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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA: IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLES OF GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

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Abstract

This Paper compares how Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar built rival yet complementary visions to constitute modern India. Both visionaries shared a vision of an independent, equitable nation, but fundamentally differed on means and priorities. Gandhi's thought synthesised non-violence (ahimsa), religious values, and rural self-reliance, represented by khadi, village panchayats, and the pursuit of Swaraj as a moral renaissance. Ambedkar's thought emphasised constitutionalism, rational critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, and social justice through legal reforms-most notably, abolition of caste, affirmative action, and an independent judiciary enshrined in India's Constitution. Through comparative reading of primary sources-Hind Swaraj, Satyagraha texts, Annihilation of Caste, Drafting Committee debates-and secondary literature in history, political science, and sociology, the essay analyses their contrasting positions on caste hierarchy, religious identity, economic models, educational paradigms, and political institutions. It traces critical junctures such as the Poona Pact and analyses how their ethical and institutional frameworks continue to inform modern debates on democracy, development, and social equity. The research argues that the interplay of Gandhian moral appeal and Ambedkarite structural guarantees offers a rich map to navigate India's enduring challenges.

Introduction:-

The Indian independence movement went beyond the goal of a cessation of British domination; it was an ideological battle for the nation's soul and future course. Its centre was Mohandas K. Gandhi and Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, two giants whose visions parted even as both aspired to national progress. Gandhi's approach evolved from an ethic of religious humanism, nonviolence, and self-sufficient village republics. Gandhi envisioned a decentralised community where moral regeneration would enable political freedom through khadi spinning habits and communal prayer. Inner transformation and moral discipline were at the centre of mass mobilisation against colonial domination in his calls to satyagraha.

By contrast, Ambedkar's path was guided by rationalist criticism and institutional-legal remedies. Born to a poor Dalit family, he saw the hierarchy of caste as India's primary obstacle to moral and material advancement. Rejecting gradual reform, Ambedkar called for the complete annihilation of the caste system, a demand powerfully articulated

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in his seminal oration, Annihilation of Caste. As the chairman of the Constituent Assembly Drafting Committee, Ambedkar wrote a constitution based on fundamental rights, positive discrimination, and an independent judiciary to protect marginalised groups. For Ambedkar, scientific education and industrialisation were the prime tools to annihilate social bondage and bring equality.

Their competing paradigms—Gandhi's spirituality-tinged, village-centred Swaraj and Ambedkar's secular, codified democracy—symbolise two competing Indias: one historically traditional and spiritually reimagined, the other new, rationalistic, and institutionally entrenched. This essay examines their philosophical conflicts and convergences, inquiring how their legacies continue influencing debates over identity, justice, and development in contemporary India.

Literature Review:-

Scholarly interest in the ideological convergence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi is interdisciplinary, covering history, political science, sociology, and philosophy. Their competing worldviews prompt research and debate because both thinkers shaped contemporary India's moral and institutional foundations.

Historians like D. Rothermund and Judith Brown have analysed Gandhi's religious nationalism as being his emphasis on personal morality, non-violence, and religious reform as the bases of political protest. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj is best known as a critique of modern industrial civilisation and a vision for decentralised, self-sufficient India founded on traditional principles.

Contrarily, thinkers like Gail Omvedt and Anand Teltumbde point to Ambedkar's radical repudiation of social hierarchies based on caste and his rationalist social justice ideology. Annihilation of Caste (1936), a groundbreaking work by Ambedkar, is regarded as a powerful critique of Hindu orthodoxy and a call for eliminating the caste system.His book is increasingly pertinent in understanding the present caste dynamics and the Dalit rights movement.
Ashis Nandy provides a psychological and symbolic reading of the Gandhi-Ambedkar encounter, representing two kinds of resistance: spiritual-moral and legal-rational. With an **incandescent foreword** to Annihilation of Caste, Arundhati Roy **reopens the discussion**, employing a **radical imagination to critique Gandhi's complicity** in the persistence of caste injustice, notwithstanding his role as a reformer.

This collective literature posits that the ideological variations between Gandhi and Ambedkar are historical and remain resolutely embedded in present-day Indian discussions of secularism, democracy, affirmative action, and social reform.

Historical Background

British colonial rule instituted radical economic, social, and political transformation across the Indian subcontinent. Through processes of deindustrialisation, exploitative revenue policies, and land-tenure systems such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari, traditional modes of livelihood were systematically eroded, and economic resources were gradually redirected into the control of a privileged minority under colonial rule.Concurrently, the colonial census and legal machinery codified and consolidated castes, deepened chasms between higher and lower strata and constituted new class cleavages along landholding and bureaucratic privilege lines. Displaced artisans and debt-laden peasants were victimised by usurious taxes and predatory moneylenders, whose grievances cut across religious and regional faultlines. These underpinned mass political mobilisation, as new nationalist leadership sought to articulate responses to economic exploitation and social injustice consolidated under British rule.

In this charged environment, two opposing redress strategies confronted each other. Under Gandhi's leadership, the Indian National Congress utilised nonviolent resistance (satyagraha) and moral suasion to mobilise peasants, artisans, and professionals against colonial domination. Gandhi framed India's struggle as inextricably bound up with eradicating social vices such as untouchability, but advocated reform within the Hindu fold instead of legal repeal. B. R. Ambedkar—himself born into an "untouchable" Mahar family—ran constitutional and legislative courses instead to secure civil rights and structural safeguards for Dalits. His legal interventions, critique of Hindu scriptures, and calls for separate electorates testified to his belief that moral suasion alone would not shatter the grip of caste rule. The 1932 Poona Pact, where Gandhi's fast unto death over separate electorates compelled Ambedkar to sign reserved seats under joint electorates, set off this ideological struggle over representation, identity politics, and

the route of social emancipation. Although the Pact increased Dalit seats in provincial legislatures, Gandhi's moral leadership over caste was simultaneously cemented, revealing the limitations of judicial reform in the absence of popular empowerment.

Gandhi's Ideological Framework

Spiritual Politics

Politics without the spiritual for Gandhi was empty. He grounded his public life on the Bhagavad Gita's commandment to "act without attachment," demanding that Swaraj include political freedom and autonomy of spiritual and moral sorts. Genuine self-rule, he contended, started with control of one's passions—greed, anger, and ego—so that a person's interior freedom shone outward into fair government. In his Sabarmati and Sevagram ashrams, communal prayer, group spinning, and morning and evening search-for-truth discussions blended work and worship. This marriage of ethics and politics was designed to produce leaders who ruled themselves before they could rule others.

Non-violence (Ahimsa) and Satyagraha

For Gandhi, ahimsa was more than the avoidance of physical harm; it was a cosmic state of mind of love and respect for all life. He used "satyagraha" (clinging to truth) to define resistance with moral principle instead of force. Suffering was willingly endured by the volunteers, not to win sympathy, but to awaken the conscience of the oppressors. Such a practice required strict self-discipline—fasting, celibacy, austerity—and unyielding commitment to truth (Satya). From Transvaal to Champaran, satyagraha movements combined local issues with higher moral principles, illustrating how a change of the heart could bring far-reaching social reform.

Village Republics and Self-Sufficiency

Gandhi dreamed of a loose federation of self-governing village republics (gram swaraj) as the backbone of free India. Elected panchayats would ensure justice, education, and public health in each village, avoiding distant bureaucracies—Khadi—homespun cotton cloth—symbolised economic decentralisation and resistance to foreign mill cloth. Hand work, plain living, and local co-operatives would revive cottage industries and preserve ecological balance. By connecting community well-being with everyday work, Gandhi's model sought to shatter the exploitative rationale of industrial capitalism and reorient development towards human dignity and environmental harmony.

Ambedkar's Ideological Framework

Annihilation of Caste

Ambedkar portrayed caste not simply as a social wrong requiring reform, but as a fundamentally oppressive institution that demanded total annihilation. In his seminal 1936 lecture "Annihilation of Caste," he exposed the ontological violence of varnashrama dharma and rejected the notion of reforming the system of caste hierarchy from within Hinduism. Instead, he demanded an absolute break: repeal of caste legislation, abolition of untouchability, and dismantling of caste privileges rooted in religion and custom. Only legal prohibition supplemented by social ostracism—supported by education and mass mobilisation—could eliminate the stigma and structural exclusion of Dalits and other marginalised groups, argued Ambedkar.

Constitutionalism and Legal Reform

As chairman of the Constituent Assembly Drafting Committee, Ambedkar translated his faith in equality into a robust legal framework. He promoted universal adult franchise, fundamental rights, and a policy of positive discrimination—reservations in legislatures, public services, and educational institutions—to correct past injustices. He believed that a codified constitution, supported by an independent judiciary and a clear separation of powers, would safeguard minorities and check majoritarian abuses. Ambedkar's call for constitutional morality showed that legislation remained in conformity with social justice, not procedural justice; he envisioned an activist state intervening to level the playing field.

Embrace of Modernity and Rationalism

Ambedkar considered modern education, scientific inquiry, and industrialisation as Dalit emancipatory forces. Renouncing ritualism and superstition, he advocated Western-style education to cultivate critical intellect and self-respect among subordinated groups. He advocated state-led industrialisation to provide employment and eliminate rural poverty, contrasting romanticised visions of agrarianism. His conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was a step towards a rational, equalitarian religion that valued reason and ethics over hereditary privilege. Through the

convergence of legal entitlements, education, and economic opportunity, Ambedkar's modernist vision sought to replace traditional hierarchies by meritocratic institutions and a culture of egalitarian citizenship.

Points of Convergence and Divergence

Aspect	Gandhi	Ambedkar
Caste	Reform from within (Harijan upliftment)	Total annihilation
Religion	Hindu spiritual reform	Rejected Hinduism; embraced Buddhism
Economy	Decentralised, rural-focused	Supported industrialisation
Politics	Moral leadership, mass movements	Constitutional democracy, legal safeguards
Education	Basic, spiritual	Modern, technical, higher education

Gandhi and Ambedkar fought against caste oppression and colonialism, envisioning the same dream of an India liberated by justice and self-respect. Both agreed that the uplift of the downtrodden was a precondition for national renewal. Both leaders insisted on people's action at the grassroots—Gandhi by satyagrahas in villages and moral exhortation, Ambedkar by court cases, constitutional negotiation, and mobilisation of the Dalits. Both also envisioned that freedom would entail political, ethical, and social freedom for all Indians.

Their solutions and prescriptions, however, branched out in wide and different directions. Gandhi prescribed gradual reform of castes by appealing to the higher castes' moral sense and mentioning the inclusion of Harijans in Hindu society. Ambedkar demanded the removal of caste as a prerequisite for genuine equality. Religiously, Gandhi thought Hinduism's spiritual essence could be cleansed to promote harmony; Ambedkar spurned its hierarchical practices altogether, and mass-converted to Buddhism as another egalitarian faith. Economically, Gandhi thought of self-reliant village republics driven by khadi and cottage industries instead of mass industrial capitalism. Ambedkar envisioned industrialisation and state-driven development as the means to Dalit mobility and national development. Politically, Gandhi employed moral leadership and mass nonviolence to delegitimise colonial rule, while Ambedkar forged tactical coalitions through constitutional democracy, legal protection, and affirmative action. Educationally, Gandhi stressed fundamental literacy, manual work, and spiritual education; Ambedkar advocated modern, technical, and higher education as empowerment tools.

While Gandhi perceived caste as a perversion of the original varna system, Ambedkar perceived caste as exploitative.

Religion, Caste, and Social Reform

Ambedkar critically read Hindu scriptures as the starting point of his unyielding critique of Hinduism. He argued that the Manusmriti and other shastras codified caste hierarchy, legitimised untouchability as divine ordination. In 1935, he wrote "Annihilation of Caste," deconstructing how ritual, myth, and scriptural fiat reproduced social exclusion. Frustrated with repeated appeals for reform within the same system that gave birth to oppression, Ambedkar formally renounced Hinduism in October 1956, converting to Buddhism in a mass conversion at Nagpur. This was a point of no return: he abandoned faith traditions ordaining hierarchy, embracing the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha, which he saw as offering an emancipatory moral and spiritual community.

Gandhi's dual strategy was a different one. Rooted in Hindu metaphysics, he thought varnashrama dharma (the fourfold social order) could be just when cleansed of debased uses. By calling untouchables "Harijans" or "children of God," Gandhi tried to raise them within Hindu society, appealing to the conscience of the upper castes. His campaigns—public prayer, inter-dining, and Harijan Sevak Sangh service—tried to transform caste from within, permitting respect for Vedic doctrine while cleansing it of untouchability. Ambedkar found "Harijan" patronising, thinking religious terminology could not mask systematic denial of rights; he thought symbolic inclusion short of structural change maintained paternalism.

These rival positions highlight an overarching dialectic of India's modern reform movements: reform and rupture, faith and reason. Gandhi's religiously grounded reforms rested on moral change and social concord, relying on conscience and spiritual rebirth. Ambedkar's rationalist reform demanded law, education, and material equality, disrupting traditions that had long inscribed injustice.Their legacies remain central to India's controversies over temple entry, religious conversion, and affirmative action. Gandhi's vision promoted interfaith syncretism and communal dialogue, while Ambedkar's rupture with Hinduism promoted assertive identity politics and legal activism. Both their rival trajectories allude to the tensions in employing religion as a means of social

transformation: can oppressive traditions be cleansed from within, or should they be repudiated in total for new ethical paradigms?

Political Vision and Nation-Building

Gandhi's Swaraj was political freedom, but it was also an ethical and cultural pursuit towards the moral transformation of the self and society. He envisioned a society composed of self-disciplined individuals, where inner transformation would naturally give rise to just and ethical governance.His model of power decentralised in the form of village panchayats through collective decision-making tried to check the extent of an oppressive state through local self-governance and communal cohesion. This inward-outward dialectic, wherein personal morality nurtured public life, defined his vision of nationality.

On the other hand, Ambedkar's vision of democracy was grounded in procedural justice, institutional design, and legal rigour. To him, rights needed to be enshrined and enforced by an autonomous judiciary, a written constitution, and positive-action steps to eliminate entrenched hierarchies. Universal adult franchise, separation of powers, and minority safeguards were not discretionary flourishes, he held, but essential preconditions for an inclusive polity. Education and law were the twin levers by which structural inequalities would be eliminated and the marginalised empowered.

While Gandhi organised the masses through moral suasion, fasting, and mass nonviolent action, Ambedkar sought structural change through legislative activism, constitutional engineering, and public scholarships. Their symbolically opposed differences—most fundamentally on separate electorates and the limits of moral power—compelled Indian leaders to grapple with core questions about the state's role, minority representation, and protecting individual rights. The resulting constitutional compromise wedded Gandhian visions of local self-government with Ambedkar's guarantees of legal equality, setting the stage for India's parliamentary democracy. In doing so, their ideological debate fashioned a political structure that balances ethical aspirations with procedural checks.

Education, Economy, and Development

Gandhi's pedagogic solution, naitalim or "basic education through craft," sought to eradicate the spurious dichotomy of intellectual and manual labour. His template taught children literacy, numeracy, and moral values through spinning, weaving, gardening, and pottery work. Such pedagogy sought to create self-reliant citizens who understood the community's needs, appreciated labour, and embodied ethical service. By locating learning in indigenist crafts, Gandhi hoped to engage students in solidarity with manual labourers and benefit village economies directly. As against this, Ambedkar promoted access to modern education and advanced learning—from science and engineering to law and social sciences—as the primary instrument of Dalit mobilisation. He was convinced that only intense, Western-model schooling could endow socially disadvantaged youth with the critical skills and confidence to challenge systemic injustice and occupy government, academia, and industry jobs. For Ambedkar, education was not merely character-building but a route to legal literacy, economic opportunity, and social dignity.

Economically, Gandhi envisioned an interlocking system of self-reliant village economies based on khadi, cottage industry, and trusteeship principles. Rejecting large-scale industrial capitalism, he opted for simplicity, local cooperatives, and decentralised panchayats controlling production and distribution. He saw small-scale work as non-exploitative and ecologically stabilised in itself. Ambedkar, however, felt that industrialisation and workers' rights were required to usher in the end of caste-based occupational hierarchies and the end of rural poverty. He supported state-initiated infrastructure works, public sector undertakings, and influential trade unions to earn decent wages and safe working conditions. In his view, only a modernising, mixed economy could generate the surplus and social mobility required for genuine equality.

They contrast two paths of emancipation: Gandhi's grassroots, craft-based building of village communities with Ambedkar's top-down, institutional modernisationusing education, law, and mass industry.

Long-Term Impact and Ongoing Relevance Today

Gandhi's ethical politics of non-violence, self-sufficiency, and trusteeship inspire ecology and peace movements in India and the world. The Chipko movement activists and the Narmada Bachao Andolan adopt Gandhian civil resistance and nature worship, while Anna Hazare's anti-graft movement revived his fasting and moral persuasion campaign. Panchayati Raj institutions, which implement village self-rule, adopt his vision of decentralised democracy.

Ambedkar's legacy is reflected in transformative legal reforms and ongoing movements for social justice. Continued enforcement of reservations in education and government jobs testifies to his doctrine of positive discrimination: Dalit rights organisations and the Bahujan Samaj Party invoke Ambedkarite rhetoric to fight against structural discrimination. Landmark legislation—the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act—and Supreme Court rulings on caste atrocities are constitutionally rooted in his insistence on institutional protection and judicial remedies.

Secularism debates showcase their complementary legacies. Gandhi's interfaith harmony model alleviates communal tensions by moral appeal, whereas Ambedkar's procedural secularism insists on strict state neutrality and legal equality for all faiths. Modern debates on Indian democracy—trading off moral aspirations with procedural rigour—inherit Gandhi's grassroots ethos and Ambedkar's constitutionalism.

While India grapples with increasing inequality, identity politics, and environmental catastrophe, the intersection of Gandhian ethical force and Ambedkarite structural change remains necessary. Parties call upon their images during elections, bearing witness to their ongoing relevance.

Conclusion:-

Modern India's construction is informed profoundly by the simultaneous paths of Mohandas K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhi imparted a profound ethical lexicon centered on freedom, non-violence, self-governance, and principled living—concepts that not only galvanised mass mobilisation against colonial rule but also laid the moral foundation for a participatory and conscientious democratic ethos in India.Ambedkar constructed equality's constitutional and legal architecture, adding fundamental rights, affirmative action, and an independent judiciary to end caste domination and achieve justice for the marginalised. Merging spiritual renewal and institutional design, they provided rival blueprints: one emphasising inner renewal and local self-rule, the other procedural safeguards and structural transformation. Placing both visions in context discloses how moral aspirations and legal structures can complement each other. Considering inequality and ecological challenges in India today, this double legacy offers vital lessons—combining activism and institutions to build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. By blending both streams, India can find a path honouring its past while confronting modern challenges.

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