

'Never a Mahatma': A Look at Ambedkar's Gandhi

Gandhi, an essential ingredient in the making of India's image across the world, needs to be seen through Dr Ambedkar's eyes.

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Mahatma Gandhi is one of India's most recognisable names, both within the country and in the wider world. But, for most people, what they know of him is what is pieced together by the heavy hand of the Indian state — through ceremonial remembrances, public holidays, currency notes, street names, statues and school textbooks.

Apart from these, a host of hagiographies praising the subtleness of his sainthood and the ingeniousness of his protest are all too common.

Further, he is extolled as the pioneer of Satyagraha, the progenitor of non-violence and, of course, as the father of the nation.

In short, Gandhi has become an essential ingredient in the making of India's image across the world.

On the occasion of Gandhi's birth anniversary, this piece attempts to reconstruct Gandhi through the eyes of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

What did Ambedkar, the man whom we trusted with the stewardship of our constitution, have to say about Gandhi, the Mahatma? In a 1955 BBC interview, Ambedkar said, "Gandhi was never a Mahatma; I refuse to call him a Mahatma."

In an audio file of the interview uploaded to YouTube, Ambedkar can be heard saying that Gandhi was no reformer. "He was just an episode in the history of India, not an epoch maker," Ambedkar said.

While some Gandhian scholars have dismissed Ambedkar's characterisation of Gandhi as mere 'polemic', I would argue that his sharp criticism stems from logical analysis and philosophical disagreement rather than hatred for Gandhi as a political opponent.

After thoroughly interrogating the social and economic foundations of Gandhian philosophy, Ambedkar diagnosed Gandhism as a dangerous doctrine.



Statue of Mahatma Gandhi on the premises of the Parliament House during the monsoon session, New Delhi. September 20, 2020. Photo: PTI/Kamal Kishore

The Gandhian prescription for an ideal society was to establish a perfect caste system. Till 1922, Gandhi was an ardent proponent of the caste system. He saw great value in caste and openly advocated its continuance.

Gandhi glorified caste as responsible for the durability of Hindu society; as a seed of swaraj (freedom); as a unique power of organisation, as a means of providing primary education and raising a defence force; as a means of self-restraint; as the natural order of society; and most important of all, as the eternal principle of hereditary occupation for maintaining societal order.

Enunciating all these merits of caste, Gandhi declares, “These being my views I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the caste system.”¹

Later, Gandhi switched his terminology from that of caste to *varna*.

Around 1925, Gandhi declared that varna rather than caste was his social ideal. He suggested the smaller castes fuse and ‘reproduce the old system of four varnas.’ The old varna system prevalent in ancient India had society divided into four vertically hierarchical orders: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras whose socially legislated occupations were learning, warfare, trade and service to the above three varnas respectively. Ambedkar saw no real change in Gandhi’s position as Gandhi’s varna ideal carried forward the hereditary occupation from the caste model intact.

Ambedkar rightly pointed out that even within the framework of a Gandhian utopia, the Shudras were to continue as a servile class. And ati-shudras (present-day Dalits) were to be integrated into the Shudra varna.

The economic ideal of the Gandhian model was equally revolting for Ambedkar’s modernist sensibilities.

Firstly, Gandhi was against machinery and modern civilisation. In contrast, Ambedkar argues that modern machinery enables humans to have leisure. And leisure, in turn, is the primary precondition for culture and civilisation to thrive, which make human life worthy of its existence.

Secondly, the Gandhian idea of ‘trusteeship’ is ostensibly geared towards the elimination of class struggle in the relationship between employers and employees and between landlords and tenants. Ambedkar, being a trained economist, was highly sceptical of the rich protecting the interests of the poor.

¹ B.R. Ambedkar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 2016), 276



Women protest at Shaheen Bagh with Ambedkar's portrait. Photo: PTI

Ambedkar warned about Gandhism as ‘conservatism in excelsis’ that ‘helps those who have, to keep what they have and to prevent those who have not from getting what they have a right to get’.²

Ambedkar declared Gandhian philosophy to be suited only for the privileged leisure class, which is vindicated by the class status of the present torch-bearers of Gandhism.

Ambedkar dissects and concludes that the ideals of Gandhi are ill-suited for the aspirations of a democratic society.

Ambedkar, from his unique vantage point of being an ‘untouchable’ and a philosopher, indicts the highly Brahminised status-quoist formulations of Gandhi. The foundational conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi are not merely personal, but rather they epitomise the fault lines of caste that run wide and deep across the social fabric of India.

Today, there can be no doubt that we need more of Gandhi and of course, we need more of Ambedkar.

We need Gandhi to learn how a Brahminised consciousness operates regardless of its best intentions. On the other hand, we need Ambedkar for forging tools to deconstruct and repurpose the tactics of neo-Brahminical forces in the fight against the hydra-headed monster that is caste.

² Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. 9 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 2016), 291

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