

Babasaheb Ambedkar voice of the Dalit and his refutation of upper-caste hegemony

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Abstract

Through this paper author intends to look into Ambedkar's thoughts on casteism and in particular his debates with Gandhi on caste system and Dalit assertion. Ambedkar's point is that to believe in the Hindu shastras and to simultaneously think of oneself as liberal or moderate is a contradiction in terms. When the text of Annihilation of Caste was published, the man who is often called the 'Greatest of Hindus' — Mahatma Gandhi — responded to Ambedkar's provocation. Their debate was not a new one. Both men were their generation's emissaries of a profound social, political and philosophical conflict that had begun long ago and has still by no means ended. Ambedkar, the Untouchable, was heir to the anticaste intellectual tradition that goes back to 200–100 BCE. Gandhi, a Vaishya, born into a Gujarati Bania family, was the latest in a long tradition of privileged-caste Hindu reformers and their organisations.

Putting the Ambedkar–Gandhi debate into context for those unfamiliar with its history and its protagonists will require detours into their very different political trajectories. For this was by no means just a theoretical debate between two men who held different opinions. Each represented very separate interest groups, and their battle unfolded in the heart of India's national movement. What they said and did continues to have an immense bearing on contemporary politics. Their differences were (and remain) irreconcilable. Both are deeply loved and often deified by their followers. It pleases neither constituency to have the other's story told, though the two are inextricably linked. Ambedkar was Gandhi's most formidable adversary. He challenged him not just politically or intellectually, but also morally. To have excised Ambedkar from Gandhi's story, which is the story we all grew up on, is a travesty. Equally, to ignore Gandhi while writing about Ambedkar is to do Ambedkar a disservice, because Gandhi loomed over Ambedkar's world in myriad and un-wonderful ways.

Key words: casteism, anticaste, Dalit, dalit cause, feminized, chatur-varna, varnashrama

Introduction

The Indian national movement, as we know, had a stellar cast. It has even been the subject of a Hollywood blockbuster that won eight Oscars. In India, we have made a pastime of holding opinion polls and publishing books and magazines in which our constellation of founding fathers (mothers don't make the cut) are arranged and rearranged in various hierarchies and formations. Mahatma Gandhi does have his bitter critics, but he still tops the charts. For others to even get a look-in, the Father of the Nation has to be segregated, put into a separate category: Who, after Mahatma Gandhi, is the greatest Indian? Dr. Ambedkar (who, incidentally, did not even have a walk-on part in Richard Attenborough's Gandhi, though the film was co-funded by the Indian government) almost always makes it into the final heat. He is

chosen more for the part he played in drafting the Indian Constitution than for the politics and the passion that were at the core of his life and thinking. You definitely get the sense that his presence on the lists is the result of positive discrimination, a desire to be politically correct. The fact is that neither Ambedkar nor Gandhi allows us to pin easy labels on them that say ‘pro-imperialist’ or ‘anti-imperialist’. Their conflict complicates and perhaps enriches our understanding of imperialism as well as the struggle against it.

History has been kind to Gandhi. He was deified by millions of people in his own lifetime. Gandhi’s godliness has become a universal and, so it seems, an eternal phenomenon. It’s not just that the metaphor has outstripped the man. It has entirely reinvented him. (Which is why a critique of Gandhi need not automatically be taken to be a critique of all Gandhians.) Gandhi has become all things to all people: Obama loves him and so does the Occupy Movement. Anarchists love him and so does the Establishment. Narendra Modi loves him and so does Rahul Gandhi. The poor love him and so do the rich. He is the Saint of the Status Quo.

Objective:

This paper seeks to explore the key points of Ambedkar’s views on caste hegemony and his debates with Gandhi to further Dalit Cause

Gandhi v/s Ambedkar

Gandhi’s life and his writing — 48,000 pages bound into ninety-eight volumes of collected works — have been disaggregated and carried off, event by event, sentence by sentence, until no coherent narrative remains, if indeed there ever was one. The trouble is that Gandhi actually said everything and its opposite. To cherry pickers, he offers such a bewildering variety of cherries that you have to wonder if there was something the matter with the tree.

For example, there’s his well-known description of an arcadian paradise in *The Pyramid vs. the Oceanic Circle*, written in 1946:

Independence begins at the bottom. Thus every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world... In this structure composed of innumerable villages there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village... Therefore the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.

Then there is his endorsement of the caste system in 1921 in Navajivan. It is translated from Gujarati by Ambedkar (who suggested more than once that Gandhi “deceived” people, and that his writings in English and Gujarati could be productively compared):

Caste is another name for control. Caste puts a limit on enjoyment. Caste does not allow a person to transgress caste limits in pursuit of his enjoyment. That is the meaning of such caste restrictions as inter-dining and inter-marriage... These being my views I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the Caste System.

Is this not the very antithesis of “ever-widening and never ascending circles”? It’s true that these statements were made twenty-five years apart. Does that mean that Gandhi reformed? That he changed his views on caste? He did, at a glacial pace. From believing in the caste system in all its minutiae, he moved to saying that the four thousand separate castes should ‘fuse’ themselves into the four varnas (what Ambedkar called the ‘parent’ of the caste system). Towards the end of Gandhi’s life (when his views were just views and did not run the risk of translating into political action), he said that he no longer objected to inter-dining and intermarriage between castes. Sometimes he said that though he believed in the varna system, a person’s varna ought to be decided by their worth and not their birth (which was also the Arya Samaj position). Ambedkar pointed out the absurdity of this idea: “How are you going to compel people who have achieved a higher status based on their birth, without reference to their worth, to vacate that status? How are you going to compel people to recognise the status due to a man in accordance to his worth who is occupying a lower status based on his birth?” He went on to ask what would happen to women, whether their status would be decided upon their own worth or their husbands’ worth.

Gandhi never decisively and categorically renounced his belief in chaturvarna, the system of four varnas. Still, why not eschew the negative and concentrate instead on what was good about Gandhi, use it to bring out the best in people? It is a valid question, and one that those who have built shrines to Gandhi have probably answered for themselves. After all, it is possible to admire the work of great composers, writers, architects, sportspersons and musicians whose views are inimical to our own. The difference is that Gandhi was not a composer or writer or musician or a sportsman. He offered himself to us as a visionary, a mystic, a moralist, a great humanitarian, the man who brought down a mighty empire armed only with Truth and Righteousness. How do we reconcile the idea of the non-violent Gandhi, the Gandhi who spoke Truth to Power, Gandhi the Nemesis of Injustice, the Gentle Gandhi, the Androgynous Gandhi, Gandhi the Mother, the Gandhi who (allegedly) feminised politics and created space for women to enter the political arena, the eco-Gandhi, the Gandhi of the ready wit and some great one-liners — how do we reconcile all this with Gandhi’s views (and deeds) on caste? What do we do with this structure of moral righteousness that rests so comfortably on a foundation of utterly brutal, institutionalised injustice? Is it enough to say Gandhi was complicated, and let it go at that? There is no doubt that Gandhi was an extraordinary and fascinating man, but during India’s struggle for freedom, did he really speak Truth to Power? Did he really ally himself with the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable of his people?

“It is foolish to take solace in the fact that because the Congress is fighting for the freedom of India, it is, therefore, fighting for the freedom of the people of India and of the lowest of the low,” Ambedkar said. “The question whether the Congress is fighting for freedom has very little importance as compared to the question for whose freedom is the Congress fighting.” In 1931, when Ambedkar met Gandhi for the first time, Gandhi questioned him about his sharp criticism of the Congress (which, it was assumed, was tantamount to criticising the struggle for the Homeland). “Gandhiji, I have no Homeland,” was Ambedkar’s famous reply. “No Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land.”

The aftermath

History has been unkind to Ambedkar. First it contained him, and then it glorified him. It has made him India's Leader of the Untouchables, the King of the Ghetto. It has hidden away his writings. It has stripped away the radical intellect and the searing insolence. All the same, Ambedkar's followers have kept his legacy alive in creative ways. One of those ways is to turn him into a million mass-produced statues. The Ambedkar statue is a radical and animate object. It has been sent forth into the world to claim the space — both physical and virtual, public and private — that is the Dalit's due. Dalits have used Ambedkar's statue to assert their civil rights — to claim land that is owed them, water that is theirs, commons they are denied access to. The Ambedkar statue that is planted on the commons and rallied around always holds a book in its hand. Significantly, that book is not *Annihilation of Caste* with its liberating, revolutionary rage. It is a copy of the Indian Constitution that Ambedkar played a vital role in conceptualising — the document that now, for better or for worse, governs the life of every single Indian citizen. Their divergent views came to a head after the British government granted the separate electorate to the Depressed Classes on 16 August 1932. It had Ambedkar's support; Gandhi was vehemently opposed to it because it would divide the Hindus. In protest, he went on a fast unto death on 20 September 1932. Four days later, Ambedkar caved in, agreeing to abide by the Poona Pact, which abrogated the separate electorate. In return, the Depressed Classes were granted reserved seats far higher in number than the legislators they would have elected under the separate electorate. The Poona Pact symbolised Gandhi's triumph over Ambedkar. Thereafter, the Congress went in for the kill in the 1937 elections. It fielded the reputed Scheduled Caste bowler, Palwankar Baloo, against Ambedkar, who was contesting from a reserved seat in Bombay. On India's unofficial tour of England in 1911, Baloo had bagged as many as 114 wickets, a feat that instantaneously turned him into a Depressed Classes hero. Fielding Baloo was akin to cutting Ambedkar deep. In his magisterial *A Corner Of A Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport*, author Ramachandra Guha points out that it was Ambedkar who had delivered the welcome speech in a reception that Bombay's Depressed Classes had organised for Baloo on his return from England. Baloo was also among the two who represented Ambedkar in the negotiations to stitch up the Poona Pact. Undoubtedly, the Congress wanted to teach a lesson to the emerging leader who had the temerity to lock horns with Gandhi. For one, as Guha writes, the list of candidates for Bombay was "vetted by the Congress strongman, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel". Launching a vicious campaign, the Congress depicted Ambedkar as one who drew support from anti-nationals and reactionary forces and stood against freedom. It is hard to tell whether Gandhi endorsed his party's "defeat Ambedkar mission" — but he did not seem to have opposed it either. Ambedkar polled just 2120 votes more than Baloo to emerge victorious, made possible because the third candidate, a labour leader, spirited away nearly 10,000 votes. The Congress had its revenge in the 1946 elections — Ambedkar was defeated. Gandhi's party did not seem interested in sending Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly. In fact, Ambedkar was elected to the Constituent Assembly from the Bengal province, courtesy Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Dalit leader and Pakistan's first law minister. Ambedkar was then inducted as chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution, a role he acquitted with such aplomb that his stature was enhanced beyond his community. It would seem Gandhi did not oppose Ambedkar's induction as chairman. But Ambedkar resigned from the Nehru ministry over the Hindu Code Bill in 1951. In the general election of 1952, the Congress pitted against Ambedkar his personal assistant of many years, Narayan Sadoba Kajrolkar.

It split the Scheduled Castes, for Kajrolkar, like Baloo, belonged to the Chamar caste. Ambedkar lost by 15,000 votes, and failed to win a Lok Sabha by-election two years later.

This historical memory has prompted the Ambedkarites to pit their icon against that of the Congress and the nation — Gandhi. On the face of it, the crowds that Ambedkar's birth anniversary draws testify that, as far as winning over the Dalits goes, his vision has been proved right, not Gandhi's. The most eloquent symbol of it is that Dalits no longer use the Gandhian term Harijan (children of God) to describe themselves, discerning in it a humiliatingly patronising undertone. From this perspective then, Gandhi, in death, has been deserted by Dalits, whose marginalisation he struggled to overcome within the framework of revitalised Hinduism. Ambedkar has triumphed because his vision not only encapsulates the lived experience of the social conflict that Dalits encounter, but also because the story of his rise to eminence from his humble origin symbolises their aspirations. Let alone Dalits, what is incomprehensible is that Gandhi's mass support has continued to shrink. Caste, after all, was just an aspect of Gandhi's politics. He spearheaded the struggle for freedom, championed nonviolence, tried to forge an amicable Hindu-Muslim relationship, and provided a blueprint of economic development that was remarkably different from the Western paradigm. There should have been an enduring romance for Gandhi, as is the case with Ambedkar. Alas, Gandhi seems to bewitch only academicians, evident from tomes written on him. It is possible that decades after India's Independence, we take for granted the freedom that Gandhi crafted for us at such a low price. It is even possible to argue that Gandhi has been "tamed" and turned into a symbol of the state and the political class. Not for nothing then, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose 2 October 2014 to launch the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Given the declining regard for the political class, Gandhi might just have suffered by association.

Appreciation

No less a reason is the steady decline of the Congress, which has taken down Gandhi with itself. As also perhaps the cult of Nehru-Gandhi that Indira Gandhi fashioned, leaving the Congress with little resolve to reinvent Gandhian ideas in the modern context. But there are also structural reasons. Regardless of the academicians' debate, Gandhi was appropriated by the privileged upper castes for furthering their own interests. It included not just the industrialists, but also the landed class. Swami Sahajanand, Bihar's foremost peasant leader, suggests in his memoir that Gandhi turned his gaze away from the exploitative ways of zamindars. Perhaps the need of the time was to build the widest possible social coalition to challenge the British Empire. If the upper castes misused Gandhi and his popularity for their selfish ends, their veritable en bloc migration to the Sangh Parivar since 1990, as also of some sections of the OBCs, has reduced him to being a leader who was proud of his religion and unabashedly practiced it. Forgotten in this appropriation is Gandhi's penchant to reinterpret Hinduism, his quest for social reform. His inclusion in the Sangh's pantheon threatens to turn him into a caricature. Then there is the growing middle class which finds Gandhi's economic blueprint quirky, best to laugh at; and Gandhi's principle of ahimsa a threat to their masculinity, a surreptitious project to turn them effeminate, one reason why Nathuram Godse pumped bullets into him. Masculine assertion also frames the increasingly fraught relationship between Hindus and Muslims, which has inevitably eaten into the Gandhian plank of composite nationalism. It is hard to square up to the fact that the name of Gandhi, at a popular level, is recited as a lament,

as a dirge, after every incident of communal violence. To the streets people go chanting, in Hindi, these words, “Gandhi we are ashamed, your killers are still alive.” Indeed, we should be ashamed because Gandhi conceived ahimsa as the weapon of the strong. It signifies a person’s willingness to court death for a cause he or she believes in, accepting lathis and bullets without retaliating. The Gandhian ideals were perhaps irretrievably buried the day the Sabaramati Ashram — Gandhi’s very own creation — closed its gates during the Gujarat riots. It should have been, as the late reformer Asghar Ali Engineer wrote, the principal sanctuary for victims fleeing the murderous marauders. In an interview to this writer two years ago, political psychologist Ashis Nandy predicted that the catastrophe of climate change, largely because of the unbridled exploitation of nature, would see the rise of hundred varieties of Gandhi. Some hope that! Until then, it won’t be wrong to say that Ambedkar today influences the hearts, and thoughts, and actions, of far more Indians than Gandhi does, a fact highlighted by the public responses to 2 October and 14 April every year.

Using the Constitution as a subversive object is one thing. Being limited by it is quite another. Ambedkar’s circumstances forced him to be a revolutionary and to simultaneously put his foot in the door of the establishment whenever he got a chance to. His genius lay in his ability to use both these aspects of himself nimbly, and to great effect. Viewed through the prism of the present, however, it has meant that he left behind a dual and sometimes confusing legacy: Ambedkar the Radical, and Ambedkar the Father of the Indian Constitution. Constitutionalism can come in the way of revolution. And the Dalit revolution has not happened yet. We still await it. Before that there cannot be any other, not in India.

Conclusion

Ambedkar himself had originally felt that with universal suffrage, reserved seats would be sufficient. But universal suffrage was not given, and the issues at the conference revolved around separate electorates. Gandhi was reconciled to giving these to Muslims; he had already accepted their identity as a separate community. Not so for Dalits. When the Ramsay MacDonald Award was announced giving separate electorates to Dalits, he protested with a fast to death. And this brought him into direct confrontation with Ambedkar. For Ambedkar, the problem was simple. If Gandhi died, in villages throughout India there would be pogroms directed against Dalits and a massacre. Ambedkar surrendered, and the Poona Pact formalized this with reserved seats for Dalits – more than they would have had otherwise, but in constituencies now controlled by caste Hindus.

Ambedkar wrote, many years later, in *What Congress and Gandhi have Done to the Untouchables*, “There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The Fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up the constitutional safeguards [which had been awarded to them].” He felt that the whole system of reserved seats, then, was useless. For years afterwards the problem of political representation remained chronic. Ambedkar continued to ask for separate electorates, but futilely. By the end of his life, at the time of writing his “Thoughts on Linguistic States” in 1953, he gave these up also and looked to

something like proportional representation. But the Poona Pact remained a symbol of bitter defeat, and Gandhi from that time on was looked on as one of the strongest enemies of the Untouchables by Ambedkar and his followers.

The confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar did not stop with these issues and events. The final difference between the two was over India's path of development itself. Gandhi believed, and argued for, a village-centered model of development, one which would forsake any hard path of industrialism but seek to achieve what he called "Ram raj", an idealized harmonized traditional village community. Ambedkar, in contrast, wanted economic development and with it industrialization as the basic prerequisite for the abolition of poverty. He insisted always that it should be worker-friendly, not capitalistic, at times arguing for "state socialism", (though he later would accept some forms of private ownership of industry) and he remained to the end of his life basically a democratic socialist. To him, villages were far from being an ideal; rather they were "cesspools," a cauldron of backwardness, tradition and bondage. Untouchables had to escape from villages, and India also had to reject her village past. In sum, there were important and irreconcilable differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Two great personages of Indian history were posed against one another, giving alternative models of humanity and society. The debate goes on!

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