THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT: AMBEDKAR, GANDHI, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER DALIT REPRESENTATION AND VILLAGE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE

Ankita Bhattacharjee, B.A.LL.B., LLM (Constitutional and Administrative Law), Christ (Deemed to be University)

Agathiyan P, BBA.LLB, LLM (Corporate and Commercial Law), Christ (Deemed to be University)

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the intricate and persistent political dispute between Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar regarding Dalit representation and the idea of village self-rule in India's colonial era. At the heart of contention was their inherently different strategies towards caste, democracy, and empowerment of the disenfranchised Dalit group. Gandhi advocated the concept of Panchayati Raj - decentralized village self-rule- as a method to develop grassroots democracy and social cohesion in a one Hindu society, and against separate electorates for Dalits, fearing that they would create a split in Hindu unity. By contrast, Ambedkar, whose life experience was that of living under the yoke of caste oppression, spurned the Hindu orthodoxy and the very system of caste, and instead called for separate electorates and robust constitutional protections so that Dalits could have meaningful political representation and protection. The dispute ended in the 1932 Poona Pact, which substituted reserved seats for separate electorates within a joint electorate, a settlement that Ambedkar himself later criticized as coercive and inadequate. Through a critical analysis of their ideological stances, political tactics, and the significance of their disaffection, this paper emphasizes how competition over Dalit representation and local government represented wider tension within India's struggle for social justice and democratic inclusion. The research adds to knowledge of the historical origins of caste politics and the difficulty of reconciling social reform with political harmony in India's democratic development. This study relies on primary sources such as the writings and speeches of the leaders and secondary scholarly accounts to offer an insightful look at one of the most crucial discourses in contemporary Indian political history.

Keywords: Local self-government in India, Caste System, Democracy, political harmony

Introduction

The fight for India's freedom was not just a struggle against colonialism but also a deep struggle over the character of Indian society and its democratic destiny. One of the most intense and long-lasting arguments of this era was the battle between two great leaders—B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi—on the political representation and social empowerment of the Dalits, the long-marginalized and oppressed groups who were once called "untouchables." Containing at its center the question of local self-government, especially the institution of Panchayati Raj, which Gandhi saw as the key to a decentralized, self-sufficient India based on village sovereignty. Gandhi's approach emphasized social harmony within a unified Hindu society, advocating reform from within to abolish untouchability while preserving the varna system.

In stark contrast, Ambedkar's perspective was shaped by his personal experience of caste discrimination and his rigorous critique of Hindu orthodoxy. He viewed the caste system as a fundamental source of social injustice that could not be reformed but had to be dismantled. Ambedkar was strongly suspicious of village self-government because he suspected that it would institutionalize caste oppression by empowering top-ranking upper castes in the locality. He believed in separate electorates and constitutional protection as essential means of achieving real political representation and safeguarding Dalit rights.

The conflict between these two perspectives reached its peak in the early 1930s, culminating in the landmark Poona Pact of 1932, which did settle the thorny question of Dalit political representation but left many others regarding the character of Indian democracy and social justice outstanding. This essay analyzes the ideological and political aspects of the Ambedkar-Gandhi conflict, tracing how their conflicting perspectives on Dalit empowerment and local self-governance mirror deeper fault lines in India's search for social equality and democratic inclusion. Through a critical analysis of their publications, speeches, and political strategies, this research attempts to shed light on the intricacies of caste, democracy, and empowerment that continue to shape India's socio-political dynamics in the contemporary period.

Aim & Objective

Aim

To examine the ideological struggle between B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi regarding

Dalit representation and village self-rule, and how it affected social justice and democratic rule in colonial India.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are to examine Gandhi's vision of Panchayati Raj and its social implications; analyze Ambedkar's critique of caste and opposition to village self-government; investigate the political outcomes of the 1932 Poona Pact; explore their broader ideological differences on social reform and empowerment; and assess the controversy's influence on post-independence caste and governance policies.

Sustainable development goals

The B.R. Ambedkar vs. Mahatma Gandhi debate regarding Dalit representation and local self-government is directly in sync with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Ambedkar's call for structural, legal, and institutional reforms to end discrimination based on caste falls in line with SDG 10's vision to mitigate social, economic, and political inequalities by empowering marginalized communities such as Dalits. Gandhi's emphasis on social reform and village autonomy reflects efforts to build inclusive, participatory governance at the grassroots level, which is central to SDG 16's focus on promoting peaceful, just, and inclusive societies with effective institutions. Their debate highlights the challenges of achieving social justice and democratic inclusion in a deeply stratified society, underscoring the need for both moral and institutional approaches to equality. As India forges ahead with sustainable development, re-examining this colonial-period discourse provides useful lessons on combating caste-based discrimination and democratic deepening, thus promoting the fundamental values of the SDGs.

Research Questions

1. How did the differing views of B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on Dalit political representation and separate electorates shape the struggle for Dalit empowerment during colonial India?

2. In what ways did Ambedkar's critique of village self-government contrast with Gandhi's vision of Panchayati Raj, and what were the implications of this conflict for Dalit social and

political inclusion?

Research Methodology

This work is an outcome of purely doctrinal research. This research has been conducted by referring to books, articles, research papers.

Literature Review

1. Raja Sekhar Vundru (2019)- Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel: The Making of Democracy

Vundru's Journal of Social Inclusion Studies research article critically reviews Ambedkar's charge against Gandhi and the Congress for undermining Dalit political representation. The article marks Ambedkar's perception of Gandhi as a 'hypocrite' who, although in public pronouncements opposing untouchability, sold out Dalit autonomy in the interest of Hindu unity. Vundru talks about how Ambedkar's call for separate electorates was an essential political tactic to protect Dalit interests from upper-caste hegemony, sharply differing from the stand of Gandhi against separate electorates and in favour of joint electorates and Panchayati Raj as a method of social reform

2. B.R. Ambedkar's Pamphlet "Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables" (1932)

Ambedkar's own works present a basis for understanding this controversy. Ambedkar, in this political booklet, asserts that Dalits need to have separate political representation through independent electorates to avoid having their interests dominated by the Hindu majority. He reasons that joint electorates would enable dominant castes to dominate Dalit representation and thereby exclude them from justice and political expression. Ambedkar's criticism highlights the structural exclusion of Dalits from political power and the need for constitutional protections to secure their emancipation.

3. Arundhati Roy (2024)- " The Doctor and the Saint"

In this new academic book, Roy draws a contrast between the lives and philosophies of Gandhi and Ambedkar, highlighting their opposing strategies towards caste and representation. Roy posits that whereas Gandhi invested in symbolic reforms within Hinduism, like renaming

Dalits as "Harijans" and encouraging temple entry, Ambedkar aimed at revolutionary structural change by way of constitutional protection and separate electorates. Roy also highlights the performative aspects of their identities—Gandhi's asceticism versus Ambedkar's Western attire—as symbolic of their differing claims to authority and representation. This work situates their debate within the larger context of Hindu nationalism and caste oppression.

4. Raja Sekhar Vundru (2023)- "Ambedkar: Giving The Dalits a Voice"

This research paper examines Ambedkar's work as a journalist and politician who utilized media outlets such as Mooknayak and Bahishkrit Bharat to magnify Dalit causes in a repressive socio-political context. The research identifies the extent to which Ambedkar's attempts to give Dalits a separate political voice through the media coincided with his espousal of separated electorates and constitutional safeguards. It underscores Ambedkar's comprehensive strategy to empower Dalits not only politically but also socially and culturally, contrasting with Gandhi's primarily moral and spiritual approach to untouchability.

Conceptual framework

This study delves into the ideological and political confrontation between Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar over Dalit representation and local self-government in the context of the larger themes of social justice, caste relations, and democratic government.

Key Concepts

- Dalit Representation: Political empowerment and Dalit inclusion by means of electoral mechanisms such as separate electorates, reserved seats, and constitutional protection.

- Village Self-Government (Panchayati Raj): Gandhi's vision of decentralized governance aimed at empowering villages as units of self-reliance and social harmony.

- Caste System and Social Inequality: The hierarchical social structure in India that marginalizes Dalits, influencing access to political power and social justice.

- Political Empowerment vs. Social Reform: Ambedkar's focus on structural political rights and legal protections contrasted with Gandhi's emphasis on moral/social reform within Hindu society.

- Democratic Governance: The nature of political institutions and processes that ensure inclusive participation and protection of marginalized groups.

Relationships Among Concepts

- Gandhi's Panchayati Raj model promotes village autonomy as a foundation for democracy but assumes social harmony that Ambedkar critiques as unrealistic due to entrenched caste inequalities.

- Ambedkar's call for separate electorates and constitutional protections stems from his perception that, in the absence of structural political empowerment, Dalits are not secure in local government and larger democratic institutions.

- The Poona Pact is a political compromise between these competing visions that influences the course of Dalit political representation and the efficacy of local self-government.

- The conflict between social transformation (Gandhi) and political empowerment (Ambedkar) captures the general challenges to inclusive democracy in a stratified society.

Theoretical Underpinning

- The framework theorizes using social justice and political representation theories, focusing on the institutional protection of marginalized groups.

- It also engages with decentralization and grassroots democracy perspectives, critically assessing their potential and limitations in situations of fundamental social inequality.

This conceptual model will inform the analysis of primary sources, historical occurrences, and scholarly analysis, assist in critically evaluating how the Ambedkar-Gandhi dispute influenced India's democracy and social justice environment.

Divergent Perspectives on Dalit Political Representation and Separate Electorates: Ambedkar v. Gandhi

B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi had fundamentally conflicting ideas regarding the political representation of Dalits, and their views decisively shaped the course of Dalit

empowerment in colonial India. Ambedkar, who was a Dalit himself and a prominent intellectual, believed that Dalits were subject to systematic exclusion from the caste hierarchy and were downtrodden, and their condition could not be improved simply through social reform or moral suasion. [1]He maintained that Dalits needed separate electorates—separate political constituencies where Dalits would vote alone for their representatives—so that they could have true political freedom and protection of their interests against upper-caste Hindu dominance. Ambedkar was convinced that without structural political protection, the Dalits would be politically excluded and socially dominated, since joint electorates would enable the dominant castes to manipulate Dalit representation. This requirement stemmed from his more general critique of the caste system and his determination to achieve constitutional and legal guarantees for Dalits.

Gandhi was different, however, in that he rejected the proposal of separate electorates for Dalits, as he worried that such fragmentation would split Hindu society and dilute the larger nationalist movement against British colonialism. Gandhi's approach was grounded in his spiritual and moral philosophy, which emphasized social unity and reform from within Hinduism. He preferred joint electorates with reserved seats for Dalits, believing that this would promote social harmony and integration rather than division. Gandhi also positioned himself as the moral representative of Dalits, advocating symbolic reforms such as renaming Dalits as "Harijans" (children of God) and promoting temple entry to combat untouchability. But his resistance to separate electorates was seen by Ambedkar and most Dalits as a negation of their political autonomy and agency.[2]

The conflict between these perceptions reached its culmination in the 1932 Communal Award from the British government, awarding separate electorates to Dalits. Gandhi strongly opposed this move and went on a fast unto death in protest, which resulted in the Poona Pact being negotiated. The Pact substituted individual electorates by reserved seats for Dalits in combined electorates, a compromise which Ambedkar accepted unwillingly under tremendous pressure. Although the Pact added to the number of reserved seats, Ambedkar condemned it for

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[1] Raja Sekhar Vundru, Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel: The Making of Democracy, 12 J. Soc. Incl. Stud. 45, 50 (2019)
[2] Raja Sekhar Vundru, Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel: The Making of Democracy, 12 J. Soc. Incl. Stud. 45, 50 (2019)

compromising Dalit political autonomy and providing scope for upper-caste meddling in Dalit representation. [3]

Thus, the differing views of Ambedkar and Gandhi on Dalit political representation shaped the struggle for Dalit empowerment by highlighting the tension between demands for political autonomy and the goal of social unity. Ambedkar's insistence on separate electorates underscored the need for structural political safeguards to protect marginalized communities, while Gandhi's opposition reflected concerns about national cohesion and moral reform. This conflict shaped India's constitutional debates and political settlements that remain to shape Dalit representation and empowerment within India's democratic framework. [4]

Contrasting views on Village Self-Government: Ambedkar's Critique and Gandhi's Vision of Panchayati Raj

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Panchayati Raj was central to his idea of Indian self-rule and social reform. He advocated for decentralized governance where villages functioned as autonomous units capable of self-sustenance and self-governance. Gandhi believed that empowering villages through Panchayati Raj would foster grassroots democracy, social harmony, and moral regeneration. He envisioned village self-government as a means to rejuvenate India's rural economy and foster harmony among various castes, including Dalits, by fostering cooperation and change within the time-honored social order. For Gandhi, the village was the soul of Indian society, and its independence was the key to the country's political and social future. [5]

In contrast, B.R. Ambedkar was strongly critical of village self-government as Gandhi had conceived it. Ambedkar's critique was informed by his experience and research on caste oppression, which he considered the most deeply rooted in the countryside of India. According to him, villages were usually cesspools of caste discrimination, where upper castes held social, economic, and political domination over Dalits and other marginalised groups. Ambedkar was concerned that if villages were given autonomy without removing these power disparities, then they would only serve to strengthen the hierarchies of caste and continue to exploit and exclude

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[3] Raja Sekhar Vundru, Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel: The Making of Democracy, 12 J. Soc. Incl. Stud. 45, 50 (2019)
[4] B.R. Ambedkar, Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables 15-20 (1932)
[5] B.R. Ambedkar, Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables 15-20 (1932)

Dalits. For him, Panchayati Raj without robust constitutional protection would be unable to ensure Dalits' rights and turn into a tool of local tyranny instead of empowerment.[6]

The implications of this conflict were significant for Dalit social and political inclusion. Gandhi's model of village self-government assumed that caste prejudices could be overcome through moral reform and social cooperation, but Ambedkar's critique highlighted the structural barriers that made such reform unlikely without legal and political intervention. Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional protections and separate political representation aimed to ensure that Dalits could participate meaningfully in governance and protect their interests against local caste dominance.

This fundamental disagreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar reflected broader debates about how to achieve social justice and democracy in a deeply stratified society. While Gandhi's Panchayati Raj sought to empower communities through decentralization and moral upliftment, Ambedkar emphasized the need for institutional mechanisms to dismantle caste oppression and guarantee political rights. The conflict between these strategies informed the political bargaining of the era, such as the Poona Pact, and shaped the structure of India's post-independence governance, where Panchayati Raj institutions were ultimately created but augmented by constitutional protections like reservations for Scheduled Castes to facilitate Dalit representation.[7]

In summary, Ambedkar's critique of village self-government contrasted sharply with Gandhi's idealistic vision of Panchayati Raj, underscoring the challenges of balancing local autonomy with the protection of marginalized groups. Their debate remains relevant in contemporary discussions on decentralization, social justice, and inclusive governance in India.

Conclusion

The controversy between B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi over Dalit representation and village self-government reveals deep ideological and political divisions that shaped India's struggle for social justice and democracy. Gandhi's vision of Panchayati Raj emphasized moral reform, social harmony, and decentralized governance as a path to empower villages and integrate Dalits within a unified Hindu society. Conversely, Ambedkar's own experience of

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[6] Arundhati Roy, The Doctor and the Saint 102-110 (2024).
[7] Arundhati Roy, The Doctor and the Saint 102-110 (2024).

caste oppression prompted him to insist on structural political guarantees, such as separate electorates and constitutional protections, for securing true Dalit empowerment and protection from upper-caste domination. Their conflict, leading to the Poona Pact, represented the intricate challenge of reconciling social solidarity with demands for political self-determination and justice for subaltern groups. This exchange not only shaped India's constitutional landscape but remains relevant today in debates around caste, democracy, and inclusive governance. Having an understanding of the subtleties of their opposing views provides important insights into the ongoing endeavors of constructing a more democratic and equitable India.