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DALIT IDENTITY POLITICS AS A HISTORY OF NATION BUILDING: CONFLUENCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND DR. AMBEDKAR

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Abstract

Mohandas K. Gandhi's relationship with other eminent history makers of his time—whether personal friends and allies like Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, or the opponents and antagonistic rivals like Mohammed Ali Jinnah—was never straightforward, uncomplicated, or free of turbulence. But amongst this group of prominent people, one of his most controversial relationships was with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who is considered the messiah of the downtrodden and untouchables (Dalits) in India. As he served India in several capacities, He had various occasions for confrontations with Gandhi but the most famous ones are the differences in the positioning Dalits in India. This paper deliberates upon these differences and how the process of Nation-building was gradually shaped and how these differences affected today's Indian people.

INTRODUCTION:

The readings of critiques of Gandhi provide some of the very refreshing theories of Nation- Building. It is believed that they helped Gandhi reformulate some of his early ideas. Some of the prominent examples are M.N.Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, and B.R. Ambedkar. M.N.Roy provided a Marxist critique of Gandhi, Ambedkar provided a different reading of Gandhi on the basis of his ides of ‗distributive justice'(Chkrabarty, 2014), privileging the ‗untouchables' or
‗Dalits' over others and Tagore provided a critique of Gandhi was a creative response on both indigenous and Western influence. These critiques helped many of us to understand Gandhi in multiple dimensions and also made the vision of New-India envisioned by Gandhi more colorful. It has strengthened the significance of the dialogue that Gandhi had with his colleagues on issues of socio-economic and political importance. As Roy, Ambedkar, and Tagore shaped their ideological critiques of Gandhi in various dimensions, they were largely theoretical in nature, as none of them were directly involved in the Indian Nationalist Movement as completely and organically as Gandhi was.

―In Gandhism, the common man has no hope...Under Gandhism the common man must keep on toiling ceaselessly for a pittance and remain a brute. In short, Gandhism with its call of back to nature, means back to nakedness, back to squalor, back to poverty and back to ignorance for the vast mass of the people.‖ (Ambedkar, 1946)

Critical of the Nationalist Movement that upheld caste and untouchability at the behest of Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar sought to articulate an alternative political ideology. It was very different and a big challenge to the very foundation of the Hindu-ized Nationalist Movement. According to him, Gandhi and his ideology was a paradox because he ―stands for freedom from foreign domination and at the same time it seeks to maintain intact social structure which permits the domination of one class by another on the hereditary basis which means perpetual domination of one class by another‖. (Gregg, 1934)

Ambedkar assumed for Gandhi loyalty to Hinduism as supporting untouchability as it is integrally linked with and justified by Hinduism. This assumption, however, was the opposite of what the Mahatma sincerely believed. According to him, ―Untouchability is not the attention of religion, it is a device of Satan...that is neither nobility nor bravery in treating the poor and uncomplaining scavengers of the nation as worse than dogs to be despised and spat upon‖. (Gregg, 1934)

Ambedkar criticized Gandhi further for having eulogized the Indian villages as illustrative of a unique unit of social, economic and political equilibrium. Instead, Ambedkar argued,

―Indian villages represent kind of colonialism of the Hindu designed to exploit the untouchables. The untouchables have no right. They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle but this is a fact which cannot be gainsaid. (Gregg, 1956)

The biggest differences in the ideologies of both Gandhi and Ambedkar are seen in their ideas of Nation building. For example for Gandhi, the village was the basis for building a republican society. For Ambedkar, the structure of village settlements reflected basic tenets of Hinduism that never recognized the Dalits as equal. In other words, villages contributed to and simultaneously sustained the division nature of the Hindu society where the untouchables always remained—outside the fold‖.

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As Ambedkar most eloquently put it: —The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow the untouchables to live inside the Hindu quarters... It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire [*sic*] putting the impure people inside the Barbed wire into a sort of cage. Every Hindu village has a cat o the Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto. (Martin Luther King)

Another significant issue where the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar were much publicized was the separate electorate for Dalits. The conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of separate electorates for untouchables and the depressed classes reflected two contrasting perspectives that fundamentally alter the nature of political participation by the scheduled caste and tribes in British India and during its aftermath. Once the Congress considered a separate electorate for the Muslims through the 1935 Government of India Act, Ambedkar argued that the Dalits should be allowed to constitute a separate electorate and elect their own representatives to the central and provincial legislatures. He further defended the claim by saying that since voting was severely restricted by property and educational qualifications, the geographically desperate depressed classes were unlikely to have any influence in the decision-making process. So the solution play in establishing a separate electorate for them Ambedkar held the view that untouchables were absolutely separate from Hinduism and hence he tried —to find a solution to their problem through political separatism.‖ (Gregg to King, 1956)

In order to substantiate him further argued that the Hindus —had much to lose by the abolition of untouchability that they had nothing to hear from political reservation leading to this abolition.‖(Kosek, 2005). The matter was economic rather than religious. In an unambiguous way, Ambedkar brought out the economic dimension of untouchability. Gandhi's protest against the provision of the separate electorate to the Dalits was double-edged: on the one hand, he sincerely believed that the separate electorate would split from Hindu society and absolved the latter of its moral responsibility to fight against the practice of untouchability. On the other hand, there were clear political calculations that governed Gandhi's protest for —the separate electorate would have reduced the numerical strength of the Hindu majority encouraged minority alliance against it and fragmented the country yet further.‖(Sridharani- 1939)

So the Gandhian intervention was the result of a skillful political strategy as well as of his passionate concern for Indian unity. Ambedkar was equally assertive and insisted on a separate electorate as the best device to protect the social economic and political interests of the Dalits.
As he stated, – I trust that the Mahatma would not drive me to the necessity of making a choice between his life and the rights of my people for I can never consent to deliver my people bound hand and foot to the caste Hindus for generations to come.‖ (Farmer-1965)

This direct attack on the perception of Gandhi had put him in a very defensive position. No solution was visible for Gandhi. A separate electorate for the untouchables would divide Hindu society further, perpetuating the Dalits being inferior. Ambedkar denounced this as a strategic argument for using the untouchables as weightage for the Hindus against the Muslims. The British government endorsed the separate electorate in the Communal Award of August 1932 and Ambedkar had an edge over his rival. The only course of action open to Gandhi was to embark on a fast. He went on a fast rather than approve the demand of the separate electorate for the depressed classes. Gandhi, who was in prison in Pune, began the fast on September 20, 1932, and ended it on September 24 only when Ambedkar agreed to accept the reservation of seats for the Dalits within the caste Hindu constituencies. (Thurman,1979)

An agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar, known as the ‗Poona Pact', was signed in 1933 and the depressed classes were given a substantial number of reserved seats but remained within the Hindu electorate. The ‗Poona Pact' represented a victory for the Mahatma in two ways: It established that untouchability was

(a) a social and not a political problem and

(b) that it was a problem of Hindu religion and not of the Hindu economy.

Nonetheless, what was unique about the Pact was that it for the first time placed the backward classes (later classified as the Scheduled Castes in the 1935 Government of India Act) on the center stage of Indian politics and endowed them with a separate identity.

From now on the Scheduled Caste would invariably figure in any discussion on national identity. Although the Scheduled Caste found a powerful leader in Ambedkar, they continued to remain a politically significant minority with narrow social economic and political goals. As this center bent on dismantling and oppressive caste system Ambedkar, therefore, fulfilled the historical role of dissent not only to question the hateful

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religious dogma but also unbuckle the consolidating ambitions of the secular state within which former religious orthodoxies are subsumed. (Thurman, 1979)
Ambedkar ideas against Gandhi and Hindu society can be found in his lecture entitled
—Ranade Gandhi and Jinnah‖ The lecture has two clearly defined parts:
The first part is Ambedkar critique of Hinduism based largely on an analysis of Hinduism by MG Ranade, the liberal Indian politician. The second part dwells on his criticism of the roles of Gandhi and Jinnah as political leaders of the respective groups of Hindus and Muslims in India. While appreciating Ranade for his assessment of Hinduism, Ambedkar stated that Ranade was the first Indian politician who argued that —there were no rights in the Hindu society... There were privileges and disabilities, privileges for a few and disabilities for a vast majority.‖ (Thurman,1979)

Lincoln D'Souza document with his criticism of Gandhi Ambedkar felt that there was no alternative for the Mahatma but to support Hinduism and the caste system simply because —Mr. Gandhi wants the untouchables to remain as Hindus... Not as partners but as poor relations of Hindus.‖ Characterizing Gandhi as – a Tory by birth as well as faith‖ (Mays,1937) because of his rigid views on social and religious issues hi accused the Mahatma of demoralizing his followers and also politics hi alleged that like Jinnah Gandhi had made – half of his followers fools and the other half hypocrites‖.
He attributed the rise of Gandhi too, —The age of big business and money back units, as a result, Indian politics, at any rate, the Hindu part of it instead of being spiritualized has become grossly commercialized so much so that it becomes a byword of corruption... Politics has become a kind of sewage system intolerable unsavory and Insanity. To become a politician is like going to work in the drain. (Mays, 1937)

Ambedkar‘s sharp critique not only problematized the twin concepts of justice and freedom by taking into account the point of view but it also posts new social economic and political issues involving the peripheral sections of Indian society. Ambedkar‘s intervention illuminated a serious gap enlisted in the contemporary socio-political thought. Gandhi, despite being universal in his approach, had failed to incorporate the specific Dalit issues while organizing the campaign for freedom. That Gandhi represented all, regardless of class, caste and creed, was based on assumptions inflating in the claim to amicably settle the conflicting social, political and economic interest of the diverse Indian population. Not until the 1932 Poona Pact did Gandhi effectively negotiate with the Dalits as an emerging and socially formattable constituency of India's Nationalist Politics. Congress leadership formally accorded a legitimate space to the Dalits only after this Pact.

Gandhi and Ambedkar feuded over how they saw untouchability - One as justice in of Hinduism the other as the denial of rights to the oppressed people. Following the fast, Gandhi informed about a new identity what he called the Harijan Sevak Sangh. But again many basic and ideological differences arose. Ambedkar argued for a broad civil rights organization which would focus on gaining civil rights for Dalits - entry into public places use of public facilities broad civil liberties- and he wanted it under the control of the Dalits themselves. Instead, Gandhi proclaimed a paternalistic organization, controlled by caste Hindus, working for the upliftment of untouchables. This flowed from his basic theory, which considered untouchability as a sin of Hinduism- but not a basic part of Hinduism, rather a flow in it which would be removed; upper- caste Hindus should atone for this, make recompense and take actions for the cleansing and upliftment of Dalits.
But after Ambedkar condemned Harijan Sevak Sangh in very strong language saying the work of the Sangh is of the most inconsequential kind. It does not catch anyone's imagination it neglects most urgent purposes for which the untouchables need help and assistance the Sangh rigorously excludes the untouchables from its management the untouchables are no more than beggars, mere recipients of Charity (Omvedt,1973). He concluded that the untouchables see the Sangh as a foreign body set up by the Hindus with some ulterior motive...the whole object is to create a slave mentality among the untouchables towards their Hindu Masters. This to Ambedkar was the major thrust of paternalism.
This debate on the Sangh and its importance had as its background fundamental difference in the very ideology of Ambedkar and Gandhi. Ambedkar campaigned for the annihilation of caste. He saw untouchability as a fundamental result of it and believed there would be no elevation, no uplift, no relief without the abolition of caste. On the other hand, Gandhi was not simply a devoted Hindu but also a fervent believer in his idealized version of
—Varnashrama Dharma‖. He felt that what he considered to be the benign aspect of caste- its encouragement of certain solidarity- could be maintained while removing hierarchy and the evil of untouchability. This was Gandhi‘s whole idea and the essence of his reformism.

The conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi was not merely about the religion as Ambedkar by now had become thoroughly disillusioned with Hinduism. He argued for a conversion and in 1936 made the historic announcement at Yeola that – I was born Hindu and have suffered the consequences of untouchability. I

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will not die a Hindu.‖ Two days later, Gandhi in a Press Conference, called Ambedkar decision —unbelievable‖. He said, —Religion is not like a house or a clock which can be changed at will.‖ On August 22, 1936, he wrote in the Harijan (His magazine name) –1 may hope we have seen the last of any bargaining between Dr. Ambedkar and Savarnas for the transfer to another form of several million poor Harijans as if they were chattel.‖

Gandhi's views on humanity were different from that of Dr. Ambedkar. He did not see untouchables as individuals born into a particular community but rather as somewhat non- thinking members of an existing Hindu community and Hinduism as he saw was there natural religion that asks for story format they should not leave it. Ambedkar, in contrast, put the individual and his development at the center of his vision and believed his development was impossible without a new pure religion so this confrontation was inevitable.

Another major difference in the ideology between Gandhi and Ambedkar was about India's path of development itself. Gandhi believed that a Village Centre model of development is good to achieve his concept of ‗Rama Rajya', which will be an idealized harmonized traditional village community. But for Ambedkar, the economic development and industrialization was the basic prerequisite for the abolition of poverty always believed that it should be a worker-friendly and not centralized capitalistic model.

In the recent past, however, a growing number of prominent intellectuals have been attempting to find ways of reconciling these camps, giving both Gandhi and Ambedkar due credit and respect for their lifelong struggles and attempting to find the numerous and profound ways that they worked toward the same goals and in a similar spirit. For example, in his essay "Gandhi-Ambedkar Interface: When Shall the Twain Meet?," Suhas Palshikar presents the case that Gandhian and Ambedkarian discourses were not antithetical. (Palshikar, 1996) Both were fundamentally concerned with emancipation, despite their different approaches and areas of concentration. Palshikar adds that when we consider how contemporary social movements have lost emancipation as a concern and have devolved to exclusively local issues, it is increasingly urgent to see the unifying theme of emancipation between Gandhi and Ambedkar and to synergize this in order to unite their factions toward this important shared aim.

Finally, in the words of Gopal Guru, —While I have a long-standing interest in writing and speaking about Ambedkar and Gandhi, this interest is neither purely epistemic nor is it aimed at producing any degree of fascination by writing on Gandhi–Ambedkar. In fact, it is deeply ontological in the sense that it is related to changing the fate common to me, Gandhi and Ambedkar. All three of our futures are linked up with the transformation of social relations in the Indian context. Gandhi's historical efforts to be a dependable part of the vision to annihilate untouchability, if not caste, form the larger project of social transformation. This project is further intensified by Ambedkar at a much deeper level by attacking the essence of the caste system and not just untouchability, which is a derivative of the former. Changing fate, thus, makes the efforts of Gandhi and Ambedkar indispensable. Ambedkar's project, both intellectual as well as political, to reason out with members of caste society makes it historically important to acknowledge the affirmative energy in Gandhi. Ambedkar's critique of Gandhi revolves around the hope that he would succeed in reasoning out with —caste infected‖ Hindus first through persuasion and finally, through conversion to Buddhism. Since he poses hope in persuasion and conversion he, in a loose sense, is a realist and not a sceptic.‖(Guru, 2017)
It would not be wrong to argue, therefore, that the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate is theoretically innovative and politically crucial in interpreting and understanding the most volatile phase of Indian nationalism when the mahatma no longer remained the undisputed leader of the freedom struggle.

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