

# THEORISING CASTE AND ADDRESSING EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AMBEDKAR AND GANDHI

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## ABSTRACT

The caste system in India is a complex social structure that has persisted despite constitutional and legal reforms. Despite these efforts, it still leads to socio-economic disparities and discrimination. People often view education as a transformative tool to challenge these norms. This paper is analysing the theoretical foundation of caste and the educational philosophies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, two prominent leaders in India, to understand their contributions to caste and social reform. Ambedkar condemned caste systems and emphasised education for the poor, whereas Gandhi linked education with rural India's enlightenment. This analysis also aims to understand the historical and political context; the role of education in social mobility, social inequality, and marginalisation; education policies and strategies; and the educational philosophies of Ambedkar and Gandhi, offering practical recommendations for socially engaged individuals in their pursuit of social justice.

**Keywords:** Justice, Caste, Liberty, Equality, Education, Social Justice, Political Thought, Philosophy Etc

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Bharat, the system of caste is still one of the biggest and most complicated ways that people are put into groups based on their social structure. The caste system evolved from ancient Hindu scriptures, dividing society into successive levels determined by birth. Even though the constitution and laws were changed to stop discrimination based on caste, their effects can still be seen today in the form of social and economic differences, a lack of social mobility, and widespread discrimination. People believe that education, as a transformative tool, has the power to dismantle and change these existing norms in society. This study attempts to contextualise education to overcome casteism by drawing upon the political thoughts and educational philosophies of two of India's most renowned leaders: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. The central focus of this paper is the analysis and comparison of the educational philosophies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi concerning their ideas and contributions to caste and social reform. The paper also adds to the ongoing academic discussion about caste and education, presenting the complex analysis of two of the most important thinkers in history. Ambedkar, a scholar and social reformer, vigorously condemned the practice of caste systems and emphasised education for the poor as an agency to liberate and empower marginalised communities. Gandhi's nonviolent resistance and moral leadership earned him such respect that he linked elementary education to the enlightenment of rural India. Today, we use philosophies to gain insight into present-day strategies for caste-based

discrimination in schools, and the research offers direct, practical applications for all educators, policymakers, and social activists who continue the battle for social justice and equality. The other goal of this analysis is to provide a complete and academic discussion about Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's and Mahatma Gandhi's educational ideas, with a focus on what these ideas mean for current efforts to fight casteism. When historical perspectives are mixed with current educational issues, useful suggestions are often made to help active people in their never-ending fight for social justice.

## 2. THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CASTE

A caste is a designated groups of individuals who inherit an identifiable way of life, practice endogamy, and derive membership from their familial lineage. A hierarchical system typically links this way of life, which may involve following a tradition to perform a specific job, to a more or less clear ritual status. In 1967, Berreman articulates that caste is a way of dividing people into groups based on their birth, allowing for cultural diversity, and regulating how people in different ranks deal with each other. According to Sinha, caste is a social order based on the hereditary distribution of labour within endogamous groups. From 1946 to 1990, various experts on the caste system, like Hutton in 1946, Leach in 1960, Sinha in 1967, Berreman in 1968, Appadurai in 1986, and Gould in 1990, described it. There is a lot of disagreement among sociologists about whether caste is a cultural and social thing. For example, Max Weber made it clear that caste is the most important thing in Hinduism. He makes it sound like caste is a traditional idea, but he also says that there are castes among Indian Mohammedans and Buddhists. This paradox makes us think about what caste is, but Weber's point of view keeps changing at this point. He began by saying that caste is a thing that happens all over India. He went on to explain how caste is universal and not exclusive to India. Additionally, authors who delve into the issue of "diffusion" often assume that caste is a collection of anthropological features exclusive to Hindu India until they come across instances of caste behaviour in contexts as diverse as ancient Egypt and contemporary Fiji. After that, they begin to believe that caste is an artificial social hierarchy (Subedi, 2013).

Domut, Marriott, and Leach all suggest understanding caste through its Hindu characteristics and the region that shape it. This indicates that caste is exclusive to contemporary Bharat and less prevalent in South Asia. Bailey and Wagatsuma all contend that the caste system should be viewed through the lens of similar structural characteristics shared by Hindu India and other places. According to this second group of experts, comparing cultures only aids in the organisation of societies, not in the perception of cultures and their values. Proponents of this perspective contend that caste groups are present in North and East Africa, Polynesia, Japan, and the USA (Subedi, 2013).

People have different ideas about where the Indian system of castes came from. Racial theory links the origin of the caste system to the diverse races that inhabited the world at that time. The Aryans had a caste system because they didn't have many women and married too many or too few times. Political theory says the Brahmins created the rank system to determine their social status. Most people view the Brahmins as the most important group. Occupational or functional theory says that the caste system may have been shaped by people's jobs, what they liked to do for fun, where they went to school, their skills, abilities, and talents, as well as their social class. The class system shows the quality of work: people from higher castes do more well-known jobs, while people from lower castes do less well-known jobs. Hocart and Senart's religious theory says that religious rules and customs caused social separation in the first place. Hocart says that religious rules and customs led to the creation of social classes, while Senart says that the rules about what foods could be used in religious rituals were the first steps towards the caste system. These two ideas help us figure out how the Indian caste system came to be. People from all walks of life and communities tried to improve their lives in different ways over a long period of time, according to the idea of evolution. This is how the caste system came to be. There is a rank system in every area and group. All of them have helped it grow (Acharya, 2019).

In the old way of life, people from lower castes were not allowed to go to school. The caste system bestows a person's right and privileges. Previously, only individuals from higher social classes were eligible to receive an education. Underprivileged groups have been unable to catch up with others in school due to thoughts and actions associated with the caste system, which was built on social differentiation and the belief that access to education was only for the wealthy (Aikara, 2004). The caste system has historically denied Dalit communities access to education and knowledge because it views them as untouchable. Even though these groups were officially allowed to go to school in the middle of the 1800s, Dalits who tried to go there ran into a lot of trouble (Nambissan, 2013). We can observe a complex and often unfair connection between the social system and the school system. This has been changing for a while, but it's moving very slowly.

During British rule, caste rules and norms became much stricter and more widespread. The revival of various forms of caste language and philosophy served as a source of power and authority. Nicholas B. Dirks agrees that caste is a new political phenomenon that resulted from British rule. Both Bayly and Dirks hold the belief that the strong colonial power upheld the rules and conventions of the caste system. It wasn't a strict caste system before the British came. Instead, the system was more akin to other social structures. Because of the British, caste became a useful tool for people of all religions, languages, levels of wealth, and social classes (Dirks, 2001). With this view of caste, most theories about how it came to be, including Louis Dumont's account of the principle of pure and impure, which explains everything about caste, don't make sense. We cannot apply the orientalist argument to caste, as it reverberates with the legacy of British colonialism. Caste is different in a big way: it refers to the relationships and ties between different caste groups in a village or other setting. This is why the word "jajmani" means "systematic integration of different castes into the organic whole." To be fair, though, different classes also had some freedom, which gave them a distinct personality. In this way, caste was both organic and segmented at the same time. The complexity of caste and its influence from outside India have always made it a "contentious" issue. In terms of a way to divide people into social classes, caste is similar to race in the U.S., class in Britain, and party in Italy, even though it is different (Dumont's (1970).

### 3. COMPARATIVE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Prior to comprehending Gandhi's perspectives on education, it is essential to grasp the context of the educational system established during British rule. By the conclusion of the 19th century, the contemporary education system completely supplanted the traditional and indigenous system of India. The traditional systems in villages managing public institutions such as temples, monasteries, hospitals, and schools were supplanted by British influence, leading to the adoption of the English language, which undermined local culture and garnered rapid popularity among the youth. The system estranged the child from his social environment, established new castes, prioritised literary instruction, and neglected popular education (Patel, 1958). Gandhi's educational theory developed in response to these evident disparities.

What did Gandhi signify by "real education" in his education philosophy? Gandhi defined education as a comprehensive cultivation of the finest qualities in both children and adults, encompassing the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, as articulated in a 1937 in Harijan. Education does not stop at literacy; in fact, it is just the beginning. Among other things, it's a way to teach others. What education offers in terms of personal growth was more important to Gandhi than the methods or content covered in school. Awakening the soul and strengthening the inner voice are two other outcomes of education that he sees in his students. According to him, a well-rounded education fosters a state of complete physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being by engaging all four senses. In his view, putting too much weight on any one of these aspects of education undermines its foundational principles and stunts personal growth (Bose, 1960).

Gandhiji made a unique addition to education. He was the first in his own country to advocate for an education system based on the most important values of Indian culture and civilisation. He said that the colonial system of schooling was detrimental for India. The colonial system of education, according to Gandhi, was based on foreign cultures and almost destroyed the local culture. It also only taught the mind and didn't teach the heart or the hands. And finally, it used a foreign language, which Gandhi said was not appropriate for education. The methods and techniques he pushed, along with the environment he suggested, completely changed Indian thought and way of life. His core belief was in ideals. He wanted to put his beliefs and goals into action. His approach to teaching is a beneficial mix of idealism, naturalism, and pragmatism. There is no natural conflict between the three beliefs, which is something to keep in mind. Idealism is what Gandhi's theory is based on, and naturalism and pragmatism help him put that philosophy into practice. Gandhi pushed for truthfulness, nonviolence, and moral values as ways to reach the final truth of self-realization. He believes in naturalism when he says that a child should grow up according to his or her nature, and he believes in pragmatism when he says that people should learn and do what they do. This leads to integration, which is crucial for excellent education and whole-person development (Dar, 2022).

One of Ambedkar's goals for education is to teach people new, improved ideas that will help build a society based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, and justice. Ambedkar said, "Education is a weapon for creating mental and educational development; it is also a weapon for ending social slavery and a weapon for economic development and political freedom." His educational philosophy is based on teaching people of all backgrounds the ideals of freedom, equality, brotherhood, justice, and morality. Not only did Ambedkar live in a unique time and build important things, but

he also started a new social order to help the poor. In line with the Buddhist ideas of Prajna, Karuna, and Samata, which stand for freedom, equality, and brotherhood, Ambedkar knows that education is a must for rebuilding society. These three Buddhist ideas were important to B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar thought that the goal of education should be to teach students to be wise (to know the difference between right and wrong), compassionate (to care about other people), and believe in social equality. Ambedkar thought that the Dalits could only move forward if they got an education. The popular phrase that Ambedkar used was "educate, agitate, and organize." Babasaheb Ambedkar said, "Students should work hard in school and become loyal leaders of society because they know that education is the way to move up in life." As a basic rule of life, Babasaheb Ambedkar stressed how important education was as a strong tool. "Be educated, be agitated, be organised, be confident, and never give up—these are the five principles of our life," he said in Nagpur on July 29, 1942 (Mondal, 2018).

Many authors have written extensively about caste and schooling, delving into intricate details of history, society, and politics. People continue to discuss Annihilation of Caste, a significant book that fundamentally questions the caste system and advocates for its complete elimination. Ambedkar says that education is the only way to help the disadvantaged Dalit group get ahead because it gives them power and lets people from different classes move around (Tandale, 2021). Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, which says that Ambedkar didn't just see education as a matter of learning to read and write but also of giving people power, supports this view. This is a theoretical framework for thinking about how education might be able to change unfair situations based on caste (Omvedt, 1993). Ankur Barua's work brings back the arguments that Gandhi and Ambedkar had about caste, focusing on how important education is for breaking down caste systems (Barua, 2019).

Gandhi and Ambedkar both come up with different ways to fight casteism that work well together. One part of Aishwary Kumar's book *Radical Equality* is a method that was inspired by Gandhi's ideas of "Nai Talim," which meant basic schooling that was linked to rigorous physical work and mental work. Not only did Gandhi support academic learning, but he also believed that morality and character growth were important parts of education (Kumar, 2015). Ambedkar strongly opposed the caste system and emphasised the significance of education in eliminating it. He asserted that education could create opportunities for individuals who were previously disadvantaged, enabling them to progress. The divergent perspectives of Gandhi and Ambedkar, particularly concerning the enhancement of education and society (Nagrle & Wakade, 2023).

#### 4. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In India, people have been arguing about how caste and schooling affect each other for a very long time. The general functioning of caste often obscures the connections. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the definition and operation of the caste system before discussing its impact on education. Caste is a long-established social stratification in Indian culture and history. Caste is a common way to think about how Indian society divides people into different social classes. Many people mistakenly believe that the institution of caste is unique to Hinduism, but it also influences other religions where individuals have converted from Hinduism. Doctor Ambedkar, who is credited as the "Father of Indian Constitution," believed that the beginning of caste was the same as the beginning of the way that people get married. He posited a correlation between class and caste, contending that a caste constitutes a confined caste. The Indian caste system is a rigid stratification structure, indicating that an individual's social status is determined by their birth group (Goldenweizer, 2004).

In India, caste is a vital part of many people's daily lives. Given that various governments and regions draw different conclusions from the well-defined framework, a new approach to policymaking is possible when caste identities are considered with gender, sub-caste, and economic status. In 2017, the World Bank looked into how caste (Varna) and sub-castes (Jatis) affect people's daily lives. Despite the macro-level formulation of welfare policies, they discovered that caste, gender, and area significantly influence the accessibility of resources for individuals (Mosse, 2018). Doctor Ambedkar adeptly depicts the malevolent caste structure of Hindu civilisation by likening it to a multi-tiered caste devoid of staircases and entrances. All individuals were required to perish on their birth floor (Roy, 2014).

To understand how the caste system and school reforms are still important today, we need to look at their political and historical roots. Barua looks at how these divisions have stayed the same in modern India, even though the latter's situation has changed or nothing else has changed. Revisiting the Gandhi–Ambedkar Debates over "Caste," by Ankur Barua, is published in *100 Sociological Bulletin* (Barua, 2019). For instance, Mandals's views on Ambedkar's educational



strategies shows how important and relevant his ideas are to shaping social justice-based education today. These works serve as a reminder that the past shapes the present educational policies and practices (Mandal, 2023).

## 5. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIAL MOBILITY

Crimes against people based on their caste, gender, race, disability, and other factors have never made Indian society and its social structure equal. Marginalisation can occur in various parts of society and is a constant phenomenon. It is based on the dynamics of social denial and lack, inequality and uncertainty, and dominance and ranking. India's culture has a history of marginalisation, and Gandhi's ideals left the fight against it unfinished. Gandhi did a lot to help people who were socially, culturally, or politically disadvantaged fit in. His most important social and political actions led to structural changes in the lives of people on the edges of society. He was sure that real development could only happen when all the disadvantaged groups in society participate in it on all levels, including legally, culturally, and economically. Gandhi worked hard his whole life to make sure that everyone had access to education, that women had more power, that young people could get jobs, that minorities could participate, and that discrimination based on race would end (Mosse, 2018).

In his lifetime, B.R. Ambedkar was very sure that education was a key part of freeing each person. He thought that education is more than just a way to make money or help a child grow up. Instead, he thought that education was the most important way to make Gandhi and Ambedkar changes in society. Ambedkar's ideas about empowering women can teach us a lot about how to include them in all parts of our lives. He believed that society was mistreating, discriminating against, and pushing women to the margins. Because of what he did, Amartya Sen said, "Ambedkar is my father in economics." People all over the world know him as a true defender of the poor. He should have done more than what he did today. However, in his home country, he was perceived as a highly controversial figure, despite the fact that this was untrue. His work in economics is truly amazing, and it will be known for a long time (Hebbbar, 2023).

Many writers have explored the role of education in facilitating social advancement. In 2022, Verma argues that a rational education questioning standard caste explanations at every level enabled Ambedkar's radical reinterpretation of religious texts (Verma, 2022). Sujay Biswas looks again at Gandhi's plan to get rid of untouchability by teaching character-building, a type of schooling that aimed to teach values like self-reliance and respect (Biswas, 2021). All of these studies make the case that education is necessary to break the cycle of oppression based on caste and help people move up in society.

## 6. CASTE, SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND MARGINALISATION

Marginalisation occurs when established or new leaders set up social and economic relationships where they are superior and others are subordinate or dependent. They do this by manipulating labor and social resource distribution. In a caste-based society, individuals from higher castes strived for advancement and influenced the community and regional economies, resulting in significant disadvantages for lower castes. For example, as rising elites gain power, privilege, and status, they pull groups of people who depend more on the economy into important production jobs or activities that require a lot of work. In 1995, Arnold contended that non-elites forfeit political or economic power when ascending elites acquire control over the information or technology essential for economic prosperity. This occurs because the powerful establish a system of interdependence that restricts the influence of others outside their inner circle. This procedure establishes the foundation for enduring socioeconomic inequality. Significant possible sources for emerging elite power include, at a minimum, influence over labour, as well as dominance over knowledge and conveyance. It didn't take long for wealth gaps to widen and for some individuals to rise in society, as powerful groups were able to control an increasing number of workers. Higher caste members received significantly more money, power, and influence than their lower caste counterparts, thereby elevating their economic status. The Dalits had to keep working to get food, clothes, and a place to live. As women persisted in working for pay (Jajamani systems), caste divisions within families also become more pronounced. Despite men being the primary source of income for their families, Dalit women continued to rely on traditional methods to survive. Some upper-caste household members helped the household economy become more wage-based and less focused on subsistence while men looked for work outside the home. This may have paralleled the changes occurring within farming societies (Subedi, 2013).

## 7. EDUCATIONAL POLICIES, STRATEGIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

As early as 1932, G.S. Ghurye talked about the type of change that was happening and said that non-Brahmin communities throughout the nation's southern provinces rose to prominence, sparking assaults against hierarchy. These initiatives engendered a novel sense of collective sentiments and caste cohesion. M.N. Srinivas went into more detail about this point. He specifically discussed how British colonists introduced modern technology and representational politics to India. He said that caste was not going away with modernisation; rather, it was becoming stronger on a horizontal level. When Srinivas wrote about how modern technology has changed caste, he said, the printing press, postal service, local publishers, telegraph, train, and bus enabled individuals from the same caste residing in disparate locations to convene and discuss their common issues and goals. Western schooling taught people new political ideas, like freedom and fairness. The smart leaders started journals and workshops for their castes. They raised a significant amount of money to assist and organise the poorer members of the caste. Caste hostels, hospitals, cooperative societies, and other similar places became popular in city life. It is safe to say that over the last hundred years, there has been an increase in caste solidarity and a decline in the perception of interdependence among several castes residing in the same locality (Ghurye, 2022).

Contemporary educational systems must incorporate Gandhi's and Ambedkar's educational theories. According to Omvedt, Ambedkar's viewpoint places a high value on professional and higher education as a way to empower underprivileged groups. On the other hand, Omvedt asserts that Gandhi's educational philosophy advocates for fundamental education that cultivates moral and ethical principles (Omvedt, 2012).

The effect of changes in schooling on social justice is another important area of study. Mahanand discusses how Ambedkar's proposals for school reforms could benefit everyone and eliminate caste-based discrimination (Mahanand, 2019). Biswas looks at how character-building education helped get rid of untouchability under Gandhi and makes the case for why moral education is important (Biswas, 2021). In general, these studies show how important education is for promoting fairness and social justice.

The link between caste and schooling is one of the most important areas that needs more study. Verma, who is looking at Ambedkar's review of religious works, says that schools need a logical and nonreligious model (Verma, 2022). On the other hand, Barua utilises the dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar regarding caste and schooling to discuss contemporary issues (Barua, 2019). These studies come to the conclusion that it is essential for educational changes to include people from different castes, genders, classes, and religions.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Gandhi stressed the importance of education beyond textbooks, promoting holistic development, moral and intellectual growth, and its role in personal and societal transformation. And on the other side, Dr. Ambedkar, a prominent Indian educationist, believed education is the key to societal progress and development. He emphasised the bounded relationship between education and society and encouraged Dalits to merge with the upper caste through the slogan "Educate, Agitate, and Organise." Discrimination based on caste is still a big problem in India when it comes to social justice and equality. There are still deep-seated social biases and structural injustices that come with the caste system, even after many changes to the constitution and the law. One well-known way to change things and help people move up in society is through education. However, it doesn't understand how some educational ideas and methods can better deal with casteism. Their ideas about how to fight casteism are different, but they work well together. This is why the philosophical ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi are studied in terms of what they thought about how education could help fight casteism.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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