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Understanding the Relevance of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar's Views on the Welfare State

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ABSTRACT

India ranks among the ten largest countries by both population and economy, and remains deeply diverse in culture, tradition and custom. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy continue to impede the welfare of the state, and a large section of the population remains below the poverty line, unable to secure basic necessities such as food, shelter and education. Providing these requirements is an essential responsibility of the state. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar each advanced distinct conceptions of the welfare state, yet all three held the state responsible for the welfare of its people. Gandhi grounded the welfare state in the principle of Sarvodaya, the upliftment of all. Nehru, a socialist, approached the welfare state from a socialist standpoint, insisting on an active state role in providing education, healthcare and other basic facilities. Ambedkar located the welfare state within the framework of social justice, arguing that marginalised communities must receive equal representation across every sphere of public life. This paper examines the views of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar on the concept of the welfare state and reflects on its continuing significance.

Keywords: *Welfare state, population, economy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

India ranks among the ten largest countries in the world in terms of both population and economy, and is heavily diverse in its culture, traditions and customs. Factors such as poverty, unemployment and illiteracy hinder the welfare of the state. Many people in India live below the poverty line and cannot afford basic necessities such as food, shelter and education. It is essential for the government of a state to provide such basic requirements to its people. Scholars such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar proposed differing conceptions of the welfare state, yet all three believed that the state was responsible for the welfare of its people. This paper examines the views of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar on the concept of the welfare state and reflects on its significance.

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II. THE RELEVANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI'S RAM RAJYA

Ram Rajya is a conception of an ideal state propounded by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s. In this ideal state, the principles of truth, righteousness, morality and justice are paramount, and justice is granted to every citizen irrespective of caste and creed. In a 1929 issue of *Young India*, Gandhi stated: "By Ram Rajya, I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ram Rajya Divine Raj, the kingdom of God. For me, Ram and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness. Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Ramayana is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described to have received justice under Ram Rajya." In the journal *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, he stated that the Ramayana of his dreams ensures the rights of both the prince and the pauper.¹

In a 1937 issue of *Harijan*, Gandhi observed that a state is truly independent only when the principles of Ram Rajya are implemented. He emphasised the values of truth and righteousness among citizens and argued that Ram Rajya cannot be established where there is an unequal distribution of wealth and resources. He also called for the replacement of the British army with a national army, reasoning that a country governed by its military can never attain freedom in the moral sense.²

III. AMBEDKAR'S DEMOCRATIC STATE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

A democratic state, or a democracy, is a form of government in which power is vested in the hands of the citizens. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a renowned economist, sociologist and democrat, chaired the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. Speaking on the social order of the country, he observed: "There is no doubt in my opinion that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilise the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole."³

¹ Madan Mohan Mathur, *M.K. Gandhi's Vision of Ram Rajya*, SPEAKING TREE (Mar. 13, 2019) see also *Ramrajya*, MIND OF MAHATMA GANDHI.

² Sumeet Kaul, *Gandhi's 'Ram Rajya': What the Mahatma Meant by the Term, and Its Significance Today*, TIMES NOW (Oct. 1, 2019).

³ Avinash Bhale, *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and His Interpretations on Social Exclusion as a Historian*, Int'l J. Res. Culture Soc'y (Jan. 2017).

Ambedkar laid particular emphasis on protecting the rights of minorities, an emphasis reflected in the constitutional provisions for the protection of minorities and the safeguards for the Scheduled Castes. In his memorandum *States and Minorities*, he set out the provisions to protect the interests of minorities alongside the fundamental rights of citizens. By providing for the right to representation in the legislature, the executive and the services, and for special responsibilities such as financial support for the higher education of the Scheduled Castes, he sought to safeguard their interests.⁴

In his work *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (1955), Ambedkar expressed his views on the reorganisation of India's provinces on the basis of language. He also favoured smaller states, which in his view would enable easier governance and administration. His proposals concerning the states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in 1955 illustrated his preference for smaller states. He feared that in a larger state the proportion of minorities would diminish, leading to the oppression of their rights.⁵

IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF NEHRU'S SOCIALIST AND SECULAR STATE FOR INDIAN POLITICS

Socialism is a political and economic system in which property and the means of production are collectively controlled by the people, in contrast to their control by private institutions under capitalism or by aristocrats under feudalism.⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, regarded as a builder of the Indian nation, was a strong believer in socialism and a pioneer of socialist policy in Indian governance. Setting out his views on socialism at the 1929 Congress session, he stated: "I must frankly confess that I am a socialist and a republican, and am no believer in kings and princes, or in the order which produces the modern kings of industry, who have greater power over the lives and fortunes of men than even the kings of old, and whose methods are as predatory as those of the old feudal aristocracy." He continued: "We must realise that the philosophy of socialism has gradually permeated the entire structure of society the world over, and almost the only points in dispute are the pace and the methods of advance to its full realisation. India will have to go that way too if she seeks to end her poverty and inequality, though she may evolve her own methods and may adapt the ideal to the genuine needs of her people."⁷

⁴ B. R. AMBEDKAR, *States and Minorities: What Are Their Rights and How to Secure Them in the Constitution of Free India* (1947).

⁵ *Ambedkar and Small States*, HINDUSTAN TIMES (Jan. 31, 2010).

⁶ Wilson Sherwin, *Socialism: Foundations and Key Concepts*, JSTOR DAILY (Nov. 20, 2020), <https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-socialism>.

⁷ L. S. Rathore, *Political Ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru: Some Reflections*, 46 INDIAN J. POL. SCI. 451 (1985).

In keeping with these views, Nehru introduced the Five-Year Plan system in 1951, a Soviet model for developing a state's economy. The first Five-Year Plan focused on agricultural development, with emphasis later shifting to industry. Other notable policies of his tenure include the policy of non-alignment and the Panchsheel agreement. The policy of non-alignment, adopted during the Cold War, held that India would maintain neutrality and would not align with either of the power blocs.⁸ The Panchsheel agreement, also known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, rested on mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.⁹

A state is described as secular when its government establishes no official religion. Secularism is directed towards achieving justice in society and is closely associated with socialist states such as the erstwhile USSR. Nehru was keen to embed secularism in Indian governance. In a speech at Aligarh Muslim University in 1948, he stated: "As far as India is concerned, I can speak with some certainty. We shall proceed on secular and national lines, in keeping with the powerful trends towards internationalism. India will be a land, as in the past, of many faiths, equally honoured and respected."¹⁰

V. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the ideologies of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar shows that the state plays a crucial role in realising the idea of the welfare state. While each scholar advocated the welfare state along a different dimension, successive governments have implemented policies inspired by their ideals. In the era of privatisation, basic resources such as healthcare, education and food are increasingly vested in the hands of private players, affecting the ability of the poorer and marginalised sections to access them. While privatisation aims to bring efficiency to the delivery of services, it poses a challenge to the government's objective of securing equality and justice for all groups. States must therefore advocate policies such as public-private partnerships, which combine the efficiency of the private sector with the welfare orientation of the public sector, and thereby help extend services to marginalised communities as well.

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