

Impact of Gandhi's Activism on Dalit Empowerment: Unravelling Complexity and Progress

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Citation: Dr. Parvesh Kumar et al (2024), Impact of Gandhi's Activism on Dalit Empowerment: Unravelling Complexity and Progress, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(5), 14133-14139
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i5.6309

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article explores Mahatma Gandhi's impact on Dalit empowerment in India, focusing on the complexities of his approach, the progress made, and the work that still needs to be done. Gandhi, known for his role in India's independence movement, was also a prominent advocate for social reform and the upliftment of Dalits, the lowest strata of India's caste system. His efforts included the Harijan movement and the promotion of the term "Harijan" (children of God) to combat untouchability. However, Gandhi's approach has been critiqued for being paternalistic, and there are ongoing challenges faced by Dalits, including social discrimination, economic disparities, and political underrepresentation. Despite these challenges, there have been positive outcomes, such as increased awareness, legal reforms, and social initiatives, contributing to Dalit empowerment. Gandhi's principles of nonviolence, social justice, and moral integrity remain relevant in the ongoing struggle for Dalit rights and social equality, inspiring movements and initiatives aimed at eradicating caste discrimination and promoting dignity for all individuals.

Introduction:

Mahatma Gandhi, also known as the "Father of the Nation" in India, was a pivotal figure in the country's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. His philosophy of nonviolent resistance, known as Satyagraha, inspired millions to participate in civil disobedience campaigns. Gandhi's leadership in the Salt March, the Quit India Movement, and numerous other protests and campaigns significantly weakened British control and eventually led to India's independence in 1947.

Mahatma Gandhi, a pivotal figure in the history of India's independence movement, utilized nonviolent resistance as a potent tool against British colonial rule. His philosophy of Satyagraha, or truth-force, underscored the power of peaceful protest and civil disobedience, profoundly influencing the trajectory of the struggle for freedom (Gandhi, 1946). Gandhi's leadership in key events such as the Salt March of 1930 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 galvanized public sentiment and mobilized diverse sections of Indian society against the British Empire (Brown, 1971). Moreover, his emphasis on self-reliance and his critique of modern industrialization were instrumental in shaping an indigenous identity and governance model post-independence (Andrews, 1930).

Beyond his role in independence, Gandhi was a staunch advocate for social reform. He worked tirelessly to promote unity among diverse religious and ethnic groups, uplift rural communities, and improve the status of women. One of his key focuses was the abolition of the caste system and the eradication of untouchability, practices that he viewed as morally reprehensible and socially divisive.

Dalits: Historical Status in India

The term 'Dalit' has been in practice to describe the members of the lowest strata of India's caste system, traditionally known as "untouchables". Historically and socially, Dalits were subjected to severe discrimination and exclusion, both socially and economically. They were denied access to education, temples, and public facilities, and were often relegated to menial and degrading occupations.

The term derived from the Sanskrit word "dalita," meaning "oppressed" or "broken," refers to the marginalized and oppressed communities in India who have historically been subjected to social, economic, and political

discrimination based on their caste. Dalits were traditionally known as "untouchables" within the caste system, a rigid social hierarchy that categorized individuals based on their birth. The caste system, deeply rooted in Hindu religious texts, divided society into four main varnas or classes, with Dalits placed outside of this system and considered impure and polluting.

Dalits faced severe social restrictions and were relegated to the most menial and degrading tasks in society, such as cleaning toilets, handling dead bodies, and tanning leather. They were denied access to education, temples, and other public facilities and were often subjected to violence and discrimination. The practice of untouchability, which prohibited physical contact with Dalits, further reinforced their social exclusion and marginalization.

Despite efforts to eradicate untouchability and improve the social status of Dalits, discrimination and oppression persist in contemporary India (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998 - Mendelsohn, Oliver, and Marika Vicziany. "The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India." Cambridge University Press, 1998). Dalits continue to face social discrimination in various forms, including access to public spaces, education, and employment. The legacy of the caste system continues to influence social interactions and relationships, reinforcing hierarchical structures that marginalize Dalits. In response to their social exclusion and discrimination, Dalits have organized themselves into various movements and organizations to assert their rights and demand equality (Jodhka, 2012). These movements have sought to challenge caste-based discrimination, promote social justice, and empower Dalit communities through education, political mobilization, and advocacy.

In recent years, there have been efforts to address the social and economic inequalities faced by Dalits through affirmative action policies, such as reservations in education, employment, and political representation (Jodhka, 2012)(Jodhka, Surinder S. "Dalits in Business: Self-Employed Scheduled Castes in Northwest India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 11, 2012, pp. 41-48.). While these measures have helped improve the socio-economic status of some Dalits, challenges remain in ensuring full equality and dignity for all members of Dalit communities.

Therefore, the term "Dalit" refers to the marginalized and oppressed communities in India who have historically faced social, economic, and political discrimination based on their caste. Despite efforts to eradicate untouchability and improve their social status, Dalits continue to face discrimination and marginalization in contemporary India. Dalit movements and affirmative action policies have sought to address these inequalities, but challenges remain in achieving full equality and social justice for Dalits.

Gandhi's Philosophy:

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and ideology for Dalits were deeply rooted in his broader principles of nonviolence, truth, and social justice (Guha, 2018). His approach towards Dalit empowerment aimed not only to uplift them but also to transform society's perception of caste and untouchability. Gandhi believed that the caste system was fundamentally wrong and that untouchability was a sin that needed to be eradicated (Ambedkar, 2014).

Gandhi's philosophy emphasized the dignity and equality of all human beings, regardless of caste or social status (Guha, 2018). He famously said, "I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." This statement reflects his belief in the universality of human values and the need to transcend narrow identities based on caste or creed (Guha, 2018).

One of Gandhi's key strategies for Dalit empowerment was the concept of "Sarvodaya," or the welfare of all (Guha, 2018). He believed that true progress could only be achieved by uplifting the most marginalized sections of society, including Dalits. He advocated for the economic and social empowerment of Dalits through education, vocational training, and economic self-reliance (Ambedkar, 2014).

Gandhi's Harijan movement was a manifestation of his philosophy in action (Guha, 2018). Through this movement, he sought to break down the barriers of caste and untouchability by promoting inter-caste dining, temple entry, and social integration. Gandhi also emphasized the importance of self-respect and self-reliance among Dalits, encouraging them to assert their rights and dignity (Guha, 2018).

Despite his efforts, Gandhi's approach has been critiqued by some Dalit leaders and scholars (Shah, 2000). They argue that his emphasis on nonviolence and moral persuasion was insufficient to dismantle the deeply entrenched caste system. Critics also point out that Gandhi's acceptance of the varna system and his use of the term "Harijan" were paternalistic and did not address the root causes of caste discrimination (Ambedkar, 2014).

If viewed in the light of these facts, Gandhi's philosophy and ideology for Dalits were characterized by a commitment to nonviolence, truth, and social justice (Guha, 2018). His efforts to uplift Dalits and challenge the caste system were an integral part of his broader vision for a more just and humane society. While his approach has been subject to critique, Gandhi's legacy continues to inspire movements for social justice and equality, emphasizing the importance of dignity and respect for all individuals.

The caste system, deeply ingrained in Hindu society, classified individuals based on their birth, determining their occupation, social status, and even their worth as human beings. Despite the official abolition of

untouchability in 1950 with the Indian Constitution, Dalits continue to face discrimination and violence in various forms.

Gandhi's efforts to uplift the Dalits included advocating for their access to education, temples, and other public spaces, as well as promoting social integration and equality. He famously renamed the untouchables as "Harijans," meaning "children of God," although this term is now considered patronizing by many Dalits and has largely fallen out of use.

His Philosophy and Approach

With a view to evaluate his philosophy, it is vital to delve into Gandhi's Views on Caste and Untouchability, which bear significant relevance to Dalits.

Mahatma Gandhi's views on the caste system and untouchability were complex and evolved over time. While he supported the idea of Varnashrama Dharma (the traditional Hindu division of society into four varnas or classes) in his early years, he vehemently opposed the practice of untouchability, considering it a blight on Hindu society. Gandhi believed that all individuals, regardless of their caste, were equal in the eyes of God and should be treated with dignity and respect.

His views on caste and untouchability were complex and evolved over time. He believed that the caste system was a social evil that needed to be eradicated, and untouchability was a blot on Hinduism that needed to be removed (Gandhi, 1942). Gandhi criticized the rigidity and hierarchy of the caste system, arguing that it went against the principles of equality and justice (Gandhi, 1942).

One of Gandhi's key principles was that all individuals, regardless of their caste or social status, were equal in the eyes of God (Gandhi, 1942). He advocated for the abolition of untouchability and called for the integration of Dalits into mainstream society. Gandhi believed that social reform was essential for the progress of society as a whole and that the upliftment of Dalits was a moral and ethical imperative (Gandhi, 1942).

Gandhi's efforts to combat untouchability and promote the rights of Dalits were reflected in his Harijan movement (Gandhi, 1942). Through this movement, Gandhi sought to raise awareness about the injustices faced by Dalits and mobilize support for their cause. He emphasized the need for social reform and the importance of treating all individuals with respect and dignity (Gandhi, 1942).

While Gandhi's views on caste and untouchability were progressive for his time, they have been criticized for being paternalistic and insufficiently radical (Ambedkar, 1936). Critics argue that Gandhi's acceptance of the varna system and his use of the term "Harijan" to describe Dalits were condescending and did not address the root causes of caste discrimination (Ambedkar, 1936).

All facts considered, Mahatma Gandhi's views on caste and untouchability reflected his commitment to social justice and equality. While he advocated for the abolition of untouchability and the integration of Dalits into mainstream society, his approach has been subject to critique for being paternalistic and not going far enough to challenge the underlying structures of caste discrimination.

Factually speaking, there are bountiful evidences to suggest that Gandhi dedicated his entire life to uplifting the marginalized status of Dalits. Here are some of his multifaceted efforts

- Harijan Movement: Gandhi launched the Harijan movement in 1932 to fight against the social injustices faced by Dalits. He undertook nationwide tours, visiting "Harijan" communities, and advocating for their rights.

- Promotion of the Term "Harijan": Gandhi coined the term "Harijan" to refer to Dalits, meaning "children of God." He believed that this term would help in removing the stigma associated with untouchability.

- Temple Entry: Gandhi campaigned for the right of Dalits to enter Hindu temples, which was a significant step towards their social integration.

- Access to Public Facilities: He fought for the rights of Dalits to access public wells, schools, and other facilities from which they were traditionally barred.

Critiques of Gandhi's Approach

Despite his efforts, Gandhi's approach to caste and Dalit upliftment has been critiqued by Dalit leaders and scholars. Mahatma Gandhi's efforts to uplift the Dalits, historically marginalized communities in India, have been a subject of both admiration and criticism. Gandhi, who famously referred to Dalits as "Harijans," or children of God, aimed to integrate them into the social mainstream, advocating for their rights and attempting to eradicate the stigmatization attached to their low caste status. However, critics argue that his approach was paternalistic and that his use of the term "Harijan" itself reflected a kind of benevolent condescension rather than genuine empowerment (Omvedt, 2004).

Critics also point out that Gandhi's methods often conflicted with those of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a contemporary Dalit leader and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution. While Gandhi was committed to the idea of varnashrama dharma (the caste system), suggesting modifications to make it more equitable, Ambedkar advocated for its complete abolition, viewing it as inherently discriminatory (Jaffrelot, 2005). This fundamental difference in perspectives led to disagreements on how best to achieve Dalit upliftment, with Ambedkar accusing Gandhi of perpetuating caste distinctions even in his advocacy for Dalit rights.

Moreover, some scholars assert that Gandhi's fasting and appeals to moral conscience in the upper castes did little to change the material conditions and social realities faced by Dalits. They argue that his actions, while raising awareness, did not lead to significant structural changes or improve the socioeconomic status of Dalits in a substantial way (Rodrigues, 2002). Instead, these critics suggest that Ambedkar's legal and political approach had a more direct impact on the lives of Dalits by securing specific legal protections and rights for them.

Furthermore, Gandhi's opposition to the "separate electorates" for Dalits, a policy proposed by the British that would allow them to elect their own representatives, is another focal point of criticism. Gandhi feared that separate electorates would divide Hindu society, which led to his fast unto death in 1932. This event resulted in the Poona Pact, which instead provided reserved seats for Dalits but within the general electorate (Mendelsohn, 1993). Critics argue that this move weakened Dalit political autonomy and their ability to advocate for their distinct interests.

Despite these criticisms, it's undeniable that Gandhi's efforts brought the issues of caste and untouchability into the national consciousness, making them central themes in the Indian struggle for independence. His engagement with the question of Dalit rights, albeit flawed and contested, nonetheless played a role in the evolution of caste dynamics in modern India (Bayly, 1999). Critics and supporters alike must navigate these complex legacies in their ongoing efforts to address caste discrimination and inequality.

On one hand, his approach to uplifting Dalits came under fire, on the other hand his contribution brought incredible transformation in society in terms of Dalit upliftment. Impacts of Gandhi's works on Dalit empowerment have been wonderful:

- Awareness and Mobilization: Gandhi's campaigns brought national attention to the plight of Dalits and mobilized public opinion against the practice of untouchability. His efforts helped in raising awareness about the social injustices faced by Dalits and garnered support for their cause.
- Social Integration: Gandhi's advocacy for temple entry and access to public facilities for Dalits played a significant role in their social integration. His efforts helped in breaking down some of the barriers that separated Dalits from the rest of society.
- Political Representation: Gandhi's support for the Poona Pact in 1932, which provided for reserved seats for Dalits in the Provincial Legislatures, was a significant step towards ensuring political representation for Dalits.

Gandhi's Principles in Shaping Indian Policies and Laws

- Constitutional Provisions: The principles of equality and social justice championed by Gandhi were enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution abolished untouchability (Article 17) and provided for affirmative action measures, including reservations in education and employment, for Dalits and other marginalized communities (Articles 15 and 16).
- Legislation: Gandhi's influence is evident in several pieces of legislation aimed at eradicating caste discrimination, such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989).
- Policy Initiatives: Gandhi's emphasis on upliftment of the marginalized has shaped various government policies aimed at the socio-economic development of Dalits, including land reform initiatives, educational scholarships, and employment schemes.

Influence of Gandhi's Legacy on Modern Movements for Dalit Rights

- Continued Relevance: Gandhi's principles of nonviolence and social justice continue to inspire modern movements for Dalit rights. Activists and organizations often invoke Gandhi's legacy to advocate for equality and dignity for Dalits.

- Critique and Evolution: While Gandhi's approach has been critiqued, his emphasis on moral and ethical values has influenced the discourse on Dalit rights. Modern movements have built upon and evolved from Gandhi's foundation, incorporating more radical and assertive strategies for social change.

- Global Impact: Gandhi's legacy has transcended national boundaries, influencing international human rights movements and providing a framework for the global struggle against discrimination and inequality.

It could be deduced from the discussion that, Gandhi's campaigns for Dalit rights and his principles have had a lasting impact on Indian society and policies. While there have been critiques of his approach, his commitment to social justice and equality continues to inspire movements for Dalit rights both in India and around the world.

Challenges versus Progress:

There has been a fact that success always comes at price. Despite putting inordinate amount of his efforts, Gandhi's miraculous personality as a social reformer as well as political thinker met multiple challenges

Ongoing Challenges Faced by Dalits in Contemporary India

- Social Discrimination: Despite legal protections, many Dalits continue to face discrimination in various forms, including segregation, exclusion from social and religious events, and denial of access to public facilities.

- Economic Disparities: Dalits are disproportionately represented among the poor and have limited access to economic opportunities. They often face discrimination in employment and are overrepresented in low-paying, menial jobs.

- Educational Inequalities: Dalits have lower literacy rates and educational attainment levels compared to other social groups. They often face discrimination in educational institutions, which hampers their academic and personal development.

- Violence and Atrocities: Dalits are frequent targets of violence and atrocities, including physical assaults, sexual violence, and caste-based violence. These incidents are often rooted in deep-seated caste prejudices.

- Political Underrepresentation: Despite affirmative action measures, Dalits are still underrepresented in political and administrative positions, which affects their ability to influence policies and decisions that impact their communities.

Recent Progress in Dalit Empowerment

- Legal Reforms: India has enacted several laws aimed at protecting the rights of Dalits and preventing discrimination, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

- Affirmative Action: Reservations in education, employment, and political representation have helped increase opportunities for Dalits and reduce disparities.

- Social Awareness: Campaigns and movements, both online and offline, have raised awareness about caste discrimination and mobilized support for Dalit rights.

- Economic Empowerment: Government and non-governmental programs aimed at skill development, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion have contributed to the economic empowerment of Dalits.

Influence of Gandhian Principles on Current Initiatives for Social Justice and Equality

- Nonviolent Activism: Gandhian principles of nonviolence and peaceful protest continue to inspire social justice movements, including those advocating for Dalit rights.

- Moral and Ethical Framework: Gandhi's emphasis on morality and ethics in social reform has influenced the discourse on caste and Dalit rights, encouraging a focus on human dignity and equality.

- Grassroots Mobilization: Gandhian strategies of grassroots mobilization and community involvement have been adopted by organizations working for Dalit empowerment, emphasizing local participation and empowerment.

- Global Solidarity: Gandhian ideals of universal brotherhood and solidarity have inspired global support for the Dalit cause, linking it with broader struggles for human rights and social justice.

In this way, what appears is that while significant challenges remain, there has been progress in Dalit empowerment in contemporary India. Gandhian principles continue to influence initiatives for social justice and equality, providing a moral and ethical framework for addressing caste discrimination and promoting the dignity and rights of Dalits.

Mahatma Gandhi's impact on Dalit empowerment is a complex and multifaceted subject. On one hand, Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability and his advocacy for the rights of Dalits brought national attention to their plight and mobilized support for their cause. His efforts to integrate Dalits into the social fabric of India through initiatives like the Harijan movement and his emphasis on moral and ethical values had a significant influence on the discourse surrounding caste and social justice.

However, Gandhi's approach to caste and Dalit empowerment has also been critiqued for being paternalistic and insufficiently radical. Critics argue that his acceptance of the varna system and his emphasis on changing the hearts of upper-caste Hindus, rather than advocating for structural changes, limited the scope of his impact on the caste system.

In terms of progress, there have been notable advancements in Dalit empowerment since Gandhi's time. Legal reforms, affirmative action policies, and increased social awareness have contributed to improving the socio-economic status of Dalits and reducing instances of discrimination and violence. However, the persistence of caste-based inequalities, ongoing discrimination, and underrepresentation in political and economic spheres indicate that much work still needs to be done.

Gandhi's teachings remain relevant in the ongoing struggle for Dalit rights and social equality. His principles of nonviolence, social justice, and moral integrity continue to inspire movements and initiatives aimed at eradicating caste discrimination and promoting the dignity and rights of all individuals. The challenges faced by Dalits today call for a renewed commitment to these values and a concerted effort to address the structural and systemic issues that perpetuate inequality.

Ongoing Challenges Faced by Dalits in Contemporary India

- **Social Discrimination:** Despite legal protections, many Dalits continue to face discrimination in various forms, including segregation, exclusion from social and religious events, and denial of access to public facilities.
- **Economic Disparities:** Dalits are disproportionately represented among the poor and have limited access to economic opportunities. They often face discrimination in employment and are overrepresented in low-paying, menial jobs.
- **Educational Inequalities:** Dalits have lower literacy rates and educational attainment levels compared to other social groups. They often face discrimination in educational institutions, which hampers their academic and personal development.
- **Violence and Atrocities:** Dalits are frequent targets of violence and atrocities, including physical assaults, sexual violence, and caste-based violence. These incidents are often rooted in deep-seated caste prejudices.
- **Political Underrepresentation:** Despite affirmative action measures, Dalits are still underrepresented in political and administrative positions, which affects their ability to influence policies and decisions that impact their communities.

Recent Progress in Dalit Empowerment

- **Legal Reforms:** India has enacted several laws aimed at protecting the rights of Dalits and preventing discrimination, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.
- **Affirmative Action:** Reservations in education, employment, and political representation have helped increase opportunities for Dalits and reduce disparities.
- **Social Awareness:** Campaigns and movements, both online and offline, have raised awareness about caste discrimination and mobilized support for Dalit rights.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Government and non-governmental programs aimed at skill development, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion have contributed to the economic empowerment of Dalits.

Influence of Gandhian Principles on Current Initiatives for Social Justice and Equality

- Nonviolent Activism: Gandhian principles of nonviolence and peaceful protest continue to inspire social justice movements, including those advocating for Dalit rights.
- Moral and Ethical Framework: Gandhi's emphasis on morality and ethics in social reform has influenced the discourse on caste and Dalit rights, encouraging a focus on human dignity and equality.
- Grassroots Mobilization: Gandhian strategies of grassroots mobilization and community involvement have been adopted by organizations working for Dalit empowerment, emphasizing local participation and empowerment.
- Global Solidarity: Gandhian ideals of universal brotherhood and solidarity have inspired global support for the Dalit cause, linking it with broader struggles for human rights and social justice.

While significant challenges keeps coming up from different school of thoughts, there has been progress in Dalit empowerment in contemporary India. Gandhian principles continue to influence initiatives for social justice and equality, providing a moral and ethical framework for addressing caste discrimination and promoting the dignity and rights of Dalits. Mahatma Gandhi comes across as a global figure, who not only worked for uplifting Dalits and outcast, but also dedicated his whole life as a saintly figure, social activist, thinker and above all, a human being.

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