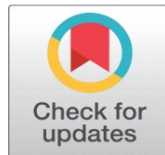


# CONCEPT OF MODERNITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF GANDHI, NEHRU AND AMBEDKAR

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## ABSTRACT

Modernity is a multifaceted concept that has evolved over time, encompassing various dimensions such as social, political, economic, and cultural transformations. In the Indian context, modernity emerged as a significant discourse during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period marked by colonial rule, social reform movements, and the struggle for independence. This article introduces the perspectives of three pivotal figures in Indian history—Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B.R. Ambedkar—each of whom articulated distinct visions of modernity that reflected their ideologies, experiences, and aspirations for the nation. By examining their views, one can gain insights into how modernity shaped individual identities and societal structures in India, particularly in contrast to medieval frameworks of authority and colonial legacy.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Self-reliance, Equality, Empowerment, Emancipation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To understand the concept of modernity as articulated by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar, it is essential to situate their ideas within the socio-political context of their times. The late 19th century and early 20th century in India were characterized by the British colonial regime, which imposed foreign governance structures and economic systems that disrupted traditional ways of life. The impact of colonialism was profound, leading to widespread social dislocation, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation. In response to these challenges, various reform movements emerged, seeking to address the injustices of colonial rule while also grappling with the legacies of India's own feudal past.

The struggle for independence catalyzed a re-evaluation of identity, authority, and governance. As the nation sought to redefine itself, the discourse surrounding modernity became increasingly relevant. It was within this context that Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar articulated their visions, each responding to the pressing issues of their time while also envisioning a future that would empower the Indian populace.

Mahatma Gandhi's approach to modernity was deeply rooted in his philosophy of non-violence, self-reliance, and moral integrity. For Gandhi, modernity was not merely about adopting Western technological advancements or political systems; rather, it was about cultivating a sense of ethical responsibility and social cohesion. He believed that true modernity must emerge from the grassroots, emphasizing the importance of rural self-sufficiency and the revival of traditional crafts as a means of economic empowerment.

Gandhi's critique of modernity was particularly directed at the materialism and individualism that he associated with Western civilization. He argued that the relentless pursuit of economic growth and technological progress often led to the degradation of human values and social relationships. Instead, Gandhi envisioned a modern India that prioritized community welfare, spiritual development, and environmental sustainability. His concept of "Sarvodaya," or the welfare of all, encapsulated his belief that modernity should be inclusive, addressing the needs of the marginalized and promoting social justice.

In contrast to Gandhi's emphasis on tradition and moral values, Jawaharlal Nehru embraced a more secular and progressive vision of modernity. As India's first Prime Minister, Nehru sought to position India as a modern nation-state on the global stage. He believed that modernity was synonymous with scientific advancement, industrialization, and the adoption of democratic governance. Nehru's vision was shaped by his experiences in Europe, where he was exposed to the ideals of socialism, secularism, and rationalism.

Nehru's approach to modernity was characterized by a commitment to education, technological innovation, and economic development. He advocated for a planned economy that would harness India's resources for the benefit of all citizens, particularly the underprivileged. Nehru's vision of modernity was also intertwined with his belief in the importance of national unity and social cohesion. He recognized that the diverse fabric of Indian society required a modern state that could accommodate various identities while fostering a sense of collective belonging.

B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent social reformer and the architect of the Indian Constitution, offered a critical perspective on modernity that focused on the issues of caste, inequality, and social justice. Ambedkar's experiences as a member of the marginalized Dalit community profoundly shaped his understanding of modernity. He argued that the traditional caste system was a significant barrier to achieving true modernity in India, as it perpetuated social hierarchies and denied basic rights to millions.

For Ambedkar, modernity was not merely about political independence or economic development; it was fundamentally about the empowerment of marginalized communities. He believed that the quest for modernity must include a radical rethinking of social

structures, advocating for the abolition of caste and the establishment of a more egalitarian society. Ambedkar's vision of modernity was closely linked to the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which he saw as essential for the realization of a just and democratic India.

The differing perspectives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar on modernity highlight the complexities of its implications for marginalized communities in India. While Gandhi emphasized moral and ethical dimensions, Nehru focused on economic and political frameworks, and Ambedkar critiqued the social hierarchies that persisted even in the face of modernity. Each of these perspectives offers valuable insights into the challenges faced by marginalized groups in their quest for empowerment and emancipation.

The transition from medieval frameworks of authority to modernity brought about significant changes in individual identities and societal structures. However, the benefits of modernity were not uniformly distributed. For many marginalized communities, the promise of modernity often remained unfulfilled, as systemic inequalities continued to persist. The struggle for empowerment through political and economic means became a central theme in the discourse surrounding modernity, as marginalized groups sought to assert their rights and challenge the status quo.

This article reveals a persistent tension between modernity and tradition in the thoughts of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar. This dichotomy is reflective of broader debates within Indian society about the role of traditional values in a rapidly modernizing world. Gandhi's critique of modernity is often framed as a defense of traditional Indian values, which he believed could provide a moral compass in an age dominated by materialism. Conversely, Nehru's vision of modernity seeks to transcend traditional constraints, advocating for a break from the past to embrace a future defined by progress and innovation.

Colonialism serves as a critical backdrop to the discussions of modernity and tradition. The impact of British colonial rule on Indian society created a unique context in which the ideas of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar emerged. Colonialism

not only disrupted traditional social structures but also introduced new forms of governance, economic systems, and cultural exchanges. This historical context is essential for understanding how each thinker navigated the complexities of modernity in relation to their vision for an independent India.

Gandhi's approach to social justice is fundamentally ethical, rooted in his belief in the inherent dignity of every individual. His vision of modernity emphasizes moral responsibility and the importance of non-violent resistance as a means to achieve social change. Gandhi's advocacy for the upliftment of the marginalized, particularly the untouchables, reflects his commitment to social justice as an integral component of modernity. His writings encourage a re-evaluation of social hierarchies and advocate for a society where equality is achieved through moral and spiritual awakening rather than mere legislative reforms.

Nehru's perspective on social justice is framed within the context of democratic governance and economic development. He believed that modernity should facilitate the creation of a just society through the establishment of democratic institutions and the promotion of education and economic opportunities. Nehru's policies aimed at reducing inequalities through state intervention and social welfare programs, reflecting his belief that modernity must be inclusive and equitable. His vision of modernity is thus intertwined with the idea of a democratic state that actively works to dismantle social injustices.

Ambedkar's approach to social justice is marked by a radical critique of existing social structures, particularly the caste system. He argued that true equality could only be achieved through systemic reforms that address the root causes of oppression. Ambedkar's advocacy for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized communities underscores his belief that modernity must entail a fundamental transformation of social relations. His writings call for a rethinking of social justice that goes beyond mere political representation to encompass economic and social empowerment. Ambedkar's vision of modernity is thus one that demands a critical engagement with the past to forge a more just future.

The literature on modernity in the Indian context often engages with theoretical frameworks that illuminate the complexities of individualism and social relations. One such framework is C.B. Macpherson's notion of "possessive individualism," which critiques the idea of the individual as an autonomous entity solely driven by self-interest. This concept is particularly relevant when examining the works of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar, as each thinker grapples with the implications of individualism for social justice and community welfare. Gandhi's emphasis on collective well-being challenges the tenets of possessive individualism, while Nehru's vision of modernity seeks to balance individual aspirations with national progress.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study is fundamentally analytical and comparative. The analytical approach allows for a detailed examination of the thoughts produced by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar, focusing on their conceptualizations of modernity and its implications for Indian society. The comparative framework is structured around three primary axes: the conceptualization of modernity, the understanding of social justice, and the envisioned role of the state. Each axis serves as a lens through which the writings and speeches of the three leaders can be analyzed. This framework not only facilitates a systematic examination of their ideas but also allows for the identification of thematic overlaps and distinctions. By situating their thoughts within the broader discourse on modernity, the research aims to illuminate the unique contributions of each thinker while also recognizing the shared challenges they faced in articulating a vision for a modern India.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1. GANDHI: MORAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF MODERNITY

Mahatma Gandhi's conception of modernity is deeply intertwined with his moral and spiritual beliefs. For Gandhi, modernity was not merely a matter of technological advancement or economic progress; it was fundamentally about the ethical transformation of individuals and society. He posited that true modernity must be rooted in moral values, emphasizing the importance of non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satyagraha) as guiding principles. Gandhi's critique of industrialization and materialism emphasize his belief that true progress must align with the moral upliftment of individuals and communities. His emphasis on self-reliance, non-violence and the empowerment of the rural people reflects a vision of modernity that seeks to harmonize tradition with contemporary needs.

### 3.2. THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Gandhi's ethical framework challenges the notion of modernity as a linear progression towards materialism. He critiqued the Western model of modernity, which often prioritizes individualism and economic gain over communal well-being and spiritual growth. In his view, the pursuit of material wealth without moral grounding leads to social fragmentation and environmental degradation. Gandhi advocated for a model of modernity that harmonizes material progress with spiritual development, urging individuals to cultivate inner virtues alongside external achievements.

### 3.3. MODERNITY AND COMMUNITY

Gandhi's vision of modernity also emphasizes the importance of community and collective identity. He believed that the strength of a nation lies in its ability to foster a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility among its citizens. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of India's diverse social fabric, where communal ties often shape individual identities. Gandhi's call for self-reliance (swadeshi) and local governance (Panchayati raj) reflects his belief that modernity should empower local communities rather than impose external structures of authority.

### 3.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR MARGINALIZED GROUPS

Gandhi's approach to modernity has significant implications for marginalized communities. His emphasis on moral upliftment and social harmony resonates with the struggles of those who have been historically oppressed. By advocating for the inclusion of marginalized voices in the national discourse, Gandhi's vision of modernity seeks to create a more equitable society. However, his reluctance to confront the caste system directly has drawn criticism, highlighting the complexities of his stance on social justice.

### 3.5. NEHRU: SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS AND STATE INTERVENTION

In contrast to Gandhi's moralistic approach, Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of modernity is characterized by a strong belief in scientific progress and state intervention. Nehru viewed modernity as an opportunity for India to emerge as a global power through industrialization, technological advancement, and education. His emphasis on rationality and empirical knowledge reflects a commitment to a modernity that is rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress.

He viewed modernity as an opportunity to reshape Indian society through rationality, education and technological advancement. Nehru's vision was formed by a desire to create a secular, democratic state that could include modern science to improve the lives of its citizens. His advocacy for industrialization and economic planning reflects a commitment to transform India into a modern nation-state capable of competing on the global stage.

### 3.6. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Nehru's perspective on modernity is closely linked to his understanding of the role of the state in shaping society. He believed that a strong, interventionist state was essential for facilitating economic development and social change. Nehru's policies aimed at modernizing agriculture, promoting industrialization, and expanding education were grounded in the belief that the state could act as a catalyst for progress. This approach underscores a significant departure from Gandhi's vision, which prioritizes individual moral agency over state control.

### 3.7. MODERNITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Nehru's conception of modernity is also intertwined with the formation of a national identity. He envisioned a modern India that could assert its place on the global stage, free from colonial rule. This aspiration for national pride and self-determination is evident in Nehru's emphasis on scientific education and technological advancement as means to empower the nation. His vision of modernity is thus not only about economic growth but also about fostering a sense of collective identity and purpose among Indians.

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

While Nehru's focus on scientific progress and state intervention has the potential to promote social justice, it also raises questions about the inclusivity of his vision. The top-down approach to modernization can inadvertently marginalize voices from below, particularly those of marginalized communities. Nehru's policies, while ambitious, often failed to address the structural inequalities that persisted in Indian society. This tension between progress and equity remains a critical issue in contemporary discussions on social justice.

However, Nehru's approach also raises critical questions regarding the implications of state intervention in the lives of individuals. While his policies aimed to uplift marginalized communities, they often fell short of addressing the deeper social hierarchies that persisted in Indian society. The tension between state-led modernization and grassroots empowerment is a recurring theme in Nehru's legacy, highlighting the complexities of implementing a vision of modernity that is both inclusive and effective.

#### 5. AMBEDKAR: CRITIQUE OF CASTE AND ADVOCACY FOR RIGHTS

B.R. Ambedkar's perspective on modernity is marked by a profound critique of social hierarchies, particularly the caste system. As a champion of social justice, Ambedkar viewed modernity as a means to dismantle oppressive structures and promote equality. His advocacy for constitutional rights and social reform reflects a commitment to creating a more just society, one that recognizes the dignity and agency of all individuals. His advocacy for constitutional rights and social equality reflects a commitment to destroy oppressive structures that obstruct the progress of marginalized people. His vision of modernity is linked to the idea of empowerment through legal and political means, give emphasis on the need for institutional frameworks that promote social justice.

#### 6. THE CASTE QUESTION

Ambedkar's critique of caste is central to his understanding of modernity. He argued that the caste system is a fundamental barrier to achieving true modernity, as it perpetuates inequality and discrimination. For Ambedkar, modernity must entail the abolition of caste and the establishment of a society based on principles of justice and equality. His emphasis on constitutional rights as a tool for empowerment underscores the importance of legal frameworks in facilitating social change.

##### 6.1. MODERNITY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

Ambedkar's vision of modernity is deeply rooted in the recognition of individual rights. He believed that true modernity cannot exist without the protection of fundamental human rights, particularly for marginalized groups. His advocacy for the rights of Dalits and other oppressed communities reflects a commitment to inclusivity and social justice. Ambedkar's emphasis on education and political participation as means of empowerment highlights the importance of agency in the pursuit of modernity.

##### 6.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Ambedkar's ideas on modernity continue to resonate in contemporary Indian society, particularly in discussions surrounding caste and social justice. His critique of structural inequalities serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggles faced by marginalized communities. The relevance of Ambedkar's advocacy for constitutional rights and social reform underscores the need for a modernity that is inclusive and equitable, addressing the historical injustices that persist in Indian society.

##### 6.3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

The distinct perspectives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar on modernity reveal the complexities of navigating tradition and progress in the Indian context. While Gandhi emphasizes moral and spiritual dimensions, Nehru focuses



on scientific advancement and state intervention, and Ambedkar critiques social hierarchies and advocates for rights. These differing approaches highlight the multifaceted nature of modernity and its implications for social justice and empowerment.

## **7. EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:**

The implications of their ideas for contemporary Indian society are profound. Gandhi's call for moral upliftment and community empowerment resonates with ongoing movements for social justice, while Nehru's emphasis on state intervention raises questions about the role of government in addressing inequalities. Ambedkar's advocacy for rights and inclusion serves as a guiding principle for marginalized communities seeking empowerment.

Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities of modernity in India.

## **8. EFFECTIVENESS OF APPROACHES TO MODERNITY**

### **8.1. ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE OPPRESSED**

The effectiveness of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar's approaches to modernity can be evaluated through their impact on the lives of the oppressed. Gandhi's emphasis on moral upliftment and self-reliance resonated with many rural communities, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment. However, his vision often struggled to address the systemic inequalities faced by marginalized groups, particularly in urban settings where economic disparities were more pronounced.

Nehru's policies aimed at economic development and modernization brought about significant changes in infrastructure and education. Yet, the benefits of these advancements were not evenly distributed, and many marginalized communities continued to face barriers to access and participation in the modern economy. The challenge of ensuring that state-led initiatives translate into tangible benefits for the oppressed remains a critical concern in evaluating Nehru's legacy.

Ambedkar's focus on constitutional rights and social justice offers a more direct approach to addressing the needs of the oppressed. His advocacy for affirmative action and legal protections has had a lasting impact on the lives of marginalized communities, providing them with avenues for empowerment and representation. However, the implementation of these measures has often been met with resistance, highlighting the ongoing struggle for social justice in contemporary India.

## **9. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

### **9.1. ONGOING STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE**

The ideas of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar remain profoundly relevant in the context of contemporary struggles for equality and justice in India. The ongoing challenges faced by marginalized communities, including caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and economic disparities, underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of modernity that incorporates the insights of these three leaders.

Gandhi's emphasis on moral values and community empowerment resonates with contemporary movements advocating for social justice and environmental sustainability. His vision of a more equitable society continues to inspire grassroots activism, particularly in rural areas where traditional power structures remain entrenched.

Nehru's legacy of state-led development and modernization is also pertinent in discussions about economic policy and social welfare. The need for inclusive growth that addresses the needs of marginalized communities is a pressing concern in contemporary India, highlighting the relevance of Nehru's vision in shaping policy frameworks.

Ambedkar's advocacy for constitutional rights and social justice remains a cornerstone of contemporary movements for equality. His emphasis on the importance of legal protections and affirmative action continues to inform debates about social justice and representation in India. The ongoing struggles for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized groups reflect the enduring significance of Ambedkar's ideas in the quest for a more just society.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar's perspectives on modernity reveals a rich tapestry of ideas that continue to shape the socio-political landscape of India. Understanding modernity as a dynamic process allows for a more specific approach that recognizes the complexities of social justice and the ongoing struggles of marginalized communities. As India navigates the challenges of the 21st century, the insights gained from these leaders remain relevant, urging us to strive for a more inclusive and equitable society. The call for further research underscores the importance of continuing this dialogue, ensuring that the quest for modernity is not only about progress but also about justice, dignity, and empowerment for all.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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