

Gandhi - Ambedkar Debate on Caste System

The core of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate is the fundamental differences between the perspective of two leaders regarding the probable solution to the problem of untouchability and other vices of caste system. Both leaders addressed this issue but with different approach and sometimes contradicting each other. Ambedkar wanted to end the caste system as not only this was the reason behind the plight of untouchables but also the gradation of labour was given divine sanctions. Gandhi on the other hand wanted to reform the caste system not only through abolition of untouchability but also giving equal status to each occupation.

Ambedkar was convinced that the condition of untouchables could be improved mainly through winning political rights. Ambedkar started this quest from 1919 through Southborough Committees in which he considered a number of options like reserved seats, separate electorate etc. During the various Round Table Conferences and proceedings of the Minorities Committee, he articulated the reasons for separate electorate in order to secure more protection for untouchables.

Gandhi criticised the practice of untouchability and asserted that no occupation attributes a social status to the people. Gandhi wanted to do away with untouchability without abolishing caste system as he considered that caste system saved Hinduism from disintegration. So even when Gandhi supported inter caste marriages he didn't support the eradication of caste system.

This differences saw its peak when the Communal Award came in 1932 which gave separate electorate to the depressed class. Gandhi began his epic fast unto death which arouse wave of sympathy for him. Ambedkar was persuaded to compromise with Gandhi who was willing to give more reserved seats to the depressed class. This was concluded with the signing of the Poona Pact and Gandhi broke his fast on 26th September 1932.

Gandhi initiated a series of programmes and campaigns for the promotion of interests of untouchables. He stated that untouchability was crime against both humanity and God. Gandhi faced criticism and sometimes violent resistance from orthodox upper caste Santani Hindus.

This involvement of Gandhi actually weakened the position of Ambedkar. Ambedkar couldn't politicise the untouchables and was not being able to them a force to reckon with.

Gandhi's basic disagreement with Ambedkar was the doing away of Chaturvarna system. Ambedkar on the other hand was frustrated with slow pace in Gandhi's efforts.