

A Comparative Study of Economic Thoughts: Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karl Marx

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Abstract

This research paper explores the economic thoughts of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karl Marx, focusing on their visions of equality and justice. Dr Ambedkar advocated for state socialism and emphasised non-violence, democracy, and technological progress to uplift marginalised communities. Gandhi proposed the principle of trusteeship and promoted moral and spiritual development, and urged the wealthy to act responsibly for the welfare of society. Marx, on the other hand, emphasised the revolutionary class struggle to eliminate capitalism and establish a classless society. While Marx relied on conflict and materialism, Ambedkar and Gandhi prioritised social reform and non-violent methods. This study highlights how the ideas of Ambedkar and Gandhi provide solutions to contemporary socio-economic issues, offering sustainable, inclusive, and humanistic alternatives to the radical ideology of Marx.

Keywords: Economic Thoughts; Dr Ambedkar; Mahatma Gandhi; Karl Marx; Comparative Study.

Introduction

The economic thoughts of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karl Marx represent significant efforts to address exploitation and establish freedom, equality, and justice in society. While their experiments and methods differed, their ultimate goal was to create a society free from oppression and inequality. These thinkers approached this goal from different perspectives. All three thinkers were aware of the suffering and challenges of their time and proposed revolutionary ideas for uplifting humanity. The differences in their historical contexts and approaches brought diversity to their methods, yet their thoughts converged in seeking a just and humane society. Dr Ambedkar worked to integrate social and economic transformation, Marx focused on class struggle and economic equality, and Gandhi sought harmony between social justice and economic self-reliance.

In the present era, characterised by unrest and prejudice, a distorted picture of thinkers like Gandhi and Ambedkar often emerges. However, their thoughts are not in conflict but complement each other. Gandhi sought the upliftment of Dalits as part of a broader social revolution, while Ambedkar aimed to achieve Dalit emancipation through revolutionary means. This study analyses their principles to highlight both similarities and differences, emphasising that no animosity or contradiction exists between their ideas.

By comparing the economic philosophies of Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Marx, this study aims to present a clear and just understanding of their contributions. It examines their views on exploitation, freedom, and justice while addressing misconceptions about their thoughts. The analysis also seeks to explore the

relevance of their ideas in addressing contemporary issues like inequality, labour exploitation, and societal unrest.

Method and Materials

This research employs a qualitative method to explore the economic philosophies of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karl Marx, focusing on their views on key economic concepts. The study relies on primary sources such as speeches, writings, and archival documents to understand their original ideas and arguments. Secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, and historical analyses, are used to provide context and interpret their philosophies within broader socio-political and economic frameworks.

Comparative Analysis of Key Economic Concepts

Private Property

Dr Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Karl Marx viewed private property as a cause of social misery, but their approaches were different. Marx advocated for the complete abolition of private property and believed it perpetuated class exploitation. Ambedkar was critical of the inequalities created by property ownership, but he did not advocate for its total abolition. Instead, he sought to limit property ownership through state intervention to ensure a more equitable distribution.

Gandhi also considered private property a source of suffering but he approached the issue differently. He emphasised the principle of ‘trusteeship’, where wealthy individuals would act as custodians of their wealth for the benefit of society. Citing Shrimad Bhagwat, Gandhi believed people should only possess what they need, and surplus wealth should be used for the common good. Unlike Marx, Gandhi did not condemn capital accumulation outright but accepted it if it served society. His vision included equal access to basic necessities like education, food, and justice and aims to reduce inequality without violent revolution.

Communist Economy

Dr Ambedkar rejected the concept of the proletariat dictatorship of Marx. He argues that centralised power in the hands of a single class leads to oppression and ignores the intellectual and emotional dimensions of individuals. He advocated for peaceful, non-violent methods of struggle and believed in a balanced approach to addressing economic and social issues.

Similarly, the vision of socialism of Gandhi differed from the communist thought of Marx. Gandhi supported a non-violent, cooperative economy based on mutual aid and moral values. He emphasised the spiritual and ethical dimensions of economic activity and rejected the materialistic idea of Marx. Gandhi and Ambedkar valued peaceful methods over revolution, highlighting the importance of individual dignity and social harmony.

Classless society

The vision of Ambedkar of a classless society was rooted in the abolition of the Hindu Varna system, which he saw as the foundation of caste-based discrimination in India. He believed that caste divisions were the primary cause of social inequality, and a classless society could not exist unless the religious and social structures supported caste. Ambedkar argued that caste was deeply intertwined with religion, particularly Hinduism, and therefore, a religious revolution, alongside a social revolution, was essential to achieving a classless society. His advocacy for social justice was not limited to the abolition of caste but

also included economic and political reforms to ensure equality and dignity for all individuals, particularly the marginalised communities. Ambedkar believed that eliminating caste was essential for achieving a truly classless society.

Gandhi believed in a classless society that emphasised moral and spiritual transformation. While he recognised the importance of social and economic equality, his approach was centered on non-violence (Ahimsa) and truth (Satya). Gandhi believed that a classless society could be achieved by eliminating divisions based on wealth. Unlike Marx, who called for a revolution of workers, Gandhi advocated for a spiritual revolution, where the hearts and minds of people would change. He believed that through self-purification, individuals would come to recognise the inherent dignity and equality of all people, which leads to an egalitarian society. The vision of Gandhi was not of a radical political revolution but rather a gradual transformation of society based on non-violent resistance and moral principles. He saw the struggle against inequality as a path to personal and societal liberation, not through violent conflict but through peaceful means like Satyagraha (truth-force).

The vision of Marx to achieve a classless society was fundamentally different. For Marx, the establishment of a classless society could only occur through a proletarian revolution. He argued that the working class, or proletariat, which was exploited by the capitalist system, needed to overthrow the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) in order to abolish class distinctions. Marx believed that only through a radical transformation of the economic system, replacing capitalism with socialism, could a classless society be achieved. Unlike Gandhi and Ambedkar, Marx did not emphasise moral or spiritual change as much as he focused on material conditions and class struggle. For Marx, the majority of the population, the workers, had the power to bring about this revolution, which would eventually lead to the dissolution of class divisions and the establishment of a communist society where the means of production were collectively owned and controlled.

Attitude Towards Large Industries and Mechanisation

Dr Ambedkar supported the development of large industries and mechanisation. He believed that embracing technological advancements was essential for the progress of the nation. His European education shaped his dynamic, scientific approach, and he argued that no class or community should be larger than the nation. Ambedkar saw large industries and mechanisation as crucial to uplift marginalised groups, especially Dalits, by providing employment and reducing poverty. Mechanisation could free labourers from exploitation and improve their social status by providing them with organised work opportunities.

Gandhi, on the other hand, was critical of large industries and mechanisation. He viewed them as contributing to exploitation and increasing unemployment. Gandhi believed that mechanisation led to the dehumanisation of workers, including women and children, who became tools in the industrial system. He argued against the migration from villages to cities for industrial jobs, as it led to social insecurity, immorality, and dependence on capitalists. Gandhi favoured small and cottage industries over large-scale industries, promoting self-reliance in villages. He saw machines as symbols of modern civilisation, which he considered harmful and sinful. However, he acknowledged that certain industries, like iron, steel, and transportation, should be developed on a large scale, but industries like clothing and food should remain small-scale.

The vision of Marx was closer to Ambedkar than Gandhi. He believed that mechanisation and large-scale industries, when controlled by the proletariat, could improve the condition of workers. While he opposed

capitalism, Marx thought mechanisation, if owned and managed by workers, could benefit the working class. In capitalist systems, mechanisation was an instrument of exploitation, but under socialism, it would serve the welfare of workers. Marx advocated for the workers to control the means of production to ensure that mechanisation benefited the proletariat.

Controlled Economy

Gandhi was in favour of a controlled economy, but he emphasised that control should come from within society, guided by moral decisions. He called this self-discipline. Gandhi believed that economic control should not be imposed by the government but should arise from individuals ethical choices. He saw this as a way to ensure that economic activities aligned with the values of non-violence and truth.

Marx, in contrast, rejected the idea of self-discipline in economic matters. He believed that capitalists were inherently exploitative and could not be trusted to act in the interests of society. Marx advocated for complete government control over the economy, with the workers having control over production and distribution. He envisioned a fully socialised economy where the state would oversee all economic activities to ensure fairness and equality.

Ambedkar recognised the necessity of government control over the economy, especially to ensure fairness for marginalised communities like Dalits. However, he did not support excessive government intervention or monopolies. Ambedkar favoured a balanced approach where government intervention would help promote social justice without hindering personal freedoms. He did not advocate for the abolition of the private sector, but instead, he sought to reform the economy to ensure equal opportunities for all.

Importance of Labour

Gandhi firmly believed in the importance of labour, but he was against mechanisation as it led to the exploitation of human labour. He believed that machines often dehumanise workers and reduce their role to mere cogs in a larger system, thus diminishing the value of labour. Gandhi advocated for a system where manual labour and personal effort were central to the economy, and he promoted self-reliance through village industries that valued human labour.

Ambedkar, like Gandhi and Marx, recognised the significance of labour in economic processes. He saw labour as essential for the progress of society, whether in agriculture, construction, or industry. However, he was against the feudal system, landlordism, and exploitation of labour. Ambedkar supported a system that allowed labourers to gain fair wages and a better standard of living, opposing the traditional structures that perpetuated inequality. His view was that labour and capital should not be in conflict but should work together for the welfare of the masses. Unlike Marx, who emphasised the labour theory of value, Ambedkar viewed the role of labour from a more practical standpoint, emphasising its need for recognition and respect.

Marx focused on labour as the fundamental source of value in an economy. He argued that labour is the primary means of production and that the exploitation of workers under capitalism is inherent. The labour theory of Marx value posits that the value of a commodity is determined by the labour required to produce it. He saw the relationship between labour and capital as adversarial, with capitalists exploiting workers to accumulate wealth. For Marx, the end of this exploitation could only come with the overthrow of the capitalist system and the establishment of socialism, where workers would control the means of production.

National Self-reliance

Gandhi believed in economic self-reliance at both the national and village levels. He argued that each village should be self-sufficient, producing its own necessities and avoiding unnecessary trade. For Gandhi, national self-reliance was crucial for economic independence and the protection of local industries from foreign domination. He advocated for reducing foreign goods and emphasised producing goods locally to support economic growth without relying on external powers.

Ambedkar supported national self-reliance but had a more pragmatic approach. While he advocated for self-reliance in areas where local resources and capabilities were sufficient, he believed that economically backward nations, like India, needed to import advanced technology and production methods to uplift their economies. Ambedkar was not against foreign trade but thought dependence on foreign luxury goods should be avoided. His focus was on technological development and the modernisation of the economy through external inputs when necessary. The viewpoint of Marx on self-reliance was different in the context of communist nations. He argued that communist societies should cooperate and trade with each other for mutual benefit, abandoning the idea of strict national self-reliance. Marx believed that capitalist exploitation could only be challenged through international solidarity among workers, transcending national boundaries. For him, the global unity of the working class was key to defeating capitalism, and this might require some degree of international trade and cooperation, which would undermine the concept of strict self-reliance.

Sanctity of Mean

Gandhi was a strong advocate of the purity of means; he believed that only pure and ethical means could lead to just ends. He argued that achieving truth, non-violence, and justice through violence was contradictory. Gandhi's non-violence was a principle that guided his actions; he believed that any form of injustice could not be justified, even if it led to a positive outcome. He rejected the use of violence for political change and believed in the power of moral and non-violent struggle.

Ambedkar also believed in the sanctity of means but took a more pragmatic approach. While he acknowledged the importance of non-violence, he also recognised that in certain situations, violence could be justified, especially when the oppressed were defending themselves from exploitation or violence. The view of Ambedkar was that while the end goal should be just, the means should not be sacrificed in pursuit of that goal. He believed that violent resistance could be necessary for protecting the dignity and rights of the oppressed, especially when they were under the threat of violent oppression.

Marx was less concerned with the purity of means, he focuses more on the outcome. For him, achieving a classless society was the ultimate goal, and he saw violence as a necessary means to overthrow the capitalist system. Marx believed that revolution could only succeed through force, as the capitalist class would never voluntarily relinquish power. He did not view violence as inherently immoral if it was in service of the broader goal of establishing a communist society. Unlike Gandhi and Ambedkar, Marx saw violent revolution as essential to ending capitalist oppression.

Rise of Capitalism and New Economy

Dr Ambedkar saw mechanisation and technological progress as key factors in the rise of capitalism. These changes led to large-scale production, competition, and colonialism. While capitalism helped economies grow and allowed people to move from rural to urban life, it also created new divisions between the rich and the poor, and the feudal lords and farmers. Ambedkar did not believe in ending capitalism through

class struggle. Instead, he supported a controlled capitalist system to reduce exploitation and social inequality. He suggested combining socialist principles within capitalism to create a fairer society.

The idea of Ambedkar differed from Gandhi's. Gandhi supported non-violence and the idea of trusteeship, where the wealthy would act as caretakers for the poor. Ambedkar, however, rejected this idea as unrealistic. He believed real change needed struggle and political power, not just moral appeals. Later, Gandhi accepted that the government should control wealth to prevent exploitation.

Marx, on the other hand, believed that capitalism would eventually collapse because of its internal contradictions. He argued that workers revolution would lead to socialism. Ambedkar, however, did not favour violent revolution. He believed in balancing individual entrepreneurship with public welfare through state intervention. While Marx, Gandhi, and Ambedkar all opposed exploitation and inequality, their approaches were different. Marx supported revolution, while Gandhi and Ambedkar focused on peaceful social change through truth, non-violence, and equality. These values remain important today.

Conclusion

Dr Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi shared a common vision of a compassionate, tolerant society grounded in religion, morality, and humanism. Both saw equality, freedom, and fraternity as essential principles at the core of religion. While Gandhi focused on practical social reform, Dr Ambedkar brought a scholarly approach to addressing inequality. Despite their differences in methods, both were deeply committed to uplifting the oppressed, promoting self-respect and non-violence.

Both leaders dedicated their lives to the well-being of humanity, focusing on creating a society free from exploitation and discrimination. Their unwavering commitment to truth, non-violence, and love set them apart from Marx, whose approach was rooted in struggle and violence. Unlike Marx, who believed in transforming society through economic changes, Gandhi and Ambedkar advocated for social transformation through moral values, tolerance, and humanism.

The vision of Dr Ambedkar was non-violent and democratic, emphasising the need for social consciousness and the protection of human dignity. He rejected the use of religion for political purposes and instead focused on creating a society based on trust, companionship, and the welfare of all. While the approach of Marx leaned on scientific materialism, Gandhi and Ambedkar emphasised moral and social development alongside material progress.

In conclusion, Dr Ambedkar and Gandhi's ideals continue to offer a relevant path for creating a just society. Their focus on non-violence, democracy, and human dignity remains a guiding light for addressing social inequalities, ensuring that the spirit of compassion and humanism prevails in shaping the future.

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