

# **Why Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's idea of Dalit emancipation**

**He rebuffed Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh, viewing it as a paternalistic  
tool that reinforced caste Hindu dominance rather than empowering  
Dalits.**

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Oct 02, 2024



In 1933, Mahatma Gandhi renamed his newspaper Young India as Harijan, and asked for a message for the inaugural issue from Ambedkar. | Photo Credit: Gandhi Smriti/The Hindu Archives

While striking the Poona Pact, Gandhi promised to devote himself to the task of eradicating untouchability. Just five days after signing the Poona Pact, Gandhi founded the All India Anti Untouchability League on 30 September 1932, which was later renamed as Harijan Sevak Sangh (Servants of Untouchables Society). At the time, industrialist Ghanshyam Das Birla was its founding president with Amritlal Thakkar as its secretary. In 1933, Gandhi renamed his newspaper *Young India* as *Harijan*, and undertook a twenty-one-day 'self-purification fast' against untouchability. He asked for a message for the inaugural issue of *Harijan* from Ambedkar, to which Ambedkar sent a blunt reply: 'I feel I cannot give a message. For I believe it will be a most unwarranted presumption on my part to suppose that I have sufficient worth in the eyes of the Hindus which would make them treat any message from me with respect . . . I am therefore sending you the accompanying statement for publication in your *Harijan*.'

The essence of his statement was what he would elaborate on in his *Annihilation of Caste* after four years: 'Nothing can emancipate the Out-caste except the destruction of the Caste system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of the Hindu Faith of this odious and vicious dogma.'

Gandhi also took a march across the country from November 1933 through August 1934, covering 12,500 miles by vehicle and foot and collecting Rs 8,00,000 for the Harijan fund. Ambedkar was taken onboard of the Anti-Untouchability League, one of the three Untouchables among the total nine members. He anticipated it to be a comprehensive civil rights group focused on securing civic liberties for Dalits, including access to public spaces, utilization of public amenities, and broader civil freedoms, all under Dalit control.

However, Gandhi transformed it into a paternalistic organization, overseen by caste Hindus aiming for the 'upliftment' of Untouchables. This stemmed from his fundamental philosophy, which regarded untouchability as a sin within Hinduism, to be expiated by the Hindus. It was not an inherent aspect of the religion, but rather a flaw that could be rectified. According to Gandhi, upper-caste Hindus should acknowledge and atone for this sin, make reparations, and undertake initiatives for the purification and elevation of Dalits. This involved activities such as engaging in slum clean-up efforts, advocating against alcoholism, promoting vegetarianism, and similar endeavours.

Ambedkar proposed that the League could undertake a campaign for intercaste marriages and intercaste dining so as to weaken castes. But the League rejected it. All the untouchable members resigned immediately.

For Ambedkar, the entire plan of the Harijan Sevak Sangh was worse than useless. He condemned the Harijan Sevak Sangh in strong language: 'The work of the Sangh is of the most inconsequential kind. It does not catch anyone's imagination. It neglects the most urgent purposes for which the Untouchables need help and assistance. The Sangh rigorously excludes the Untouchables from its management. The Untouchables are no more than beggars, mere recipients of charity.'

After induction on the Board of the Anti-Untouchability League formed in the aftermath of the Poona Pact, Ambedkar wrote a six-page letter on 14 November 1932 to A.V. Thakkar, general secretary, outlining his views on the concrete programme to be taken up by the League. Pointing out the need to take up a campaign to secure civil rights for the Depressed Classes, he preferred the behavioural school that focuses on amelioration of the social environment as against improvement in individual behaviour, as it believes that the latter is largely conditioned by the former.



An artist painting a portrait of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on a wall near Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, on August 26, 2022. | Photo Credit: G.N. RAO

He explained, 'It starts with the hypothesis that the fate of the individual is governed by the environment and the circumstances he is obliged to live under, and if an individual is suffering from want and misery it is because his environment is not propitious.' He cautioned that it would entail violence in rural areas and 'criminal prosecutions of one side or the other'. He also pointed out that in these struggles 'the Depressed Classes will suffer badly because the Police and the Magistracy will always be against them'. 'The Police and Magistracy are corrupt as they could be, but what is worse is that they are definitely political in the sense that they are out not to see that justice is done, but to see that the dignity and interests of the caste Hindus as against the Depressed Classes are upheld.' Therefore, he recommended the League to create an army of workers in the rural parts, 'who will encourage the Depressed Classes to fight for their rights and will help them in any legal proceedings arising therefrom to a successful issue'. He emphasized that 'this programme involves social disturbance and even bloodshed. But I do not think that it can be avoided'.

The other measures he proposed were: creating equality of opportunity, social intercourse and employment of an agency to carry out the programme. This reflected a profound learning from his experience in Mahad wherein he thwarted the counterattack by the Dalits when they were attacked by the caste Hindu goons for polluting the Chowdar Tank. It does not spell just resistance, which in any case needed to follow as part of the struggle, but more importantly it becomes a cultural shock to challenge their age-old customs and traditions. His attitude to violence also reveals that there are situations where violence is inevitable. If he concedes that violence could not be avoided in a simple case of changing peoples' behaviour, he would surely see what would entail if the societal economic structure needed to be overhauled. The question of violence or non-violence is not a question of principle, it is a question of strategy. He rightly reads here violence as being a constitutive element of any secure social order.

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This letter with such a clear-headed contribution was not even acknowledged by Thakkar. The League continued work under the influence of Gandhian paternalism and did not want even to seek views of the Depressed Class members. Realising it, Ambedkar resigned from the League, which was later followed by P. Balu, Srinivasan and Rajah.

He concluded that the Untouchables see the Sangh 'as a foreign body set up by the Hindus with some ulterior motive... the whole object is to create a slave mentality among the Untouchables towards their Hindu masters'. This, to Ambedkar, was the major thrust of paternalism. More importantly, he explicated, 'The outcaste is a byproduct of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system. Nothing can help Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except, the purging of Hindu faith of this odious and vicious dogma.'

If only this principle was stressed in the Constituent Assembly, the euphoria over the abolition of untouchability could have been punctured and possibly the intrigues to preserve castes with an alibi of social justice could have been thwarted. Unfortunately, not only would he not raise this issue in the Constituent Assembly but when raised by others would choose to stay quiet.

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