



## THE IDEA OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR OF AN INDEPENDENT INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts a comparative analysis of the two visions of an independent India of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Both were great architects of the national and social vision of India but their visions of its independence were markedly different. Gandhi had a vision of a new India based on spiritual regeneration, a decentralised village republics, a moral nonviolence and a new Hindu social order which would not be based on the Varna system but would be clean of untouchability. Ambedkar, on the other hand, envisioned an independent nation that would be modern, based on the rule of law, industrial and without caste. This paper discusses five comparative strands of analysis: philosophical traditions; how caste and religion were understood; strategies for social reform; political representation and the Poona Pact; and conceptions of economy and democracy, all drawn from the primary and secondary literature provided — including that of Saxena (Heritage Times, 2022), Jha (RAIJMR, 2017), Shaw (IJPSG, 2025), Sarkar (IJAR, 2025), and the Indira Gandhi National Open University unit on Gandhi and Ambedkar. Even as they remain antagonistic, according to the study, Gandhi and Ambedkar provide alternative, but complementary, visions of India and the unfinished nature of the Indian independence movement can be better captured by creating productive tensions between them. The paper ends by arguing that caricaturization of either of the thinkers is a deprivation of scholarship and policy.

## 1. Introduction

The issue of what was to be India after Independence was not just administrative but was a civilisational one. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar were two figures above all others who gave the different answers to the question. Though born 30 years apart (Gandhi in 1869 and Ambedkar in 1891), they lived in different social worlds, learned about Indian society and its reform in different ways, and reached different conclusions about its nature and its reform. However, both were mass organisers, constitutionalists in their own way, and were committed to the issue of justice for India's most marginalised communities (Saxena, 2022; Shaw, 2025).

After studying law at King's College London, and inspired by a twenty-year period of anti-colonial struggle in South Africa, Gandhi made his return to India in 1915 to fight for freedom with the method of Satyagraha – nonviolent resistance based on moral truth. His idea of India was a decentralised, self-contained village republic (Gram Swaraj), spiritual purification and the reform of the Hindu society from within. Ambedkar, returning from Columbia University in New York with a PhD in economics, subsequently studying at the London school of Economics, saw the ills of India through the lens of rationalism, liberal constitutionalism and his experience of America's pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. He finally settled the belief that the caste system was not a deviation from Hinduism but the very essence of it and that independent India could be a just India if there was no caste, but if there were changes in the caste system, then it was not a just change but a wrong one (Sarkar, 2025; IGNOU Unit 2).

This ideological battle between the two was not an abstract one, but a decisive one on the fate of millions of Dalit Indians. These flashpoints were the Poona Pact of 1932, Gandhi's fast unto death protesting against separate electorates for Dalits, Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste (1936) and finally Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956. To comprehend India's unfinished democratic process today, one needs to understand the conflicting visions of an independent India of these two parties (Jha, 2017; Drishti IAS, 2025).

This paper is organized as follows: The methodology and sources are presented in Section 2. For each, a philosophical background will be explored in Section 3. Their conflicting notions of caste and religion are explored in Section 4. They are compared with respect to their social reform and political representation in section 5. In Section 6, they are juxtaposed against each other in their economic and democratic ideas. A discussion of convergences and divergences is given in

Section 7. The final part of section 8 is about implications for modern India.

## **2. Methodology**

The paper is based on a qualitative conceptual-analytical approach using the basis of comparative political thought. It is a theoretical review article analyses and synthesises the ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar as contained in the source materials assigned. The study is not based on fieldwork or Primary sources. Instead, it takes a contextual approach to reading, as suggested by Quentin Skinner, who reads a theorist within his or her historical context, as Jha (2017) has called for, in order to avoid anachronistic and reductive readings of either figure.

The analysis is organised along five comparative axes, which are taken from the literature: (i) philosophical and educational underpinnings; (ii) the understanding of caste and its connection to the religion of Hinduism; (iii) strategies for social reform and emancipation of Dalits; (iv) political representation and the Poona pact; and (v) economic models and visions of democratic governance. These are chosen as the substantive areas in which Gandhi and Ambedkar came into conflict with one another in their battle for freedom, and also as areas of their respective visions for an independent India, where their views are starkly opposed.

The analysis is based on the prescribed source of texts: Saxena (Heritage Times, 2022); Jha (RAIJMR, 2017); Shaw (IJPSG, 2025); Sarkar (IJAR, 2025); IGNOU Unit 2 (Egyankosh); Drishti IAS analytical summary (2025). Direct quotations from primary sources such as Gandhi's Young India and Harijan, Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste and other writings are reproduced in these secondary sources.

## **3. Philosophical And Educational Foundations**

The gap between Gandhi and Ambedkar starts from the philosophical training level. Gandhi's ideology was based on Hindu spiritual philosophy, specifically the Bhagavad Gita, the Jain principles of Ahimsa and some of the Tolstoyan and Christian ethics. He knew that Indian society was an organic wholeness which took on spiritual form. As Shaw points out (2025), his life was a moral experiment of truth (Satya) and nonviolence to elevate all by inner transformation and community unity. According to Gandhi politics was nothing but ethic. He felt that real swaraj – self-rule – needed not just the British but the moral regeneration of the Indian self.

Ambedkar's philosophy was at a completely different level. Ambedkar's thought was deeply influenced by liberal constitutionalism, rationalism and the ideas of the Enlightenment which he

encountered at Columbia University under the tutelage of John Dewey and which emphasized liberty, equality and fraternity, but emphasized structural change rather than moral appeal (IGNOU Unit 2; Saxena, 2022). Ambedkar's conception of religion and religion's role in social justice was presented by Shaw (2025) as follows: If a religion does not work for social justice then it should be rejected or reinterpreted. This attitude ultimately brought him to Buddhism, not to the formalistic type, but the rational ethical and egalitarian type.

Jha (2017) helpfully situates the philosophical choices of Gandhi within the "indigenous historic pride" (Gopal Guru) that took the route of the Gita and other classical texts, in opposition to imperial superiority. This dual role of reformer and preserver of tradition is an untenable one which Ambedkar found unacceptable. The different intellectual paths that Gandhi and Ambedkar followed can be attributed to the fact that Gandhi had been educated at a British university, Ambedkar at an American university, as Saxena (2022) chuckles.

#### **4. Understanding Caste And Religion**

Perhaps the most important difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar on this matter is their respective conceptualizations of caste. Gandhi called the Varna system (as it stood before the influence of Hinduism) a moral evil but untouchability was not. Gandhi's perspective is that caste was designed as a division of labour, not a hierarchy, and that it had become an oppressive system due to the distortion over centuries, as Shaw (2025) summarises. He wanted to make the Hindu society pure and reformed, but never eradicated.

This is evident from Gandhi's own words, as quoted in Jha (2017). In *Young India*, Gandhi has observed that the law of Varna or hereditary occupation of a profession was not a man-made but "an immutable law of nature, like Newton's law of gravitation". He considered the Varna system to mean the destruction of distinctions between high and low, if it was used to render service to one another. In Gandhi's thinking, untouchability was an ugly appendage to Hinduism—a sinful form of Hinduism with no scriptural backing and which demeaned the unity of all Hindus.

The analysis of Ambedkar was the exact opposite. Ambedkar, in his provocative speech, *Annihilation of Caste*, which was delivered at a conference to which a copy was sent to the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, argued that the caste was not a division of labour, but a division of labourers; it made the division of persons and ordered them into a hierarchy where some were superior to others (Saxena, 2022). He termed this as a graded inequality. Importantly, Ambedkar pointed out that such an ordered organization doesn't exist as a deviation in Hinduism but as part of it. Caste

was the necessary precondition for the religion of the scriptures of Hinduism – the smritis and the shrutis. To eliminate the caste system, it was necessary to eliminate the religion that legitimised the caste system (Shaw, 2025; Sarkar, 2025).

Ambedkar decried Gandhi's reformist jargon, Harijanini (children of God), Harijan Sevak Sangh, temple entry and so on, as not only inadequate, but patronising as well. It only attempted to cure the symptom and not the disease. Sarkar (2025) points out that Ambedkar was displeased with the use of the term Harijan because he considered religious terms to be a mask for systematic denial of rights, and symbolic inclusion to be no change at all over paternalism. The study by the Drishti IAS (2025) has shown this also; though Gandhi would have introduced the word to raise the status of the untouchables, Ambedkar would reject the same as an imposed label that would deprive them of their own identity.

Both thinkers had a different view on religion. Gandhi was a devoted Hindu, and a spiritual pluralist, believing in the essential truth of all religions. He saw Hinduism as very broad and tolerant and could accommodate reform. Ambedkar felt that Hinduism wasn't worth saving and in 1935, in a public announcement, declared that he was born a Hindu, but wouldn't die one. Ambedkar, with over half a million Dalits, converted to Buddhism at Nagpur in October, 1956, just before his death. However, Ambedkar has seen it as a political expression of freedom from caste bondage, not just a personal spiritual decision, as Shaw (2025) states.

## **5. Social Reform And Political Representation**

The two thinkers' philosophies led them to different plans for social change. Gandhi was a person who believed in changing the attitudes and thoughts of people. He initiated large-scale campaigns to open temples, schools, and wells for untouchables and made a nine-month, 12,500-mile country-wide tour in 1933-34, himself, to dismantle the barriers separating the untouchables from the rest of the Hindu community (Jha, 2017). His campaigns were entirely moral and spiritual in nature and were directed towards the cleansing of Hindu society instead of meeting it face to face. Gandhi believed that adopting the state-oriented approach of solving the problems or enforcing social justice by law was impractical and could not bring change; instead, he believed that the key to social change was the adoption of a voluntary process, based on inner conscience (Shaw, 2025).

Ambedkar did not like Gandhi's way because of its paternalistic nature and its inadequacy in structure. His three pillars of social change, education, agitation and organisation could be used

by Dalits, and not bestowed upon them by upper caste reformers. He was a strong advocate of constitutional rights, legal rights and political representation, and believed that it was not possible to win over the caste Hindus morally to remove privilege, but only through state power and social activism could justice be achieved (Shaw, 2025; Sarkar, 2025).

This difference has been most dramatically manifested in an issue relating to separate electorates for Dalits. In 1932, the British government introduced a Communal Award which advocated separate electorates for minorities such as Muslims, Sikhs and the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar had been in favor of this and believed that the establishment of separate electorates would allow Dalits to produce real representatives as opposed to token ones and ensure that they were not dominated by upper caste groups in democratic institutions (Shaw, 2025, Drishti IAS, 2025).

Gandhi strongly condemned the separate electorates for Dalits as he was concerned about its negative implications, which would lead to a permanent division of the Hindu society. In September 1932, he went on a fast unto death at Yeravda Jail, protesting against it, which Jha (2017) says brought “grave moral pressure”. Gandhi knew that his fast had an impact on the conscience of his loved ones and those who believed in him. His intention was to tap on the conscience of the Hindu community. However, the Poona Pact which followed rejected the concept of separate electorates and required reserved seats to be filled by a joint Hindu electorate, thereby giving a bigger number of reserved seats without any political autonomy for the Dalits. Ambedkar’s signature was coerced and later he spoke of it as “a denial of Dalit self-determination by coercion” (Shaw, 2025; Sarkar, 2025),

The Poona Pact still continues to be a controversial symbol. Gandhi considered it as a moral triumph and a consolidation of the Hindu community, while Ambedkar viewed it as a proof that the Dalits would never be able to make their voices heard if they did not have a separate political platform. The constitutional arrangements that followed the achievement of independent India – in particular, the abolition of the practice of untouchability as individual act (article 17) – were essentially ‘Gandhian’ in approach; they dealt with untouchability as individual action and not with the inequalities and unequal relations of production that gave rise to untouchability and caste. (Saxena, 2022) Ambedkar was not only interested in the end of the untouchability system, but also in its destruction.

## **6. Economic Models And Visions Of Democracy**

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar's ideas of the economic make up of a free India were as divergent as

their ideas on caste. As far as ideas on caste are concerned, Ambedkar was as different as Gandhi was on the economic structure of a free India. Gandhi had envisioned a network of autonomous village economies based on khadi, cottage industry and trusteeship concept, which suggests that the property of the rich should be placed at the disposal of the public for its benefit instead of as private property. He was against large scale industrial capitalism that had a negative impact on morals and ecology and looked forward to the life of rural Indians. His dream society, Ram Rajya was based on the panchayat system, decentralised government and spiritual oneness (Sarkar, 2025; Shaw, 2025).

Ambedkar was unimpressed by Gandhi's village-centred vision and his reply was direct. According to Shaw (2025), Ambedkar eloquently described the Indian village as a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness, and communalism. He felt that industrialization, urbanization and state action were required to end the caste-based occupation-based hierarchy and the rural poverty. He was pro-State infrastructure, public sector undertakings and trade unions. His economic ideology was akin to a modern welfare state but was not a Marxist one, as he was a social economist, though not a dogmatic one (Sarkar, 2025; Drishti IAS, 2025). But Saxena (2022) observes, with a certain critical sophistication, that both thinkers were flawed in political economy – the former advocated trustee system which idealised the benevolence of capital, while the latter had preferred British imperial regime as opposed to an upper caste Indian regime which chose one form of oppression over another.

Gandhi saw an ethical and spiritual type of democracy in democratic theory, which he knew as one of his ideals, where consensus is built, and decentralisation is practised and where people are self-governing and based on their duties and duties alone, dharma. He was suspicious of the modern state machine, formal representative democracy, as foreign to Indian tradition (Shaw 2025). The Ambedkarian notion of democracy was procedural, institutional and legally correct. He was also the father of the Indian Constitution, and he had a strong belief in equality, which he firmly incorporated in the constitution in the form of universal adult franchise, fundamental rights and positive discrimination by providing reservations. He once, in his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, as quoted by Shaw (2025) and Sarkar (2025), declared that India was moving towards a life of contradictions – political equality and social and economic inequality – and that political democracy cannot be complete without social and economic democracy.

## 7. Results And Discussion: Convergences And Divergences

The comparisons throw up significant differences and neglected similarities between Gandhi and Ambedkar. The divergences are more familiar and can be easily broken down into four axes. Firstly on the issue of caste Gandhi tried to reform the Hindu tradition whereas Ambedkar wanted complete annihilation. Second, on religion: Gandhi believed that Hinduism can be purified whereas Ambedkar believed that it is irredeemable as an institution. Third, on economy: Gandhi's preference was for decentralised, craft-based economies of the villages while Ambedkar's was for industrialisation, and state intervention. Fourth, on democracy, Gandhi believed in democracy based on moral principles and decentralised management while Ambedkar believed in constitutional democracy with legal protection (Shaw, 2025; Sarkar, 2025; Drishti IAS, 2025).

The intersections are not as frequently recognized, but no less important. Gandhi and Ambedkar had criticized the violent revolution and the approach of communism (Drishti IAS, 2025). Both stressed the value of human dignity and social justice, albeit for different reasons as far as method. They both held that the character and morality of their people were vital to public life. Both of them were against the colonial rule and for the upliftment of the oppressed. Jha (2017) points out that there is no need to differentiate between the views of Gandhiji and Ambedkar, as both were social reformers, both were fighting the evils the society was entangled in.

The Drishti IAS analysis also noted that Ambedkar had earlier decried the vacuous and vociferous moral politics which Gandhi had advocated but later he came to appreciate the importance of individual morality as Buddha preached non-violence and self-upliftment which was akin to Gandhi's vision of Swaraj. So it is implied that there was not an opposition of one against the other, but an opposition of one against another because they addressed different groups, the other different aspects of the same crisis, and the other different registers of the political.

The synthesis provided by Sarkar (2025) is useful: The combination of gandhian moral suasion and ambedkarite structural assurances is a fruitful guide to India's ongoing issues. As Sarkar says, the Indian Constitution itself, which fused the Gandhian ideals of local self-government and Ambedkar's assurances of legal equality. The result is a political system that is not only in between morality and rules, but also between morality and rules. Keeping a critical perspective, Saxena (2022), claims both thinkers were oblivious of the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist mode of production in India and that their debate though symbolic in nature is too underdeveloped to be

considered a complete political economy. Tackling the thought of any of the two thinkers is acerbic, but might not do justice to the political and symbolic effort made by both of them in mobilizing millions and laying the discursive groundwork of Indian democracy.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper has attempted a systematic comparison of the vision of Gandhi and Ambedkar of an independent India, and has relied solely on the literature assigned for the purpose. Their differences are shown to be not just tactical but more fundamentally related to their different philosophical formations, social positions, and ideologies of the interplay between religion, caste and political power. Gandhi envisioned India as a society that was morally transformed with the elimination of untouchability and the ideal functional status of Varna along with decentralized village republics for self-governance in India. Ambedkar envisioned the independence as constitutional modernity i.e. a secular democratic state where caste is legally eradicated, social equality is legally ensured and industrialisation is the economic base of Dalit emancipation.

However, both the visions have not been realised to the full in independent India. The Constitution, which was drafted by Ambedkar was ratified, but its social assurances are yet to be fulfilled in reality. Gandhi's ideas of village republics were partly realised in the Panchayati Raj but not in the moral transformation that he wanted. In 1949 Ambedkar had pointed out some paradoxes that still continue to plague India: despite the political equality, there are still social and economic inequalities. It is in this incompleteness where both thinkers are so relevant. Gandhi's principles of non-violence, moral courage and community remain inspirational for movements fighting for ecological justice and for peaceful resistance. Ambedkar's concept of dignity, legal rights and structural elimination of the caste system is central to India's democratic consciousness, and continues to be the struggle of Dalit communities today.

As this paper has explained, it is neither the proper approach to either side or throw away a dichotomy between them into a false harmony, but to maintain their visions in productive tension. An independent India with the moral aspiration of Gandhiji and the structural guarantees of Ambedkar would unite the two and would be the India worthy of both the thinkers, that is, neither ethics without law or law without ethics would give justice which India has promised during her Independence.

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