GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR: FINDING COMMON GROUND

November 8, 2016

Gandhi and Ambedkar are two of the most important figure in India's journey towards social justice. They both have been, in their life time as well as after their death, used by people and politicians of different ideological persuasions to augment their positions. Both of them have been deified and kept at an apostle to blunt the radicalism in their thought and works. Both of them were opponents and had criticized each other. They came head to head on many issues, most famously on caste. Gandhi believed in reforming the caste system and Ambedkar believed in the annihilation of caste. Gandhi was not in favour of separate electorate for Dalits which he considered as their political isolation; on the other hand, Ambedkar considered separate electorate as a must for ensuring rights of the Dalits. Ambedkar had to recede and sign the Poona pact under pressure from Gandhi's fast unto death. Ambedkar wrote "What Gandhi and Congress did to Untouchables?" criticizing Gandhi and congress for betraying them after the Poona pact. Given the nature of their difference, were they both irreconcilable as Arundhati Roy thinks? Ambedkar and Gandhi were much more similar than they are commonly perceived to be. Both of them gave importance to social issues over political and they also reinterpreted their religions and aligned it to cause of social justice instead of spiritual ecstasy.

Primacy of Social over political:

Prior to Gandhi, the Indian freedom struggle was predominantly elitist and political in nature. Nationalists and Freedom fighters from this period were mainly concerned with the political independence of India. Gandhi was the first congress leader who realized that it is only through alleviation of social suffering of millions of people that Independence can have any meaning for masses. He brought issues like untouchability and inequality into the mainstream and insisted that these must be addressed for Independence to have any meaning.

Swarajya is a meaningless term, if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjection, and deliberately deny to them the fruits of national culture.(CWMG, Vol 23, P 191)

For him social and spiritual were always above the political. He withdrew the non-cooperation movement after the incident of violence stating that Indians are not prepared for independence.

This convinces me that the country at large has not at all accepted the teaching of Non-Violence. I must, therefore, immediately stop the movement for civil disobedience.(CWMG, Vol 26, P 137)

The Bardoli resolution of Congress in the wake of the withdrawal of Non-cooperation movement passed a resolution, which talked about the pre-condition of attaining Swarajya.

They enlisted some conditions like wearing khadi, opposing untouchability, prohibition etc. for anyone to become a congress volunteer. Gandhi insisted that if these conditions are not met then one can't fight for Swarajya-

We have discussed the conditions for swarajya several times before now. But, as long as we have not learnt to observe them, we must continue to think about them and tell ourselves that there can be no swarajya till then.(CWMG, Vol 26, P 143)

It is evident that for Gandhi social issues were preconditions for Independence and that is why his primary focus throughout the freedom struggle was on social justice. Even on the eve of independence his "Constructive program" was primarily concerned with the social issues facing India.

Ambedkar being an untouchable himself and having tolerated the injustices of caste system had his primary concern the alleviation of the social suffering of the untouchables. He criticized Congress and other political parties to be overly concerned with political freedom and to have neglected the oppression of Dalits. He refused to accept the primacy of political reform over social reform and considered it a ploy to continue the injustice to untouchables.

The thesis that political reform should precede social reform becomes on the face of it an absurd proposition, unless the idea is that the Government is to protect those who have vested rights and to penalize those who have none (Ambedkar in Ranade, Gandhi, and Jinnah, 1943).

Ambedkar prized social democracy over political democracy and thought the later to be meaningless without former.

The formal framework of Democracy is of no value, and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy (Ambedkar in Ranade, Gandhi, and Jinnah, 1943).

He even refused to consider India as his homeland because of the injustices to his class by caste Hindu society.In a conversation with Gandhi he said-

If at all I have rendered any national service as you say, helpful or beneficial, to the patriotic cause of this country, it is due to my unsullied conscience and not due to any patriotic feelings in me. If in my endeavor to secure human rights for my people, who have been trampled upon in this country for ages …

Ambedkar through his writing, speeches and struggle tried to mobilize Dalits to fight against the oppression and didn't hesitate to collaborate with British Empire in order to acquire social justice for Dalits. His politics was also shaped around achieving social justice for Dalits. Ambedkar and Gandhi both thought that political freedom is meaningless without social reforms. They both disagreed on the means to achieve this but were united in the primacy of social justice over political freedom.

Reinterpreting religion:

Religion was at the center of Gandhi's politics. He didn't see religion and politics as separate.

I claim that human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another. (YI, 2-3-1922, p. 131)

This mixing of religion and politics was contrary to the liberal values of theCongress elites of that time. He reinterpreted religion to suit his political needs. According to him, morals were at the center of religion and not god. He considered that politics bereft of moral will not serve any purpose. His methods of ahimsa and Satya demanded morality in politics. He reinterpreted aims of religion from moksha to that of service to humanity.

Politics concern nations and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined, in other words, a seeker after God and Truth.(YI, 18-6-1925, p. 214)

Instead of talking in the western language of democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity he used the term Ram Rajya to bring home the meaning of Swarajya to millions of Indians who understand this language.

By political independence I do not mean an imitation to the British House of commons, or the soviet rule of Russia or the Fascist rule of Italy or the Nazi rule of Germany. They have systems suited to their genius. We must have ours suited to ours. What that can be is more than I can tell. I have described it as Ramarajya i.e., sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority. (H, 2-1-1937, p. 374)

His Ram Rajya was not about sovereignty and morality alone but is about equality and justice. He said "*Ramarajya of my dream ensures equal rights alike of prince and pauper. (ABP, 2-8-1934)*"It was this reorientation of religion and moral towards goals of equality and justice what galvanized millions of Indian to fight for independence.

Similar to Gandhi, Ambedkar also reinterpreted religion for the sake of justice and equality of millions of untouchables. It is important to note that although he was critical of Hindu religion and traditional values, he never rejected religion and its importance. He even converted to Buddhism in his last time. In his essay "Buddha and future of his Religion" he says-

There is one question which every religion must answer. What mental and moral relief does it bring to the suppressed and the downtrodden?(Ambedkar, Buddha and future of religion, 1950)

Like Gandhi, he also reinterpreted objective of religion from moksha to cessation of social suffering and moral guidance to society. If religion can't do these things then according to Ambedkar that religion was bound to failure. Gandhi found his solutions in Ram Rajya and Ambedkar in gospels of Buddha. His conversion to Buddhism was not reactionary but

emancipatory as he not only converted to Buddhism along with thousands of other Dalits but also reinterpreted Buddhism and started a new sect called Navayana.

What I wish to emphasize is that Buddha taught many other things besides Ahimsa. He taught as part of his religion, social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only, but between man and woman.(Ambedkar, Buddha and future of religion, 1950)

Ambedkar's Buddha was not overly concerned with cessation of suffering, nirvana and ahimsa as principles of Buddhism but was also concerned with freedom and equality. According to him, Buddhism was the only religion suited to the modern mind based on reason and science. He considered Buddha's gospel as the gospel of equality and freedom. He reimagined Buddhism as a religion of emancipation and equality.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both considered religion very important to society and individual. They both went to different religions to look for inspiration in their fight for social justice but radically changed them and aligned them towards the cessation of social suffering.

Conclusion:

Gandhi once said that we must burn all the religious texts which preach untouchability and Ambedkar burnt one of them, what an irony of comradeship! For modern India to make any serious effort towards uplifting millions of people from the social suffering we must try and understand Gandhi and Ambedkar as complementary to each other rather than in opposition. In times when society is overly politicized and focus of politics has moved away from the social suffering of people and religion is being used for political purpose, we must turn back to the radicalism of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Religion and politics must have only one aim and that is social justice. Any form of nationalism and patriotism is meaningless until millions of people are deprived of a life with dignity. Ambedkar in his conversation with Gandhi said to him, *"How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own, wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink?"* Gandhi didn't celebrate the day India got independence because his Ram Rajya was not about transfer of power but equality of human beings. Both of them rejected any political struggle or religion if their sole purpose was not social justice.

Note:
CWMG: Complete works of Mahatma Gandhi

YI: Young India

H: Harijan

ABP: Amrit Bazaar Patrika