

Gandhi & Ambedkar on Social Reforms: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract- The paper analyses the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar on social reforms in Hindu Society, Ambedkar was critical of Caste inequalities in Hindu society, and Gandhi dislikes the untouchability in Hindu society, but their approach toward reforms was quite different, the paper would like to analyze and review the context of both reformers according to their perspectives on the issue in historical context. Despite having a difference of opinion on the Caste issue both were on the same plank on some issues like proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries, Partition, and Muslim fundamentalism.

Keywords: Dalits, Poona pact, Harijan Sewak Sangh, Ashram, Congress.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is revered by millions of Indians for various reasons, some know him as the architect of the modern constitution of India, others refer to him as the messiah of Dalits (A modern term used for the scheduled castes) while political parties use his name to perpetuate politics increase of Dalits of Indian democracy. Ambedkar's view on the Caste system or Jati or varna system was more critical than Gandhi's.

Gandhi was a moderate leader, who proved his leadership abilities early through his struggles in South Africa. A very prolific writer, his ideological work "*Hind Swaraj*" (Published in 1909) covers various aspects of society. Gandhi wrote on many aspects of social and political life in India. He wrote extensively about the caste system, he shows his unhappiness towards treatment meted out to the depressed classes (official term used for untouchables during the British Period) in Hindu society. He experimented with menial work at his farm (Ashram) in South Africa. So, in the early days of his political career, Gandhi took up the cause of reforming Hindu society and ameliorating the position of untouchables. He wanted the so-called *Savarna*, or high castes of Hindu society must shed

their inhibitions towards *Acchuts or Harijans*, (the term coined by Gandhi for untouchables.) and must respect and show dignity to depressed classes of Hindus and abhor every kind of social discrimination against them. He returned to India and assumed control of the led congress-led freedom struggle in the 1920s and worked for the upliftment of Harijans through various constructive programs, especially during a lean period of political activity.¹ Ambedkar belongs to the Mahar caste a depressed class of Maharashtra, he was a very bright student and from early childhood witnessed caste discrimination and atrocities committed by high castes on menial castes in his village and suburbs, so develop a kind of critical mindset towards this social evil of Hindu society, he completed his studies, Ambedkar returned from his studies abroad in 1920's, Over this period Gandhi achieved the status of the supreme leader of the Indian freedom struggle. Gandhi perceived British imperialism as an unending evil that was nurtured by the support of Indians, hence his call for Non-Cooperation received massive support from all classes of Indians including *Harijans* in the early 1920s.² Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar perceived British rule as the harbinger of modernity through which Dalit masses could attain salvation from the tyrannical Brahminical dogmatic exploitative caste hierarchy. It was obvious he remained a member of the viceroy's executive council and expressed sacrilege for the Gandhian concept of *Ram Rajya* and Harijan upliftment. This political trajectory opposed Gandhi and the Congress party. He occasionally uses derogatory language for Gandhi and the Congress party because, according to him, Congress was dominated by *Brahmins* and *Banias*, who had, in the past, oppressed Dalits, and might continue to do so if they come to power after independence. His *All India Scheduled Castes Federation*, basically a social organization, had polemics against the Congress and

Gandhi, Ambedkar revered British rule as the only savior of Dalits. Ambedkar rejected Hinduism altogether. He proposed that Dalits must convert to other faiths if they wished to become equal citizens. However, strangely enough, he condemned the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries like Gandhi.³

Gandhi on his traditional belief regarded Dalits as part of the Hindu community and upheld social reforms like temple entry and removal of caste discriminations through inter-community kitchens and inter-dining; he even advocated marriage inter-caste-marriages. He founded *Harijan Sewak Sangh* in Delhi in the early 1920s and carried out social upliftment programs for *Harijans*.

During the 1922-24 period of lean political activities movements, Gandhi demonstrated a more direct critique of the caste system through his writings and constructive programs. Gandhi wanted to purify Hinduism by removing untouchability for which he was challenged and criticized by traditional Hindu organizations such as *Santan Dharma Sabha* and *Bharat Dharma Maha Mandal*. They even physically threatened Gandhi, and *Hindu Mahasabha* pertained for his ex-communicated from Hinduism. Gandhi's social campaign was unpopular within his party, Nehru, Bose, Patel, and others believed that Gandhi should have kept set social reforms aside and focused exclusively on winning political freedom for Indians. ⁴ Gandhi never budged from his position as he was a firm believer in his convictions about reforming the Hindu society by removing caste anomaly anomalies. Gandhi's campaign to abolish untouchability may seem hypocritical to modern thinkers but it was extremely daring in the acrimonious social environment of the 20th century.

Ambedkar's political fortune usually depend upon the support of British rule. His predecessors such as *Phule* and *Mangu Ram*, the leaders of backward castes from Maharashtra and Punjab respectively, also perceive the British rule as the lesser evil when compared with the Brahminical Congress, so it is evident for he to support the British. Gandhi opposed the British attempt to treat the Depressed Classes--as untouchables were then called officially--as separate from Hindus and to grant them reserved seats in legislatures based on separate electorates in the communal awards of 1932 because once they were separated from Hindus, there would be no ground for

making the Hindu society change its attitude towards them. Gandhi's effort to make the upper castes realize the enormity of the injustices done through the practice of untouchability and to persuade them to atone for this wrong would go waste if the British scheme was implemented. Gandhi went on fast against the Communal Award in 1932.⁵

Ambedkar firstly welcomed the Award but later the pursuance of other leaders of congress agreed to the *Poona Pact* by which the Scheduled Castes were given reserved seats from within the general Hindu category. Gandhi and the Congress were usually detested by Ambedkar. He also founded the *Independent Labor Party* to organize the poor peasants and workers and fought the 1937 elections in Maharashtra in which it won a few seats too, his opposition to Congress was not very successful politically. He drifted toward the British in the hope that he could get more benefits for his community. His loyalty earned him a seat in the Viceroy Executive Council in the 1940s. Gandhi at this time was involved in the Quit India movement and thus could not pay much attention to social issues.⁶

But on the issue of *Pakistan*, both were on the same platform. Ambedkar did not support the Muslim League's resolution as he stated that the Depressed classes did not need a separate Nation altogether, but they needed conversion to another religion. Yet he deferred the idea since the British would not promise that the benefits of reservation would then be continued. Gandhi and the Congress categorically rejected the partition. Gandhi welcomed Ambedkar on his remarkable critique of the idea of *Pakistan*, despite their disagreements on caste issues both agreed on the unity and integrity of the Indian nation.⁷

British proposed that after the end of the Second World War Constitution for India may be prepared and hopefully the road to freedom be clear, Ambedkar was a party to the constitutional and legal initiatives. He took active participation in the Constitution-making process and deliberated many meetings of the Constituent assembly as Chairperson of the drafting committee. Despite, their differences in attitude Gandhi persuaded Nehru and Patel to make Ambedkar a member of the first Cabinet of India. Gandhi told them that freedom had come not to Congress but to the nation. The first Cabinet must draw the finest talent irrespective of party affiliation, that is how Ambedkar became the first law minister in Cabinet.⁸

CONCLUSION

Although Gandhi and Ambedkar were rivals in their political careers, they played major roles in the nation-building process and even complemented each other on many issues, the caste question was hotly debated by two stalwarts of the 20th century as, it is undoubtedly true that no other upper-caste Hindu did so much to challenge untouchability as did Gandhi, and, Ambedkar was, of course, the greatest leader to emerge from within the ranks of the *Dalits*. Gandhi made the Caste issue an important part of his social discourse and even linked it as part of the freedom struggle hoping it could be reformed, Ambedkar never accept the caste as an important part of society, he altogether rejected the Hindu society, and gave a call for conversion to a new faith for his supporters.

Gandhi and Ambedkar truly represented the national aspirations of Indians once India got Independence both became the larger-than-life figures for the masses. Gandhi was appropriated by the Congress as the sole proprietor of the freedom struggle, while Ambedkar was eulogized by the *Dalit* parties in the mid-1990s to gain power, they succeeded in their attempt to wrest power from the Congress in the Indian States by democratic take-over by-election process and Marketed Ambedkar's legacy in India. The political career of Ambedkar was appropriated by the caste-based politics in the early 1990s, however besides being a great national figure his legacy was confined as limited to the *Dalit* icon and a constitution maker, which is unjustified, similarly, Gandhi was appropriated by the ruling dispensation for their political fortune and power, which again is unjustified in context of modern politics in India. Both eloquently spoke and wrote against the social deformities of Hindu society viz Caste, but Gandhi does believe the Caste question and problems related to it could be resolved by the cooperation and coordination of the Hindu society itself, but Ambedkar rejected the Caste formulations and Hindu society altogether and provided the solution in the form of conversion to other faith by his followers. Gandhi and Ambedkar were successful in their respective political career, and both addressed the Caste issue differently but were able to scrutinize and analyze the social evil successfully.

REFERENCE

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- [3] Chavan, Sheshrao. *Gandhi and Ambedkar Saviors of untouchables*,2001, APH Publishing House, Delhi, pp 34-35, the part of the book quoted in the article is taken from Ambedkar's book "What Congress and Gandhi done to untouchables " Ambedkar's polemic against Gandhi was referred during the period of round table conference in London when the issue of separate electorates being discussed, and British Government was eager to announce Communal Award in 1932.
- [4] Judith,M.Brown. *Gandhi: Prisoner of hope*,2004, OUP, Karachi, pp-124-126. It is one of the best biographies of Gandhi, author has analyzed the Gandhian constructive program in detail from 1922-24, Khadi work, Harijan upliftment, and issue of swadeshi were undertaken by Gandhi to inmates of his Ashrams at Delhi and Wardha. Gandhi's views on inter dining and inter-caste marriages between *Savarna* and *Harijans* for bringing equality in Hindu society were much despised and condemned by radical Hindu Organizations.
- [5] : Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, New Delhi,1958-1984(Gandhi, CW) Vol. 86, Sevagram, Wardha, pp. 96-112, The events pertaining to *Poona Pact* between Gandhi and Ambedkar are extensively covered in the volume, Gandhi was in Yeravda jail at Pune, when Communal Award was announced in 1932.
- [6] Dhanjay, Keer .Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission,1990,1st edition,Manohar,Delhi,pp.43-45, in this biography of Ambedkar his ambitions in regard to empowerment of depressed classes described as his loyalty towards British for cause of his was questioned by many within the rank and file of Congress and many of them including Purshotam Das Tandon and Madan Mohan Malviya who were sympathizers were not allude the idea that Ambedkar become the member of Viceroy council during the period.

- [7] B. R. Ambedkar. *Pakistan or Partition of India*, 1941, 3 edition, Bombay, in the book Ambedkar critically analyzed the authenticity of the demand for Pakistan by the All-India Muslim League (AIML) and rejected the offer by many Muslim friends to embrace and convert to Islam with his followers his views against Pakistan demand in 1940s was appreciated by Gandhi and Congress
- [8] H.R. Khanna. *Making of India's constitution*, 2008, 2 edition, Upkar Publication, Jaipur, Introduction, pp10-11.