

Planning and Economic Development: Ambedkar versus Gandhi

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INTRODUCTION

Why should we study the history of economic thought? Dasgupta (1993) argues that we benefit in at least three ways: we understand new ways of looking at problems for even failed models can be instructive; we understand the logic of economic thought and, pedagogically, we can trace the meaning of concepts over time. For us, the first idea is the most relevant, and in this paper I will trace briefly some ideas of Ambedkar, particularly those elaborated during the colonial period, with respect to planning, social reform and economic development. I am particularly interested in the way in which he carves out his differences with Gandhi as well as with other early nationalist economic thinkers.

Indeed, I think with globalization and the constant refrain of the retreat of the state, particularly from social security and welfare investment, the ideas of Ambedkar bear listening to again. Dadabhai Naoroji is the most important of early Indian economists and the symbol of Indian economic nationalism. Nevertheless, Naoroji felt that the Congress could not take up the social reform of particular classes and must confine itself to questions in which the entire nation has participation. As Ambedkar himself notes (1945):

Turning to the second question as to why no Congress President has retired to the question of Social Reform in his presidential address after 1895, the answer is that before 1895 there were two schools among Congressmen on the issue of social reform versus political reform. The viewpoint of one school was that expressed by Mr. Dadabhai Naoroji, Mr. Budruddin Tyabji and Mr. Surrendranath Bannerjee. The viewpoint of the other school was that expressed by Mr. W. C. Banerjee. The former did recognise the need of social reform but thought that the Congress Session was not the proper platform for it. The latter denied that there was need for

social reform and challenged the view that there cannot be political reform without social reform.

Indeed, Naoroji's theory of 'economic drain' focuses largely on foreign domination and with respect to Indian richer classes, he suggests that they were as much the instruments of exploitation as foreign capitalists. However, in contrast, Ambedkar's ideas regarding economic development and planning included explicit suggestions regarding social and legal reform, particularly with reference to one section of Indian society—the Depressed Classes.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY: THE CONGRESS, GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

In 1917, the Congress passed a resolution on the Depressed Classes. The resolution urged upon the people of India 'the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom on the Depressed Classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting these classes to considerable hardship and inconvenience'. Gandhi's Constructive Programme (1922) included one resolution on the Depressed Classes: 'To organize the depressed classes for a better life. To improve their social, mental and moral condition, to induce them to send their children to national schools and to provide for them the ordinary facilities which the other citizens enjoy'.

However, it is Ambedkar's contention that Gandhi did little for the so-called 'Untouchables'. The Congress session was led by Mrs Besant, and Ambedkar quotes her earlier remarks on separate schooling for the Depressed Classes (quoted in Ambedkar 1945).

The children of the depressed classes need, first of all, to be taught cleanliness, outside decency of behaviour, and the earliest rudiments of education, religion and morality. Their bodies, at present, are ill-odorous and foul with the liquor and strong-smelling food, out of which for generations they have been built up; it will need some generations of purer food and living to make their bodies fit to sit in the close neighbourhood of a school-room with children who have received bodies from an ancestry trained in habits of exquisite personal cleanliness, and fed on pure food-stuffs. We have to re-use the Depressed Classes to a similar level of physical purity, not to drag down the clean to the level of the dirty, and until this is done, close association is undesirable. We are not blaming these children, nor their parents, for being what they are; we are stating a mere palpable fact. The first daily lesson in a school for these children should be a bath, and the putting on of a clean cloth; and the second should be a meal of clean wholesome food; those primary needs cannot be supplied in a school intended for children who take their daily bath in the early morning and who come to school well-fed.

Ambedkar contended that the Congress only passed the resolution on the Depressed Classes to gain the support of the latter for the Congress–Muslim League scheme on changes in the constitutional structure of India. In 1917, in two separate meetings, the Depressed Classes in Bombay had passed several resolutions including vowing loyalty to the British government, asking for separate electorates, free and compulsory education for the Depressed Classes and the removal of all disabilities. The Congress, according to Ambedkar, enlisted the support of Narayan Chandavarkar, an ex-President of the Congress. As the President of the Depressed Classes Mission Society he exercised considerable influence over the Depressed Classes. As a result of his influence, a section of the Depressed Classes agreed to give support to the Congress–League Scheme. This support was conditional on the Congress passing a resolution for the removal of the social disabilities of the Untouchables. The Congress resolution was thus a mere formality—a fulfilment of its part of the contract with the Depressed Classes negotiated through Chandavarkar.

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REFORM

In contrast perhaps to some of the other early nationalist economic thinkers, Ambedkar's ideas about economic development were always linked to social reform and to specific and special legal, social and economic protections for marginalized groups. He spoke in favour of targeted development. It is difficult to extricate Ambedkar's ideas without reference to what he has to say about Gandhi. Though his condemnation of Gandhi is sometimes so severe as to make reception difficult, it is against 'Gandhism' that he explicitly sets up his own ideas on social and economic policy. This paper relies on several materials but in particular on Volume IX of Ambedkar's speeches and writings titled *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables*.

According to Ambedkar, till then Indians had talked of the reconstruction of Indian social and economic life in terms of individualism versus collectivism, capitalism versus socialism and conservatism versus radicalism. However, the new *ism* of the period was Gandhism, which was, according to him, even projected as an alternative to Marxism. We are used to speaking of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy with respect to Indian nationalist notions of development. Gandhi clearly considered himself an heir to the nineteenth century thought of Naoroji and Gokhale saying that 'We would not have been, if they had not been'. He took over the economic drain theory, speaking of both internal and external theory. His crucial ideas about development centred around village self-sufficiency, *swaraj* and trusteeship. His opposition to mills and industry are well-known; Gandhi

believed that India did not need to be industrialized in the modern sense of the term.

He objected, as he put it, not to machinery as such but to the craze for machinery. However, he links machinery with violence and with drudgery. According to him, machines atrophy man's limbs and only those should be encouraged which have 'man' at the centre and which do not make work mindless or exploitative. The spinning-wheel is the example he gives of a non-exploitative machine. Gandhi's whole understanding of development revolved around reviving village communities, which were self-sufficient and in which necessities were produced by manual work.

His understanding of trusteeship as a moral responsibility constituted his take on the role of capital. Trusteeship was voluntary and Gandhi felt that industrial relations should be built on cooperation rather than conflict. Labour was not to be viewed just as a means to earn profit but as equal partners in a common enterprise. Thus, labour must also cooperate in an enlightened way. According to Gandhi, the state must not be allowed to dispossess capital; sanctions against exploitative capital could include non-violent non-cooperation or the use of public opinion but never the forceful deprivation of possessions. Though Gandhi spoke of the sanctity and dignity of work, he felt that people had different abilities and, among these, capitalists had the ability to accumulate wealth.

Gandhi was suspicious of the state and of centralized planning; decentralization was at the core of his thinking about economic development. Gandhi disapproved of a paternalistic state. He felt that villagers become passive recipients of state care. Planning itself made the model of development too centralized. The development process for Gandhi only made sense if individuals themselves have a sense of autonomy and movement in the right direction. Freedom of thought and expression is more important. Small and appropriate technology does not remove the autonomy of the people and relocate it at the centre. A state with too much power can become aggrandizing. Gandhi was always distrustful of endowing the state with too much power.

As against these ideas, Ambedkar argues that Gandhism is a social and economic policy which holds out little for the marginalized. Ambedkar knits together Gandhi's ideas on caste with those on the state, on machinery and on capital-labour relations to emphasize that, in sum, they form a traditionalist view that is both anti-modern and anti-democratic. While we are used to viewing Gandhi and Nehru in terms of the traditional-modernist framework, it would be well to insert Ambedkar in this picture. Ambedkar was perhaps the most modern of the three nationalists, moving in a direction of social reform and transformation by legal and economic means that Nehru certainly fought shy of.

Ambedkar critiques Gandhi's opposition to machinery. As he says, Gandhi's opposition to machinery is well-evidenced by his idolization of the *charkha* and the insistence on hand-spinning and hand-weaving. According to him, the opposition to machinery and the love for the *charkha* are not a matter of accident but part of a single philosophy which involves the critique of modern, western civilization, which is characterized as satanic. Thus, Gandhian economics is not sound and does not hold out hope to the common man or promise him a better life or freedom to grow to full stature.

There is nothing new to the Gandhian critique of economic ills or of machinery, which replicate the views of Ruskin, Rousseau and Tolstoy. These ideas are, on the other hand, primitive and promise only a return to nature and the animal life. Their only merit is their simplicity, but they are hopelessly fallacious. Modernity has produced many ills, according to Ambedkar, but these are the ills of private property and the pursuit of personal gain, not of modern machinery or civilization. Modernity holds out the hope of altering the organization of society to give benefit to all and not only to a few. Gandhism does not give the common man any hope but treats him like an animal. Gandhi refuses the common man reason and study and culture. Culture is possible only with leisure. Toil should be reduced. Machines are needed to reduce and replace toil. Gandhian economics and social policy is essentially non-democratic. A democratic society must use machines, ensure less toil and more leisure to all.

The second set of criticisms bring out Ambedkar's focus on another marginalized group—labour. This turns to a critique of Gandhi's notion of trusteeship and his reliance on the goodwill of employers and employees to maintain harmony in the industrial sphere. Gandhi speaks of eliminating class war and class struggle between employers and employees and landlords and tenants: 'Two paths are open before India, either to introduce the Western principle of "might is right" or to uphold the Eastern principle that trust alone conquers, that trust knows no mishap, that the strong and weak alike have a right to secure justice.'

According to Gandhi, the choice to begin with is the labouring class. Should they obtain wages by violence? They should not resort to violence however just their claims. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. What is to be done then? Referring to labour unrest in the textile industry, Gandhi states that labour in Bombay made a firm stand. The millowners could be wholly in the wrong. Often capitalists are. But when labour fully realizes its strength it could be even more tyrannical. Millowners will have to be dictated to by labour, if the latter could command the former's intelligence. Gandhi states: 'It is clear, however, that labour will never attain to that intelligence. If it does, labour will cease to be labour and itself

become the master. The capitalists do not fight on the strength of money alone. They do possess intelligence and tact.'

So, when labourers, remaining what they are, develop a certain consciousness what should be their course? It would be suicidal if they rely on numbers or brute force, i.e. violence. They will harm industries. But non-violent action or satyagraha is acceptable. Strikers should only strike for real grievances and real demands, articulated before hand. They should be able to support themselves and not depend on public charity. Kisans (peasant farmers) and zamindars in the United Provinces—what does Gandhi have to say about them? Zamindars take law into their own hands. Kisans, however, should suspend payment of taxes only when absolutely essential. We do not seek to deprive zamindars of their rent. Kisans movement must be confined to improvement of status of kisans and betterment of relations between zamindars and themselves.

Gandhi does not want to hurt the propertied classes. Ambedkar critiques the idea of trusteeship and its reliance on voluntarism and spiritual obligation. The division of classes of society must be abolished. Gandhi insists on a class structure and treats this as permanent part of social organization. This is psychologically harmful and morally and socially detrimental too. Gandhi feels that caste helps prevent competition and class struggle and fixes duties and occupations of persons. Ambedkar argues that while this is plausible, caste is not the only machinery for discharging these functions and is of those available probably the worst. It breeds corruption and these functions are better discharged by other means. Gandhi admits that *varna* determines occupation before man is born and in *varna* man has no liberty to choose his occupation. *Varna* and caste inter-dining and inter-marriage are not necessary for national unity. Children of brothers do not intermarry but do not cease to love one another. Caste system cannot be said to be bad because it does not allow inter-dining and inter-marriage.

Ambedkar finds such ideas revolting. Gandhi sees caste as a form of control, which puts limits on enjoyment. Caste restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage do not allow unconstrained enjoyment. However, Ambedkar argues that these rules do not restrain a man within caste. Gandhi states that hereditary occupation is necessary if chaos is not to result. It would be chaotic if a Brahman is today a Shudra or the opposite. It is the soul of the system. Ambedkar questions why this should be compulsory—today a Brahman sells shoes. Why should the label matter? The services are more important. Gandhi sees the caste system as the natural order of society. Ambedkar sees caste as a legal system maintained by force.

Caste, for him, is a major obstacle to economic development and is not based on rational principles. It forces a division of both labour and

labourers, and assigns occupations by birth rather than by talent, skill or inclination. As Jadhav also points out (1991: 982), Ambedkar views caste as reducing the mobility of labour; those fit for a job will refuse to work in an occupation considered 'low', while those fixed in lowly occupations will not strive for better or 'higher' ones. Further, the mobility of capital is also restricted for it is constrained by caste boundaries. Untouchability is a system of unmitigated and uncontrolled economic exploitation.

For Ambedkar, therefore, Gandhism is a paradox. It destroys foreign domination but preserves the internal domination of one class over another and propounds that Harijans should aspire only to serve and not to own property. Thus, Ambedkar feels that there must be legal provisions and reservation or generous treatment for the Depressed Classes in recruitment. He insists on separate electorates and reservation in public services. He wants sums to be set apart for the secondary, university or higher education of Scheduled Castes. Land should be set apart for Scheduled Castes to live in their own villages. As he states in the All India Scheduled Caste Federation of September 1944, there should be safeguards for the so-called Untouchables in the new constitution. The question of reform and development did not end with economic issues, clearly. Social and political components were imperative. Ambedkar wanted the Dalits to have political power but he was not clear which way to go—to organize only Dalits or to create a larger political base. In the end, the Republican Party of India (RPI) went the second way, though Ambedkar himself was to have his greatest success only with the Mahars.

PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: DIFFERENT VISIONS

At this point in history when we are asked to reconsider the role of the state in a globalizing economy and asked to trust private interests or enterprise for creating wealth in society it is meet to remember Ambedkar's vision. The faith in planned development is failing, but we do have to question whether the planned development that was part of the Nehruvian model of the economy is the kind that Ambedkar would support or want to revive? Globalization valorizes transnational linkages and proceeds to call the death of the nation-state. The Indian state has certainly withdrawn considerably from the social sector in the years after liberalization. We are faced with a crisis in the agrarian sector, where it became clear in the decades after Independence itself that land reforms have failed in most states.

On the other hand, there are calls for decentralization and putting development in the hands of people's participation. This strongly recalls for us Gandhi's vision of building self-sufficient village communities. While neither of these ideas is totally wrong, we need to understand anew the

relationship between state, social change and democracy. Gandhi displayed a suspicion of the state believing that a paternalistic powerful state made citizens into passive recipients of state care. His view of planning for development was that it was too centralized. The development process made sense for Gandhi only if individuals themselves had a sense of their own autonomy and self-respect.

On the face of it none of these ideas are objectionable and they are making more sense today as we see the effects of rampant industrialization. Gandhi's views on machinery or modernity or the state seem to gel well with radical visions that seek to decentralize, increase people's participation in development and protect communities from the onslaught of development or globalization. His critique of mechanization and call for non-exploitative machines can easily fit with an environmentalist and people-centric vision. In fact, it seems very difficult to critique Gandhi on these views at least in the present period when we are reassessing development.

However, his insistence on changing people's tastes and habits, on moral persuasion as a mode of change is unreliable. Ambedkar has a very different view and this certainly comes from his experience and understanding of the centuries-old oppression of the Dalits. Ambedkar could not rely on changing people's individual habits; this did not seem to him a viable option to changing Dalits' lives or opportunities. Ambedkar was well aware that society left on its own would hardly give up either its class or caste privileges. The state had to come in to protect marginalized citizens. While Ambedkar did rethink his own views on this matter, he placed a great deal of emphasis on planned change and on putting down explicit legal and political provisions in place for the protection of minorities and Scheduled Castes. When confronted with state and society—each with its potential for misuse or abuse of power—Gandhi would place his faith in society, while Ambedkar would opt for the state

Ambedkar was explicitly modern and his critique of caste, for instance, is based both on principles of human rights and social justice as well as ideas of rationality and economic efficiency. It is Nehru who is called the 'modernist', but Nehru bases himself on an understanding that though India may become a class society, caste is nothing but part of India's history or its past. He is not able to perceive with perhaps as much clarity as Ambedkar how deep caste goes and how hard the state will have to work to remove it. Even with regard to socialist ideas, Ambedkar was in many ways far ahead of Nehru. Though popularly 'socialist ideas' are associated with Nehru, Ambedkar felt staunchly that the rapid industrialization of society was not possible without state ownership. At the same time, for all its 'socialist' vocabulary, Nehruvian economics produced 'state capitalism';

Ambedkar wanted the state to produce a 'socialist' economy, not fortify the position of the propertied classes.

As framer of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar proposed that:

1. the key industries should be owned and run by the state;
2. basic and non-key industries should be owned and run by the state or corporations established by it;
3. insurance should be nationalized and a monopoly of the state and every adult citizen should be mandated by the state to have a life insurance policy in accordance with wages;
4. agriculture should be a state industry and should be organized by the state.

Agricultural industry should be organized on the following basis:

- (i) The State shall divide the land acquired into farms of standard size and let out the farms for cultivation to residents of the village as tenants (made up of group of families) to cultivate on the following conditions:
 - (a) The farm shall be cultivated as a collective farm;
 - (b) The farm shall be cultivated in accordance with rules and directions issued by the Government;
 - (c) The tenants shall share among themselves in the manner prescribed the produce of the farm left after the payment of charges properly leviable on the farm;
- (ii) The land shall be let out to villagers without distinction of caste or creed and in such manner that there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless labourer;
- (iii) It shall be the obligation of the State to finance the cultivation of the collective farms by the supply of water, draft animals, implements, manure, seeds, etc.

Thus, both in agriculture and industry, the state had the obligation to provide capital and all these provisions are framed by Ambedkar's understanding of the state's fundamental duty to protect its citizens from economic exploitation.

The state had the obligation to plan the economic life of the nation according to Ambedkar. This planning should lead to the greatest productivity and the greatest benefit to the society, while providing for the equitable distribution of wealth. Nowhere does Ambedkar envision the total eclipse of private enterprise, but the state should not delegate private persons to govern others. If the economy is built on purely on the private pursuit of gain, then the private employers will have the freedom to control the workers as they wish. As Ambedkar argues:

It is true that where the State refrains from intervention what remains is liberty. But this does not dispel of the matter. One more question remains to be answered.

To whom and for whom is this liberty? Obviously this liberty is liberty to the landlords to increase rents, for capitalists to increase hours of work and reduce rate of wages. This must be so. It cannot be otherwise. For in an economic system employing armies of workers, producing goods en masse at regular intervals some one must make rules so that workers will work and the wheels of industry run on. If the State does not do it the private employer will. Life otherwise will become impossible. In other words what is called liberty from the control of the State is another name for the dictatorship of the private employer.

The removal of poverty, inequality and exploitation: these were the basic ideas of Ambedkar's understanding of economic development. He did not believe in enhancing state power to the extent that the state owned all resources nor did he believe that economics alone explained all aspects of society. He emphasized the varied aspects of development and exploitation including the social, religious and political. Thus, his views on economic development, though they partake of a certain socialistic stance, do not proceed on an explicitly Marxist path. However, he is much more insistent than Gandhi on bringing to the fore the extent of exploitation of the masses—of labour and the marginalized castes—by the privileged capitalists and elite classes. It is clear for Ambedkar that poverty is linked to exploitation, and that economic development and planning must eradicate this exploitation through explicit and targeted measures.

The removal of the state held no positive associations for Ambedkar. While Gandhi is associated with communitarian ideologies, he has a strong streak of individualism in his writings, particularly due to his insistence on moral responsibility and conscience. His ideas about the state also rely considerably on protecting the village communities from the debilitating patronage of the state and preserving the self-respect and autonomy of the individual. Ambedkar is also individualist, relying on notions of citizenship associated with secularism and democracy. However, in one important sense he differs: it is not enough to rely on the morality of the individual or on the community or society to protect the interests of the marginalized. The state is essential; the view from the margins that Ambedkar has by reason of the circumstances of his birth enable him to see that the privileged classes do not easily make space for the deprived. It is the responsibility of the state to protect, if necessary, whole communities.

Ambedkar explicitly rejects the interiority of Gandhi's arguments. A form of social change that relies on the moral transformation or persuasion of each individual conscience will be pathetically slow for the deprived classes and offers them no recourse to shelter in the meanwhile. Certainly, it would be a fine outcome if such a transformation may be achieved. But in the meanwhile, the public manifestation and play of caste prejudice has to be restrained and that cannot rely on individual consciences. It can only be the legal provisions of the state that control individuals and groups

from acting on their ingrained prejudices. Whatever people may think, they should—in the exterior, in public, in the workplace or the market or the state—be prevented from acting on it. Fairness in procedures, in selections, in all aspects of modern social, economic and political life can only be protected when the state makes explicit provisions to guard *against* unfairness or bias.

This is not a favour the state as ‘patron’ performs for its citizens; this is their rightful claim as joint citizens of a democratic republic. Thus, Ambedkar would decline to agree with Gandhi’s arguments that certain forms of centralization will necessarily create associations of dependence and patronage; on the contrary, the state in order to be truly just must address first and further the needs of the vulnerable. In *Thoughts on Linguistic States* Ambedkar argues that a ‘communal’ majority should not become a political majority. Elsewhere, he proposed a representation mechanism whereby Hindus were capped at 40 per cent, and minorities get representation positively disproportionate to their ratio in the population. In other words, in accord with the state’s commitment to real democracy, the educationally and socially more inferior groups get higher representation than those better endowed.

Finally, Ambedkar’s radical socialist views did not prevail; the weaker and more rhetorical ‘socialism’ of Nehru took its place. Land reforms remained an unfulfilled promise. In fact, Nehruvian economics was strongly influenced by capitalist elites. What Nehru–Mahalanobis produced in the early period of Independence was not ‘socialism’ but state capitalism, which largely benefited the propertied classes, fell short of implementing radical land reforms and excluded large masses of people from the development (see, for instance, Bagchi 1982). Nehru was both individualist and modernist and, though, extremely sensitive to the vulnerabilities of the minorities—ensuring that protections were put in place constitutionally—he stopped short of the more fundamental gender reform of Hindu Personal Law and believed that caste would give way soon enough in the face of economic change.

Both Gandhi’s reliance on ‘trusteeship’ and Nehru’s on economics to bring about social transformation are misplaced. The planned development right from Nehru’s period skewed the balance of power in favour of the propertied rather than the deprived. Ambedkar, unlike both these thinkers, placed the state firmly between the market and society—understanding the interconnections between all these three and, in fact, giving more control to the state for the management of many of the affairs of society and the market. Planned, real socialist development is even more strongly Ambedkar’s *mantra* than Nehru’s for Nehru thought of certain aspects of economic development and his ideas of ‘socialism’ remained feeble, perhaps

even merely rhetorical, while Ambedkar not only expanded those but also explicitly included much more wide-ranging social and political reforms.

Ambedkar links decentralization and the lack of state control to private exploitation; central state control is necessary to ensure 'protection from economic exploitation' and to curb the free reign of the capitalists and landlords. He is like Nehru in believing that industrialization is the future of modern India but wants both agriculture and key and basic industry to be managed by the state. At the same time, this management should not create state capitalism; the state control of the economy would be on socialist lines. Ambedkar's strong and consistent views are worth recalling precisely at a time when globalization and liberalization have reduced the state's interventions on behalf of the poor. Ambedkar would argue that it is not enough for the state to create a 'safety-net' or a 'welfare basket' for the poor. A non-interventionist state has left the poor—the landless labourers, the small farmers and the bulk of disorganized labour—to the mercies of globalization creating precisely the kind of illiberal dictatorship that he had spoken of.

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