



GANDHI VS. AMBEDKAR AT THE ROUND TABLE: A TURNING POINT IN INDIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The Round Table Conferences, held between 1930 and 1932, were a crucial phase in the Indian independence movement. During these conferences, a profound disagreement emerged between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar regarding the political rights of Dalits. This conflict was not merely a difference of opinion between two leaders, but rather a reflection of fundamental differences concerning the caste system, political representation, and the very nature of Indian nationalism. Mahatma Gandhi believed in maintaining the unity of Hindu society. He opposed separate electorates for Dalits, fearing that it would further divide society. Gandhi believed that social reform could be achieved through mutual cooperation and moral upliftment.

In contrast, Dr. Ambedkar argued that Dalits could not achieve equality and justice without political safeguards. He advocated for separate political rights for Dalits, enabling them to elect their own representatives and protect their interests. This research paper examines this conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar, the question of separate electorates, the Poona Pact, and its consequences. It demonstrates that this dispute was a pivotal moment in shaping the concepts of equality, representation, and social justice within Indian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian independence movement was not a monolithic or single-ideology movement, but rather a collective struggle encompassing diverse social classes, ideologies, and political perspectives. This movement was not limited to liberation from colonial rule; it also involved profound discussions on the internal structures of Indian society—such as the caste system, untouchability, and political representation.¹ In this context, the ideological conflict between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is considered a crucial chapter in Indian political history. The Round Table Conferences, held in London between 1930 and 1932, were the British government's attempt to formulate a new constitutional framework for India. These conferences provided Indian leaders with an international platform to present their views. It was during these conferences that Mahatma Gandhi, considered the moral and spiritual leader of the Indian nationalist movement, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leading

¹ Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857–1947* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), 249–250.

spokesperson for the Dalit community (then known as the "Depressed Classes"), came into direct confrontation.²

The central issue of the Gandhi-Ambedkar conflict was the provision of separate electorates for the Dalit community. The British government proposed this measure to ensure the political representation of Dalits, a proposal supported by Dr. Ambedkar. He believed that in the context of social discrimination, the rights of Dalits could only be protected through constitutional and political means. In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi strongly opposed this proposal. He argued that separate electorates would permanently divide Hindu society and weaken national unity.³ Thus, the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar represented two distinct perspectives—on one hand, Gandhi's approach was based on social reform, moral unity, and self-purification, while on the other hand, Ambedkar's approach focused on constitutional safeguards and political justice. This ideological clash not only influenced the direction of the independence movement but is also crucial for understanding the debate on social justice and democratic representation in modern India.

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Simon Commission (1927) did not include any Indian members, which led to widespread protests in India. The Indian National Congress and other political parties boycotted the commission. In light of this situation, the British government deemed it necessary to consult with Indian leaders to discuss India's constitutional future. The Round Table Conferences were organized in London for this purpose.⁴

The First Round Table Conference (1930) included representatives of the British government, Indian princely states, and leaders of various minority communities, but the absence of the Congress Party prevented its success.⁵ The Second Round Table Conference (1931) followed, with Mahatma Gandhi participating as the representative of the Congress. The question of political rights for minorities and depressed classes became the most important issue at this conference.

During the Second Round Table Conference, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for the Dalits, while Mahatma Gandhi opposed this. This disagreement brought the question of social equality and political representation to the forefront of the Indian national movement. The Congress did not participate in the Third Round Table Conference (1932), and ultimately, the British government proceeded with constitutional reforms on its own.⁶

MAHATMA GANDHI'S PERSPECTIVE

Mahatma Gandhi considered untouchability a grave evil within Hindu society and advocated for its complete eradication. He believed that untouchability was not only morally wrong but also undermined the unity of Indian society. Despite this, Gandhi did not support a separate political system based on caste, particularly separate electorates for Dalits. He believed that such a system would permanently divide Hindu society and harm national unity.⁷

Gandhi believed that Dalits were an integral part of Hindu society and could not be separated from it. He did not believe that social reform could be achieved solely through legal or political measures, but considered moral awakening and self-purification essential. For this reason, he appealed to the upper castes to introspect and renounce untouchability.

² Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 365–366.

³ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 288–290.

⁴ Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), 251.

⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 365.

⁶ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 40.

⁷ Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), 254.

Mahatma Gandhi used the term "Harijan" for Dalits, meaning "children of God." He provided them with equal status in his ashrams and supported temple entry movements and social campaigns for their upliftment. His aim was to ensure that Dalits received social respect and equal rights without dividing society.⁸

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's Perspective: Representation of the Underprivileged Classes

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar emerged as the most prominent spokesperson for the Dalit classes (then known as the "Depressed Classes") in the Indian independence movement. Having himself been a victim of caste oppression and social discrimination, his perspective was rooted in experience and practicality. Ambedkar believed that Dalits had been historically exploited and excluded from Hindu society and denied fundamental rights such as education, employment, and political participation.⁹ Dr. Ambedkar argued that simply including Dalits in the general Hindu electorate would not guarantee their genuine empowerment. According to him, the caste system was not merely a social problem but also a tool of political oppression. In such a situation, political power was essential for the social upliftment of the Dalits. This is why he demanded separate electorates for the Dalit classes, enabling them to secure independent, effective, and meaningful political representation.

Ambedkar also believed that Dalits, like Muslims and other minorities, should receive constitutional protection. He clearly stated that hoping for reform within Hindu society was an illusion for Dalits, as the traditional social structure was based on inequality and discrimination. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar's perspective focused on social justice, political rights, and constitutional protection, which gave the Dalit question central importance in Indian politics.¹⁰

GANDHI VS. AMBEDKAR: AN IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT

The ideological clash between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar during the Round Table Conferences of 1930–32 is considered a pivotal moment in modern Indian politics. The central issue of this conflict was the demand for separate electorates for the Dalit community. Mahatma Gandhi vehemently opposed this proposal, calling it "national suicide." He believed that such a system would permanently divide Hindu society and severely damage national unity.¹¹ In contrast, Dr. Ambedkar considered separate electorates the minimum and essential condition for the political security of the Dalits. He argued that Dalits, who had been oppressed and marginalized for centuries, could not receive genuine representation within the general Hindu society. Therefore, separate electorates were necessary to give them an independent political voice.

In reality, this conflict was not limited to a single political issue, but represented a clash of two distinct ideologies. Gandhi's approach was based on moral idealism. He viewed the Dalit problem as a social and spiritual question and sought its solution through reform within Hindu society. His objective was the assimilation of Dalits into Hindu society. Conversely, Ambedkar's approach was based on constitutional realism. He considered the problem a political one rooted in structural inequality, requiring legal and constitutional safeguards for its resolution. Ambedkar advocated for autonomous and effective representation for Dalits, even if it meant going beyond the traditional Hindu framework.¹² The impact of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate extended to post-independence Indian policies. This conflict brought the Dalit question to the national stage and compelled serious consideration of caste-

⁸ Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2018), 410.

⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 20–22.

¹⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker & Co., 1945), 64–66

¹¹ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 290.

¹² Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 82–84.

based inequalities. It was against this ideological backdrop that policies related to reservations, affirmative action, and social justice were later developed.¹²

The Poona Pact: An Agreement and a Controversy

In 1932, the "Communal Award" announced by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald granted separate electorates to the depressed classes. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar supported this decision, considering it an essential measure for the political protection of the Dalits.¹³ Mahatma Gandhi strongly opposed this decision, calling it detrimental to the unity of Hindu society. In protest, he began a fast unto death in Yerwada Jail. Gandhi's deteriorating health and the resulting public pressure across the country created a critical situation. Consequently, an agreement was reached between Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, known as the Poona Pact. This agreement was concluded on September 24, 1932. Under the Poona Pact, the system of separate electorates for the depressed classes was abolished. Instead, the number of reserved seats for Dalits in the provincial legislatures under a joint electorate was increased. Dalit voters were also given the right to elect their representatives in primary elections. Although this agreement was considered a significant step towards national unity, it remained highly controversial. Dr. Ambedkar later acknowledged that he had accepted the agreement under moral pressure and compelling circumstances. Nevertheless, he considered it a necessary decision given the prevailing political situation. Thus, the Poona Pact was a crucial outcome of the Gandhi-Ambedkar ideological conflict, which profoundly influenced pre-independence Indian politics.

Impact on Indian Politics

The ideological conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar during the Poona Pact and the Round Table Conferences had far-reaching consequences for Indian politics. This conflict led to the emergence of Dalit politics as an organized and conscious force. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar became the undisputed leader of the Dalits, and the discourse on caste and rights gained a new direction at the national level.¹⁴ This dispute brought the question of social justice to the forefront of Indian politics. This ideology later became enshrined in the Indian Constitution as the principles of equality, liberty, and justice. The ideological foundation of the reservation policy (in jobs and education) was laid during this period.

Mahatma Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability also gained widespread national support after this conflict. Serious discussions began on the need for reform in Hindu society, and public opinion against untouchability was generated. Dr. Ambedkar's role in the constitution-making process after independence was crucial, and he became the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Thus, the Gandhi-Ambedkar conflict proved to be the cornerstone of fundamental rights, social equality, and constitutional protection in modern India, significantly contributing to making Indian democracy more inclusive.

CONCLUSION

The ideological conflict between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar during the Round Table Conferences was a pivotal moment in the history of Indian politics. Gandhi symbolized moral reform, spiritual unity, and national integrity, while Ambedkar was a strong advocate of social equality, political rights, and constitutional safeguards. This clash was not personal, but based on profound philosophical and ideological differences. The agreement reached in the form of the Poona Pact was an attempt to strike a balance between social justice and national unity, with both possibilities and limitations. The echoes of this debate are clearly visible in the policies related to democracy, the constitution, and marginalized communities in India as it moved towards independence. Thus, the

¹³ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi* (New Delhi: Picador, 2007), 97.

¹⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 96–98

Gandhi-Ambedkar ideological conflict played a significant role in making modern Indian democracy more just and inclusive.