emphasized spiritual reform, nonviolence, and transformation within Hindu tradition, advocating unity and harmony through moral persuasion. In contrast, Ambedkar prioritized rationalism, constitutionalism, and legal safeguards, arguing for structural change and the complete annihilation of caste. Their clash over the Poona Pact, differing views on religion and conversion, economic thought, and democratic governance highlight the fundamental rift in their visions for India. Gandhi's model was rooted in village-based moral society, whereas Ambedkar imagined a modern, industrial, secular state ensuring equality through law and education. This comparative study underlines how their legacies continue to influence contemporary debates on justice, democracy, and social reform in India.

Keywords: Philosophical roots, caste system, social reform, political representation, religion, constitutional democracy

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar are two of the most iconic figures in Indian political and social history. Though both fought for the upliftment of the downtrodden and opposed caste-based discrimination, their methods, beliefs, and ultimate visions for India diverged significantly. Their ideological differences lay in their understanding of caste, religion, political power, social reform, and the nature of Indian society. These differences are not just historical curiosities—they continue to shape debates around identity, justice, and democracy in modern India.

1. Background and Philosophical Roots

Mahatma Gandhi: Spiritual Humanism

Gandhi's ideology was rooted in Hindu spiritual philosophy, particularly drawing from the Bhagavad Gita, Jain principles of Ahimsa (non-violence), and elements of Tolstoyan and Christian ethics. He saw Indian society as a spiritually organic whole. His life was a moral experiment based on truth (Satya) and non-violence, aiming to uplift all through inner transformation and community unity. He believed in the essential unity of all religions and communities and often sought harmony through moral persuasion and reform. For Gandhi, politics and ethics were inseparable.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Rationalist and Modernist

Ambedkar's philosophy was deeply influenced by liberal constitutionalism, rationalism, Buddhism, and the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Born into an untouchable Mahar caste, his personal experience with caste oppression deeply shaped his worldview. Ambedkar believed in legal reform, educational empowerment, and the annihilation of caste as necessary for social justice. Ambedkar prioritized structural change and democratic rights over moral appeals. He believed religion should serve social justice, and if it didn't, it must be rejected or reinterpreted.

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2. Understanding of Caste

Gandhi's Reformist View: Gandhi denounced untouchability as a moral evil but maintained that the varna system, in its pure form, was not oppressive. He argued that caste was originally meant to be a functional division of labor, not a hierarchy. According to him, society naturally evolved through this differentiation, and its degeneration into an oppressive system was a result of distortion over time. He sought to purify and reform Hindu society from within, not destroy it. He emphasized harmony and fraternity among castes and advocated inter-dining and inter-caste marriages as reform tools.

Ambedkar's Revolutionary View

Ambedkar's approach was radically different. For him, caste was the central mechanism of Hindu social control and hierarchy. He argued that caste was not about division of labor, but division of laborers, sanctified by religion and enforced through violence and social stigma. He rejected Gandhi's romanticism of caste's origins and saw it as fundamentally anti-democratic. In his seminal work *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argued that Hinduism itself was the foundation of caste, and without rejecting it or radically reforming it, true equality was impossible. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar advocated complete annihilation of the caste system through legal, educational, and religious means.

3. Approaches to Social Reform

Gandhi: Reform With in Tradition: Gandhi believed in transforming hearts and minds. He launched extensive campaigns to uplift the so-called untouchables, whom he called "Harijans" (children of God), and opened temples, wells, and schools to them. His campaigns were deeply moral and spiritual in tone, aiming to purify Hindu society rather than confront it directly. He believed in voluntary change and inner conscience as the basis for social transformation. Gandhi was skeptical of state-imposed solutions or legal enforcement of social justice.

Ambedkar: Reform through Law and Politics

Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's paternalistic approach to Dalits. He saw the Harijan campaign as a superficial attempt to avoid addressing the deeper structural inequalities in Hinduism. Ambedkar believed that education, agitation, and organization were the tools for Dalit liberation. He favored constitutional rights, legal safeguards, and political representation. He did not believe that caste Hindus could be morally persuaded to give up privilege—only state power and social activism could secure justice.

4. Political Representation and the Poona Pact:

Ambedkar's Demand for Separate Electorates: In the early 1930s, the British government proposed the Communal Award, which granted separate electorates to minorities including Muslims, Sikhs, and Dalits (Depressed Classes). Ambedkar supported this, arguing that Dalits needed political autonomy to prevent upper-caste domination in democratic institutions. He saw separate electorates as a means of ensuring true representation, not tokenism.

Gandhi's Opposition and Fast

Gandhi vehemently opposed separate electorates for Dalits.

He believed it would divide Hindu society permanently and weaken the moral unity of India. In protest, Gandhi undertook a fast unto death in Yerwada jail in 1932. This move created immense moral pressure, and Ambedkar was compelled to sign the Poona Pact, which replaced separate electorates with reserved seats within a joint Hindu electorate.

The Significance of the Poona Pact

The Poona Pact was a turning point. Though a compromise, it left Ambedkar deeply disappointed. He saw it as a denial of Dalit political autonomy, imposed under coercion. Gandhi saw it as a moral victory and unity of Hindus. This episode highlighted their fundamental disagreement—Gandhi believed in unity above all; Ambedkar believed that without self-respect and political power, unity was meaningless.

5. Religion and Conversion

Gandhi's Spiritual Pluralism: Gandhi was a devout Hindu but also deeply pluralistic. He believed in the truth of all religions and sought spiritual unity. While he acknowledged the wrongs committed in the name of religion, he believed that reformation was possible without abandoning faith. Gandhi saw Hinduism as a vast, tolerant system capable of accommodating reform and new interpretations.

Ambedkar's Religious Radicalism

Ambedkar came to see Hinduism as irredeemable. He believed that Hindu scriptures such as the Manusmriti justified caste oppression. After years of frustration with Hindu reform, he declared in 1935:

"I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu."

In 1956, Ambedkar, along with over half a million Dalits, converted to Buddhism, seeing it as a religion of equality and rationality. For Ambedkar, conversion was a political act of liberation from caste bondage.

6. Vision of Indian Society

Gandhi's Vision: Ram Rajya: Gandhi envisioned an ideal Indian society (Ram Rajya) based on self-sufficient villages, nonviolence, spiritual unity, and decentralized governance. He believed in a trusteeship model of economics, where the rich acted as custodians of wealth for the public good. Gandhi idealized the rural Indian lifestyle and was skeptical of industrialization and Western modernity.

Ambedkar's Vision: Constitutional Modernity

Ambedkar envisioned a modern, industrial, and secular democracy, governed by a liberal constitution and the rule of law. He rejected the romanticization of village life, famously stating:

"The village is a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism."

He believed in centralized planning, education, urbanization, and scientific temper as tools for social upliftment. Ambedkar saw India's salvation in constitutional morality, not religious or spiritual ideals.

Differences in Economic Thought Gandhi

Trusteeship and Simple Living: Gandhi advocated for "simple living and high thinking." He was against modern

capitalism and industrialization, believing that they led to inequality and moral decay. He promoted Khadi, manual labor, and self-reliance as economic principles. His concept of “trusteeship” encouraged wealthy individuals to act as caretakers of their wealth for society’s benefit, not to hoard it.

Ambedkar: Industrialization and State Intervention

Ambedkar supported industrial development, urban employment, and state intervention to promote equality. He believed economic redistribution and affirmative action were necessary to uplift historically disadvantaged groups. He was among the first in India to emphasize labor rights, fair wages, and social security. His vision was close to modern welfare states, influenced by Marxism but not dogmatic.

8. Approaches to Democracy and Constitutionalism

Gandhi: Ethical Democracy: Gandhi’s idea of democracy was ethical and spiritual. He believed in consensus-building, decentralization, and moral leadership. His ideal democracy was one where each individual was self-governed and rooted in dharma (duty). Gandhi distrusted modern state apparatus and representative democracy, seeing them as alien to Indian traditions.

Ambedkar: Legal and Institutional Democracy

Ambedkar was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. For him, democracy meant equal rights, liberty, and dignity, ensured by law. He insisted on checks and balances, minority rights, and social justice through institutional frameworks. He warned that political democracy without social and economic democracy would be hollow, famously saying:

“We are going to enter a life of contradictions... We will have equality in politics and inequality in social and economic life.”

Conclusion

The ideological differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar were deep and enduring. While both wanted to uplift the oppressed and build a just society, their methods, philosophies, and priorities differed fundamentally. Gandhi believed in moral reform within tradition, spiritual harmony, and voluntary change. Ambedkar believed in rational critique, legal reform, and constitutional guarantees to secure justice. Their debates continue to shape India’s political discourse. Gandhi’s emphasis on nonviolence and moral courage inspires many movements for justice and peace. Ambedkar’s insistence on dignity, legal rights, and the annihilation of caste remains foundational to India’s democratic conscience.

India’s journey toward equality and justice remains unfinished, and in that journey, both Gandhi and Ambedkar offer vital, though contrasting, guides. Understanding their differences is essential to building a more inclusive, just, and democratic India.

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