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Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Indian village: A study in contrasting perceptions

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Abstract

Of late, there is a mad race to appropriate Babasaheb Ambedkar and all that he believed in by people of all dissensions'. Educationally one of the most qualified ministers in the first cabinet of Jawaharlal Nehru, he could hardly win the love, sympathy and adoration of the majority his countrymen as he was pitted against the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi and was constantly treated as a villain who sided with the British and opposed the national movement. He had experienced untold sufferings as a dalit and was vehemently opposed to the rural setting where the inhuman social exploitation was the maximum. Compared to Ambedkar, Gandhi had an altogether different opinion about the village life.

The present paper attempts to compare and contrast the views of two great sons of India who dreamt of structuring a newly emerging nation with differing perceptions about its socio-political and economic foundations.

Keywords: swaraj, satyagraha, jajmani, dalit, contrasting perceptions

1. Introduction

Romanticizing village life as a return to our roots has been a general tendency among the Indian elite. However, the vision that the village should remain the building block of Indian society continues to divide the Indians. In a country with close to 680,000 villages, much of the elite continue to subscribe to the Gandhian belief that the village should occupy a holy place at the centre of Indian nationhood. Their influence probably continues to undermine attempts to provide better planning for the cities. Many others including Nehru, India's first prime Minister and Gandhi's protégée, argued against him. However, Gandhi's most vehement critic at that time was Ambedkar, who knew about village life as an untouchable. While for Gandhi the village was a place of authenticity, for Nehru it represented backwardness, and for Ambedkar it meant oppression.

If Gandhi's love for the village was ideological, Ambedkar's wariness of it was personal, particularly, as a Dalit born in a poor rural family. He saw the village as a cruel place because there, one's identity never left him. Not just one's caste or religion but also one's family history. A typical Indian village, for example, was a string of many ghettos, based on caste or religion, with Dalits confined to the fringes with their own wells, places of worship, etc. That is why when Gandhi talked of the need to go back to villages, Ambedkar wanted villagers, particularly the oppressed classes, to move to cities, for work as well as anonymity. Seventy years on, Ambedkar is winning hands down.

In a letter to Nehru, Gandhi wrote: 'I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom, and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people will have to live in villages, not towns; in huts not in palaces.. Crores of people will never be able to live in peace with each other in towns and palaces. They will then have no recourse but to resort to both violence and untruth ^[1].' In *Hind Swaraj* (Self-Rule for India), probably the most widely cited work of Gandhi, he wrote: 'Remove his (the villager's) chronic poverty and his illiteracy and you have the finest specimen of what a cultural, cultivated free citizen should be..To observe morality is to attain mastery over our minds and passions. So doing, we know ourselves. If that definition be correct, then India, as so many writers have shown, has nothing to learn from anybody else ^[2].'

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An element of cultural pride and some of his profound disdain for modernism should be seen in historical context as an effective tactical riposte to the insults that were often hurled at 'benighted India' by the colonialists, and as a way of raising the self-esteem of the masses.

For Gandhi, investments in 'erstwhile village republics of India' were deep and pervasive and it was central to his political imagination [3]. Towards the end of his life, the village stood at the conceptual core of Gandhian politics in three fundamental ways: as the institutional unit of political autonomy, the heart of a future decentralized, non-violent polity; as a model of *swaraj*, the moral ideal of self-rule isomorphic with individual *swaraj*; and finally, as the privileged site for constructive satyagraha, the exemplary mode of Gandhian political action.

Gandhi thought that village was representative of real India. In a 1931 speech Gandhi said, "princes will come and princes will go, empires will come and empires will go, but this India living in her villages will remain as it is....They have their own culture, mode of life, and method of protecting themselves, their own village school master, their own priest, carpenter, barber, in fact everything that a village could want...these villages are self-contained, and if you want there you would find that there is a kind of agreement under which they are built. From these villages, has perhaps arisen what you call iron rule of caste. Caste has been blight on India, but it has also acted as a sort of protecting shield for these masses [4]."

Gandhi more or less defended organizational validity of caste groups and village communities. The caste system answered not only their religious wants of the community, but it answered its political needs also. The villages managed their internal affairs through the caste system, and through it they dealt with any oppression from the ruling power or powers [5]."

In a 1934 interview with Nirmal Kumar Bose, in the midst of a discussion of state appropriation and ownership of land, Gandhi offered one of his sharpest objections to the modern state. "The state represents violence in concentrated and organised form"; it was a "soulless machine", and therefore, could "never be weaned from violence to which it owes its existence." Even egalitarian projects of land reform, if state driven, would pose serious threats to freedom and self-rule; for Gandhi, an increase of the power of the state should be viewed "with the greatest fear, because, although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality [6]."

Structurally, the violence of the state was associated centralization and the concomitant concentration of wealth and power. Crucially, centralization was understood to entail distinct forms of authority-hierarchical and external –which made it "inconsistent with [a] non-violent structure of the society [7]."

Gandhi's critique of the state is often subsumed under his well-known rejection of modern civilization and too quickly dismissed as naively traditionalist. Gandhi insisted that for law to have a moral claim it couldn't command obedience through the threat of force. To obey a law out of fear served only to mask domination in the language of legitimacy. A moral and psychological trauma had been brought about by imperialism as it had made the subject people to believe that power or material inequality can be legitimate domination. Thus while reformulating the moral foundations of political authority Gandhi sought ways to undo the association of rule with hierarchy and violence. Hence he conceived *swaraj* and

satyagraha, central concepts of the Gandhian philosophy. *Swaraj* was self-rule which re-imagined the logic of rule as radically non-hierarchical, and *satyagraha* as a principle of action that re-imagined logic of action that was radically self-limiting. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi claimed that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them [8]." In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi ridiculed the nationalist understanding of independence as simply a demand for "English rule without the Englishman [9]."

Gandhi was especially attentive to the means of attaining *swaraj*, the modes of living and acting appropriate with the end of *swaraj*. His politics was in a way oriented towards the transformation of relationships which animated and reproduced coercive structure. For Gandhi constructive programme was the practical analogue of decentralization. It was fundamental to the socio-economic revival and political renewal of India. Gandhian freedom, despite the intensity of its practices of self-discipline, did not seek fulfilment in Hindu renunciation or stoic indifference as commonly understood, but rather in cultivating a detached engagement with and towards the society. Gandhi's recognition that man is a social being was not only a claim about moral priority of the social over the individual, but it also taught man to "suppress his egotism" and thus taught the "lesson of humility [10]."

Ambedkar's view of the village stemmed from his own experience, in which the humiliations he suffered as a child, when barbers refused to cut his hair and wayside cafes denied him entrance, were only partially assuaged by the opportunities that an education in Bombay (now Mumbai) provided him. It is not at all surprising that he remarked: 'The love of the intellectual Indian for the village community is of course infinite, if not pathetic....What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism?' [11]

Gandhi and Ambedkar had completely different social and political outlooks. Gandhi came from upper caste whereas Ambedkar came from the oppressed caste. Their upbringing and learning were quite different from one another. It would not be wrong to say that their personal experiences influenced their thinking. They both had revolutionary ideas in their minds but the methods that they adopted to realize these ideas were very different. Gandhi advocated a fair deal for the rural people and sought their welfare without any exploitation from external forces—urban or foreign producers. When he was questioned, "Is the economic law that man must buy in the best and cheapest market wrong?", Gandhi answered: "It is one of the most inhuman among the maxims laid down by modern economists [12]."

Gandhi emphasized on village economy because he genuinely believed that the progress of India lies in its villages. There was dearth of resources on all fronts, to ensure true industrialization and urbanization of India. That is why Gandhi advocated devolution of political powers and decentralization of economy. His concept of self-sufficient Indian villages was recognized in Directive Principles of State Policy in Indian Constitution under Article 40 (organization of Village Panchayats) and article 43 (promoting cottage industries, and the federal government) [13].

Gandhi emphasized on village economy also because he believed that the skills of Indian workers lay in agricultural and other related sectors of village economy. He spoke of harnessing these skills before going for industrialization and urbanization. Since India lived in her villages, he felt that the

route of progress should also pass through that. Gandhi was not against industrialization as such but he was against the concept of ‘mass production.’ His support was more for ‘production by masses’ than ‘mass production’^[14]. He was against a form of western style of industrialization which completely replaced human labour. It is however difficult to put his ideology into practice in today’s India, however sustainable it may sound.

Gandhi turned the British formulation of the Indian village upside-down. Like most other thinkers and political activists of his time, who had quite uncritically borrowed the British constructs of the pasts of Indian society and their notion of its so called “village republics”, his ideas and moral politics of a village-centric society evolved over a period of time. His romance with the presumed classical Indian rurality remained intact but he also worked on building a futuristic model of village society, which not only would overcome corruptions brought into it by a variety of “foreign rulers” and recover its lost self, but would also have the capacity to engage with the “modern” world. Gandhi’s liberated village was to do so by reforming itself to adjust to the needs of a national and global life, without being swept away by it. Not only would it allow for education and medical care of some kind but would also be open to introducing modern modes of communication, such as a post office. “My idea of village *swaraj* is that it is completely republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity”, he wrote in the *Harijan* in 1942. It was in this context of “recovering” and “building” a village-centric *swaraj* that Gandhi had expressed his disgust at habits such as eating the meat of dead cattle^[15].

Gandhi’s idea of freedom through a revival of the self-sustaining village community was vehemently contested by Ambedkar. Gandhi’s social and economic ideals found very little space in the Indian Constitution or in the mainstream models of economic development that India chose. The Indian village continues to be an important demographic reality. Nearly two-third of India continues to reside in its nearly half-a-million rural settlements. Some demographers would argue, and for good reasons, that the substantive realities of social and political life in many of India’s smaller urban settlements is also more like the life in rural settlements possessing few attributes of urban life. Despite its demographic weight, rural India has over the past five or six decades changed quite radically. Its social structure, the *jajmani* ties, patriarchal authority and traditional hierarchies have disintegrated. Its integration with the national life is far more than it has ever been.

Over the past two decades it has also seen a gradual process of marginalisation and neglect — despite the growing presence of rural elite in regional and national politics. Unlike some of the more “mature” democracies of the West, Indian democratic politics is perhaps strongest on its margins. Villagers not only actively participate in the electoral process, but over the years, a much larger proportion of the political elite are coming from rural and agrarian backgrounds. Why is it that we hardly find anyone speaking for the village in a language that is politically effective?^[16]

Gandhi had a moral vision that was larger and beyond just the risk of farmers losing their land. Gandhi saw village life as the ideal form of intimate sacrifice and high culture, where anarchy based on self-sacrificing morals would sustain itself far from the mass of modern industrial life and interest driven politics^[17]. Ambedkar strongly disagreed with Gandhi’s celebration of village life and morals. He considered the idea

of a village republic as one based on undemocratic values. He said, ‘what is a village—a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism’. How relevant are Ambedkar’s observations today? Perhaps as relevant as they were in 1940s. Even now, close to 67 percent of India’s population lives in villages. In 2000, about two-thirds of rural dalits were landless or near-landless and close to half depended on farm labour for their livelihood—including in the left-ruled states. Much of the minimalistic land reform in many states of India ended up in providing land to the tiller and not to the labourer^[18].

Perhaps, the answer lies in the popular and dominant framing of the “village”. Gandhi’s idea of village was empirically mistaken and politically unviable. Even when he recognised untouchability as a “problem” and sincerely worked for its eradication, he did not want the caste system to go away because caste for him was merely a moral system. However, as Ambedkar had relentlessly argued, for those lower down in the caste hierarchy, it had always been a source of humiliation, violence and deprivation^[19].

Ambedkar, on the other hand was more tilted towards left of the political spectrum and preferred socialism over Gandhism. Socialism, at its heart, favours industrialization and urbanisation, on the lines of western style development. Ambedkar believed that the Indian village which Gandhi talked very highly about never cared for the lower castes. Village structures had oppressed the lower for centuries. It was the root cause of social stratification in Indian society. He had a firm belief that industrialization was the way forward for emancipation of the oppressed classes. He was very much justified when he expressed his views on caste system in his famous work ‘Annihilation of Caste’. This was one work which led to exchange of thoughts between Gandhi and Ambedkar in the 1930s^[20].

Our village culture and values are intrinsically linked to a control of land and agriculture. The dependence on land owning castes for survival makes the dalit assertion for freedom and dignity difficult. Land in the present times has turned out to be a major resource- it gives access to institutional credit, subsidies on fertilizers, farm equipment and almost institutionalized, decadal loan waivers. Land thus is a key form of private property and yields persistent rent, which is not necessarily based on its actual merit and which is, of course, not taxed^[21].

Land makes certain castes ‘kingly’ in rural communities. The control of such castes on local politics aggravates masculine hubris, land and agriculture, thus partially construct the localised cultural peace in rural India. City life is not free of prejudices either but the vulgarity of its form is minimised in an uprooted context of anonymity. Modernity and its key economic constituents of urbanisation and industrialization bring with them certain basic norms of civility.

The illiberal aspects of rural society are changing slowly due to market pressures. Despite subsidies and the absence of taxation, the social power of farmers is rendered mildly vulnerable by a budding competitive market and non-farm possibilities in rural India. Increasing urbanisation, migration and non-farm employment have added some degree of mobility and freedom to the landless in general and to rural dalits in particular. Landless labourers need not look for work that provides respect and value in the land of dominating landowning castes alone. Increasing urbanisation, labour mobility and monetisation of rural economy have had significant poverty-reducing impact on Dalits. The prescription of classical economics to decongest (landless)

labour from agriculture and farm dependency still remains of utmost relevance. Even now, close to 80 percent of dalits live in rural areas providing cheap labour, with limited productivity to farms and farmers^[22].

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