

Interpretation and Comparative Analysis of Ambedkar and Gandhi's Definition of Social Justice

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Mahatma Gandhi considered the varna (caste) system to be naturally good, but he believed that reforms were necessary to eliminate distortions such as untouchability. He argued that caste divisions should be based on work (karma) rather than birth (janma). In contrast, Ambedkar viewed the caste system as inherently oppressive and advocated for its complete abolition. He saw it as an obstacle to social unity, liberty, and fraternity, believing that it perpetuated inequality and exploitation. Gandhi accepted the moral flaw of untouchability but saw it as a distortion of Hindu religious texts, rather than a direct consequence of them. For him, the caste system had been corrupted over time and needed purification.

Ambedkar, after extensive study, concluded that the roots of untouchability and caste-based discrimination lay within Hindu scriptures themselves. This conviction eventually led him to renounce Hinduism and convert to Buddhism, seeing it as a religion that offered equality and dignity for all. Gandhi adopted a moral and spiritual approach to address caste discrimination. He led movements to socially integrate "Harijans" (children of God, as he referred to Dalits or the untouchables) into society, believing that changing the hearts of the upper castes and emphasizing moral responsibility would bring about change.

Ambedkar, on the other hand, pursued a legal and political route, aiming to dismantle the caste hierarchy through constitutional provisions and rights for Dalits. He believed that societal reform would require institutional change, laws, and policies that would structurally eliminate caste-based oppression.

Gandhi emphasized the inherent unity of India, asserting that the diverse castes together formed an organic whole. He believed that the caste system could be reformed to foster harmony and mutual dependence.

Ambedkar, recognizing the cultural and social diversity of Indian society, instead emphasized the social-political unity of Dalits to fight against oppression. He believed in organizing the oppressed castes to gain political power and assert their rights. While Gandhi's focus was on maintaining social harmony and unity within the framework of Hindu society, Ambedkar was more radical in his approach, seeing the caste system as a fundamental barrier to equality. Gandhi's approach was rooted in his belief in non-violence and gradual reform, while Ambedkar viewed the caste system as irredeemable and advocated for revolutionary change. Gandhi's views evolved over time, and although he remained committed to the varna system in some form, he increasingly emphasized the need for dignity and rights for all individuals, including Dalits. However, Ambedkar's critique remained firm—he saw the caste system as not just a social problem but as a deeply entrenched system of inequality that needed to be completely dismantled for India to achieve true democracy and equality. Ultimately, the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar reflect two very different visions of Indian society: one that sought to reform and purify tradition, and one that sought to completely break from it to create a new, egalitarian order.

Both leaders clearly recognized the social evil of untouchability and called for its eradication, albeit through different means. Gandhi sought to address untouchability through moral reform and upliftment within the Hindu framework, while Ambedkar viewed it as a structural issue requiring legal and constitutional intervention to dismantle caste-based discrimination. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar

believed in the transformative power of education to change conservative mindsets and uplift marginalized communities. Gandhi focused on basic education and moral development, emphasizing character-building through practical learning, while Ambedkar advocated for higher education as a means for Dalits to gain knowledge, political power, and independence. Although their approaches differed, both leaders adhered to non-violent methods for achieving social change. For Gandhi, non-violence (ahimsa) was an absolute principle, not only a political tool but a way of life. Ambedkar's commitment to non-violence was more pragmatic, allowing for self-defense if necessary, especially in the context of resisting oppression. His version of non-violence was aimed at securing justice through constitutional and democratic means. Both envisioned an egalitarian society where individuals, regardless of their caste, would enjoy equal rights, opportunities, and dignity. Gandhi sought this through the moral regeneration of society and the reform of the varna system, while Ambedkar aimed for a society completely free from caste-based distinctions, one that was built on legal equality and social justice.

While Gandhi's approach to caste and untouchability was rooted in his spiritual philosophy and belief in the essential unity of all beings, Ambedkar's approach was grounded in the lived experience of oppression and the need for systemic change. Ambedkar believed that the emancipation of Dalits could only be achieved through political and legal rights, including affirmative action, whereas Gandhi placed faith in societal reform and voluntary change of heart among the upper castes. Ambedkar also challenged Gandhi's paternalistic term "Harijan" and advocated for the term "Dalit," reflecting a more assertive identity and demand for rights. Their differing strategies reflected not just ideological differences but also their contrasting social positions—Gandhi from an upper-caste background seeking reform from within, and Ambedkar, as a Dalit, fighting to overthrow a system that had historically oppressed his community. Ultimately, while both leaders sought the same goal of an equal society, their methods and philosophies diverged significantly. Gandhi's approach aimed to reform the system and reduce inequality, whereas Ambedkar sought a complete transformation of Indian society through the eradication of caste altogether, advocating for a more radical reimagining of India's social structure.

Conception of Social Justice : Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's conception of social justice is multi-faceted and deeply rooted in his commitment to equality, human rights, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. He believed that social justice requires the recognition of the fundamental equality of all individuals, regardless of caste, creed, gender, or religion. Ambedkar argued that social hierarchies and caste-based discrimination must be dismantled to achieve genuine equality. He viewed the caste system as a significant barrier to social justice, perpetuating inequality and oppression. To this end, Ambedkar advocated for the complete abolition of the caste system, believing that it was essential for establishing a just society.

A critical aspect of Ambedkar's vision is the emphasis on political empowerment for marginalized groups. He believed that social justice could only be achieved when these communities had adequate representation in governance and decision-making processes. This representation was seen as a pathway to enact policies that would promote economic equity and ensure that marginalized communities had access to resources, employment, and opportunities for development. Furthermore, Ambedkar considered education to be a vital instrument for achieving social justice. He believed that education empowers individuals to challenge social injustices, assert their rights, and actively participate in society. As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar embedded principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity into its framework. He viewed the Constitution as

a tool to ensure social justice, protect the rights of marginalized communities, and promote equal opportunities.

Ambedkar was also a strong advocate for women's rights, understanding that social justice must address the specific challenges faced by women, particularly those from lower castes. He supported legal reforms aimed at improving women's status in society. For Ambedkar, social justice transcends mere legal or political concepts; it encompasses social, economic, and cultural dimensions. His vision aims to create a society where every individual is treated with dignity and has equal opportunities to thrive, free from discrimination and oppression. His thoughts on social justice continue to resonate and inspire movements for equality and human rights today.

In contrast, the definitions of social justice articulated by Mahatma Gandhi reflect a different philosophical framework. Gandhi's philosophy of social justice is anchored in the principles of non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satya). He advocated for social justice through moral and ethical means, emphasizing the importance of individual character and social responsibility. Gandhi believed in reforming society from within, focusing on uplifting the marginalized through love, compassion, and self-sacrifice rather than through political or legal means alone.

Comparative Analysis :

Foundational Philosophy: Ambedkar's philosophy is deeply rooted in the principles of equality, human rights, and the abolition of the caste system. He viewed social justice as fundamentally linked to dismantling oppressive structures, particularly the caste hierarchy that perpetuated discrimination and social inequality. His approach is often seen as secular and focused on legal and institutional reforms, emphasizing the need for systemic change through political empowerment and education.

Gandhi's philosophy centers on moral and ethical transformation, advocating for social justice through non-violence and individual responsibility. He emphasized character-building and self-regulation, believing that true change comes from within. Gandhi aimed to uplift the marginalized by fostering compassion and understanding, seeking to reform society from a grassroots level.

Caste System: Ambedkar was a fierce critic of the caste system, considering it a major obstacle to achieving social justice. He argued for its complete abolition and advocated for political representation and economic rights for marginalized communities. Ambedkar believed that social justice could not be achieved without directly confronting and dismantling the caste system.

Gandhi recognized the injustices of the caste system but focused on reforming it rather than abolishing it completely. He promoted the idea of "Harijans" (children of God), aiming to integrate the untouchables into mainstream society while still preserving some aspects of the traditional social structure. Gandhi's approach was more conciliatory, seeking to win over upper-caste Hindus to change their attitudes toward the lower castes.

Political Empowerment: Ambedkar strongly advocated for political empowerment and representation for marginalized communities. He believed that social justice required active participation in governance and the establishment of legal protections through constitutional means. He viewed the Constitution as a vehicle for enshrining rights and ensuring equality, emphasizing the need for affirmative action to support the disadvantaged.

While Gandhi also valued political participation, he believed in a more grassroots approach to social justice, emphasizing the moral and ethical responsibility of individuals and communities to uplift the oppressed. He promoted non-violent resistance and civil disobedience as means to achieve social change, often focusing on economic self-sufficiency and rural empowerment rather than formal political structures.

Economic Justice: Ambedkar emphasized the importance of economic rights and opportunities as essential components of social justice. He advocated for the redistribution of resources and affirmative action to ensure that marginalized communities had access to economic opportunities.

Gandhi believed in economic justice through self-reliance and sustainable development. He promoted the idea of "Swadeshi," encouraging people to support local industries and crafts, which he saw as a way to empower the poor and marginalized.

Conclusion :

In summary, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's approach to social justice is characterized by a focus on equality, legal reform, and the abolition of caste, emphasizing systemic change and political empowerment. His vision seeks to eradicate deeply entrenched social hierarchies and ensure equal opportunities for all. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi's perspective centers on moral and ethical transformation, advocating for social justice through non-violence, individual responsibility, and grassroots movements. Both figures offer valuable insights into the pursuit of justice and equality in Indian society, reflecting their distinct ideologies and strategies for social change. Their differing approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of social justice in the Indian context, highlighting the complexity of achieving true equality and the necessity of addressing both systemic and individual factors in the struggle for justice.

Gandhi and Ambedkar, two towering figures in Indian history, held opposing views on the caste system, shaped by their diverse experiences, actions, and firm beliefs. Despite their differing perspectives, they shared a common goal: the upliftment of society and contributing to its betterment. They embodied India's pluralistic fabric, where multiple viewpoints converge to shape the nation's destiny. Though they walked different paths, both were striving for a caste-free society, one that was liberated from discrimination and prejudice. Gandhi's legacy lies in his emphasis on moral regeneration, non-violence, and the integration of the marginalized into the broader societal fold. His idea of a self-reliant and harmonious village community (Gram Swaraj) was central to his vision of a united India. However, his approach retained elements of the traditional varna system, which Ambedkar fundamentally opposed. Gandhi's attempts to humanize the plight of Dalits through movements like the Harijan Sevak Sangh brought attention to their struggles but fell short of addressing the systemic nature of caste oppression, as seen by Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's legacy, on the other hand, is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, which he helped draft. His vision of an egalitarian society was rooted in legal equality and social justice, challenging the very foundation of the caste system. Ambedkar believed that only through structural changes, such as affirmative action and constitutional safeguards, could Dalits achieve true empowerment. His work for Dalit rights and his efforts to provide them with political representation continue to resonate today. Their contrasting ideologies highlight the ongoing debate in India regarding caste, social justice, and equality. While Gandhi's philosophy appeals to those advocating for moral reform and gradual change within the system, Ambedkar's radical critique remains a rallying point for movements calling for the dismantling of caste hierarchies entirely. Together, their legacies remind us that while the methods to achieve social justice may differ, the commitment to equality and human dignity must remain unwavering. In a diverse and complex society like India, their philosophies continue to inspire discussions on how to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, inclusion and exclusion, and justice and reform.

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