

BR Ambedkar

Ambedkar and Nationalism

Ambedkar's place in the discourse on nationalism has been one of the most debated themes in modern Indian political thought.

- **The charge of being 'anti-national':**
Thinkers like **Arun Shourie** (*Worshipping False Gods*) have accused Ambedkar of being "anti-national," pointing to his absence from landmark struggles such as **Purna Swaraj (1929), the Indian National Congress-led mass movements, and the Quit India Movement (1942)**. His sharp criticism of Gandhi and the Congress leadership seemed, to some, like a rejection of the nationalist cause itself.
- **The deeper reality – a different nationalism:**
Yet, as scholars like **Christopher Jaffrelot** and **Arundhati Roy** underline, Ambedkar was not against the nation but against a **narrow idea of nationalism**. For him, mere transfer of power from British hands to upper-caste elites would not amount to freedom. Like **Jyotiba Phule**, he saw the true test of nationalism in the **dignity of the oppressed, annihilation of caste, and creation of social democracy**. His was a **practical, justice-oriented nationalism**—rooted not in slogans but in the lived realities of India's most marginalized.
- **Ambedkar's larger vision:**
Ambedkar reminded the nation that without **equality, liberty, and fraternity**, independence would be nothing more than a change of rulers. His idea of nationalism thus went deeper than anti-colonial struggle; it was about building a moral community where every citizen could stand as an equal.

In this sense, Ambedkar was not "anti-national" but a **truer nationalist**—one who refused to

romanticize freedom without justice, and who laid the ethical foundation of the Republic through the **Constitution of India**.

Ambedkar on Caste – From Division of Labour to Division of Labourer

When Ambedkar spoke of **caste**, he didn't reduce it to mere tradition—he gave us an **anthropological understanding of the Varna system**.

The Origins

Originally, Varna was meant as a **division of labour**—different roles in society. It was also **exogamous**, meaning people married outside their own group, which kept social circulation alive.

The Decay

But over time, this fluid system became **hereditary**. Occupation was no longer by choice or ability, but by birth. And that, Ambedkar argued, was the poison that turned society rigid and unequal.

The Debate with Gandhi

Now contrast this with **Gandhi**. Gandhi defended the Varna system as a kind of **functional specialisation**, like different organs of a body working together. But Ambedkar was sharp in his critique. He said Gandhi was *not* a religious leader, and even compared his defense of Varna to **Putana poisoning Krishna**—appearing maternal, but in reality spreading poison.

The Core Idea

For Ambedkar, caste was **not division of labour but division of labourer**—it divided human beings themselves into high and low, pure and impure. And the only solution? Not reform, not patchwork—but the **Annihilation of Caste**.

That's Ambedkar's revolutionary insight. While others wanted to reform caste, he wanted to **end it**—because without annihilation of caste, there

could be no real democracy, no real nation.

Conversions

When it came to **conversions**, Gandhi and Ambedkar stood on very different ground.

Gandhi: For him, conversion was almost mystical — he said it was a **matter of divine will**. If God wished someone to change their faith, it would happen naturally, without force, without calculation. He wasn't against it, but he saw it as something deeply personal, between the soul and the divine.

Ambedkar: His approach was far more radical and practical. He had experienced caste oppression firsthand, and he knew that simply waiting for society to change was not enough. He declared, *"Society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality."*

- If law doesn't protect liberty, equality, fraternity — then morality must.
- If morality fails, then law must step in.
But caste-ridden Hinduism, according to him, had neither true **law** nor true **morality** that respected these values.

That's why Ambedkar turned to **Buddhism**. It wasn't just about leaving Hinduism; it was about choosing a moral code that recognised **Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (L, E, F)** — the very foundation of justice. For him, Buddhism offered a framework where human dignity was non-negotiable.

So, while Gandhi said **conversion = divine will**, Ambedkar made it a **political, social, and moral act** — a tool of liberation. His conversion was a declaration: *"I refuse to live in a religion that denies me liberty, equality, and fraternity."*

That's why, when Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956, lakhs followed — it wasn't just a change of faith, it was a **revolution of self-respect**.

Panchayat Raj

When we talk about **Panchayat Raj**, you'll see Gandhi and Ambedkar almost at opposite poles.

Gandhi: For him, the village was the **soul of India**. He dreamed of **Panchayat Raj** as the foundation of *Swaraj* — self-rule built from the ground up. A system where people lived in simplicity, governed themselves, and kept power close to the community. Gandhi saw villages as pure, self-sufficient, capable of nurturing democracy at its roots.

Ambedkar: He wasn't romantic about the village at all. In fact, he turned Gandhi's vision upside down. He famously dismissed Panchayats as nothing but a **den of ignorance**, where the **caste system is more entrenched and oppressive**. For him, the village wasn't the "soul of India" — it was the very **bastion of inequality**. He had lived it: untouchability, caste hierarchy, and everyday humiliation were strongest in villages.

So while Gandhi celebrated the village, Ambedkar warned: if you put power in the hands of Panchayats without first destroying caste, you're only strengthening oppression. His concern was justice — he wanted political democracy to reach the **individual**, not stop at the **village community**, which could crush the weak under caste dominance.

See the contrast? Gandhi = **idealised village democracy**, Ambedkar = **realist critique of caste oppression in villages**.

That's why Ambedkar pushed for **constitutional safeguards, representation, and rights**, not just local self-rule.

Political Method

When we talk about **political method**, the contrast between Gandhi and Ambedkar is striking.

Gandhi's method was rooted in **direct action** —

think of the **Non-Cooperation Movement (NCM)**, the **Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)**, satyagraha, mass mobilisations. For Gandhi, moral pressure and mass protest were the way to awaken the conscience of the ruler and energise the people.

Ambedkar, though, looked at this very differently. He called these methods the “**grammar of anarchy**.” Why? Because while they might challenge the state, they could easily disrupt social order and bypass institutions. For him, they carried the risk of chaos rather than real justice.

And here’s the key: Ambedkar believed that **society is more oppressive than the state**. Caste, untouchability, social exclusion — these were deeper chains than colonial rule itself. So, unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar did not put his faith in mass agitation alone. Instead, he stressed **constitutional methods — affirmative action, legal safeguards, and institutional reforms**. He wanted to create justice *within the framework of law*, not outside it.

In short: Gandhi = **moral protest, direct action**; Ambedkar = **constitutional safeguards, affirmative action**. Gandhi shook the state; Ambedkar wanted to transform society itself.

Ambedkar and Marxism

When **Ambedkar engaged with Marxism**, he didn’t reject it outright. He studied it, appreciated its insights — but he also critiqued it sharply.

For **Marxists**, the **base structure** of society is **economic** — the struggle between **haves and have-nots**. The **state** is merely an **instrument of exploitation** by the ruling class. Their ultimate solution? The **dictatorship of the proletariat**, abolishing private property, and creating a classless society. And, of course, they saw **religion as the opium of the masses** — a drug that keeps people submissive.

But **Ambedkar flipped this lens**. For him, the **base**

structure of Indian society was caste, not economy. You could redistribute wealth, but caste hierarchies would still poison social relations. Unlike Marx, who looked at class exploitation, Ambedkar said the real chains in India are **caste exploitation**.

Now, solutions:

- Marx: Revolution, violence if necessary, dictatorship of the proletariat.
- Ambedkar: **Affirmative action** — reservation, legal safeguards, political representation — as **instruments of change**.
- Marx: Religion = opium.
- Ambedkar: Turned to **Buddhism**, seeing it not as an opiate but as a path of **liberty, equality, fraternity** — values he held sacred.

And here’s the beauty: Ambedkar did not believe in violence. His method was rooted in **democracy**, in **constitutionalism**, in **Buddhism’s moral framework**. Where Marx dreamt of revolution through class war, Ambedkar envisioned **social revolution through democratic means**.

In short: **Marx saw class; Ambedkar saw caste**. **Marx trusted revolution; Ambedkar trusted democracy and Buddhism**.

Socialism

When we talk about **Ambedkar and Socialism**, it’s important to see how he **parted ways** from both **capitalist exploitation** and **Marxist dictatorship**.

Ambedkar advocated **State Socialism** — **but without dictatorship**. Why? Because he saw that mere political democracy — one man, one vote — would remain hollow unless it was backed by **economic democracy**. People cannot enjoy freedom if they are crushed by poverty.

So what did he propose?

- **Finance mobilisation through nationalisation**

— of **banks and insurance**, so that wealth would not be concentrated in private hands but channelled for the public good.

- A system where the **State takes responsibility** for ensuring equality of opportunity and social justice.

But here is his **unique contribution**: unlike Marx, he refused the idea of **dictatorship of the proletariat**. For Ambedkar, **socialism must operate through political democracy**. That is — by respecting constitutionalism, rule of law, and rights of individuals.

He believed **political democracy** (votes, representation) and **economic democracy** (fair distribution, state-led welfare) must go hand in hand. Without the second, the first becomes meaningless. Without the first, the second becomes tyranny.

So, Ambedkar's socialism was not about smashing the system violently, nor about allowing laissez-faire capitalism. It was about creating a **just society**, through **state intervention + democracy**, always keeping the individual's dignity intact.

Linguistic State

When we talk about **Ambedkar and Linguistic States**, remember—this was not just about redrawing maps, it was about **healing social tensions** in a deeply diverse country like India.

Ambedkar **supported the creation of linguistic states**, because he believed that **language is central to culture and identity**. If linguistic aspirations were ignored, he warned, it would only create **cultural and racial tensions**, which could one day explode.

For him, **unity** was not about suppressing diversity. Real stability comes when people feel their **language, culture, and identity** are respected. That's why he saw linguistic states as a **safety**

valve, a way to channel aspirations peacefully instead of letting them turn into conflict.

In short—Ambedkar was practical. He said: if you want a **stable India**, give space for **linguistic reorganisation**, because a federal structure built on respect for diversity is stronger than one forced by uniformity.

That's why his advocacy influenced the later **States Reorganisation Commission (1956)**, which reorganised India along linguistic lines.

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