Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 12, Issue 3, July 2025 – Pages 333-344

The Theoretical Intersection of Religion and Democracy: Analyzing Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar

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Religion plays vital role in the governing system of a country. Particularly in a Democratic country, it is an arguable issue that whether the religion should have a place in the governing system or not. Or it should have a neutral or private role which should be protected by the Government. In this regard, the constitutional philosophy of Indian democracy and the views of the founders of Indian Democracy like Gandhi, Ambedkar and Nehru are to be considered as a matter of discussion. In this paper attempt has been made to discuss about the relevance of Religion in Democracy in the mentioned context and it is examined here that a third means to maintain the relation between Religion and Democracy is feasible or not.

Introduction

The relationship between religion and democracy has long been a subject of debate, with some arguing that the two cannot coexist. However, this assertion is increasingly being questioned, as critics contend that the view is overly simplistic and fails to capture the complexity of the issue. In response, scholars and thinkers are now exploring the idea that religion might not only coexist with democracy but could also be understood as a form of democracy in itself. This perspective has led to a wide range of opinions, many of which are contradictory. Some argue that religion should not be marginalized or excluded from public life but caution that if the state endorses religion, it could introduce bias and potentially weaken the foundations of democracy. These thinkers suggest that religion should be kept within the private sphere to prevent interference with constitutional processes and to safeguard the secular nature of modern democratic states. But in the real world religion always has been attempting to play active role in the political governance.

There have been notable shifts in global politics regarding the interrelation between governance and religion. From the East to the West, religion is once again assuming a pivotal role in public politics. In the United States, former President Donald Trump vocally supported conservative religious beliefs, using the slogan "Take back our country." Similarly, in Europe, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has emphasized Christian democratic values, famously declaring, "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian"[1]. In South Asia, religion has been playing a pivotal role in destabilizing the governing system. There has been a significant rise in Hindu sentiment in the Indian political landscape.

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1. https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/the-rise-of-the-far-right-in-italy-the-meloni-scare

https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.12-3-5 doi=10.30958/ajha.12-3-5

Bangladesh continues to face religious tensions centered on Hindu-Muslim issues, while Pakistan has used radicalized Islam for political gain. China, meanwhile, has been oppressing Uyghur Muslims, and Myanmar has constructed a harmful narrative about the Rohingya Muslims to justify their displacement. Even in India, the birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi, secularism is under question to some extent. Historically, attempts were made to convert India into a Muslim-majority country during and after the freedom movement. Currently, the rise of Hindu nationalism is pushing Muslims to the margins of society. Thus, it is evident that across the globe, religion is increasingly influencing political systems. Religious stereotyping has become a tool for those seeking to entrench religion in governance. In this context, the perspectives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar hold significant relevance and warrant close examination.

However, the modern sociological perspectives often support the idea of a strict separation between religion and the state, viewing it as essential for maintaining the secular character of democratic systems. According to this view, religion should be entirely separate from social and political systems to ensure that democracy remains unbiased and inclusive. However, not all scholars agree with this approach. Some argue for a rethinking of the relationship between religion and democracy, suggesting that religion could play a limited but defined role within democratic frameworks. They believe that rather than completely excluding religion from the public sphere, it should be given a space where it can contribute positively to the democratic process. This re-conceptualization of the relationship between religion and democracy is particularly relevant in the context of India, where the political system has been profoundly shaped by the ideas of influential leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar each had distinct views on the role of religion in society, and their ideas continue to influence discussions on democracy in India today. Gandhi, for instance, saw religion as an integral part of life and believed that it could guide individuals toward moral and ethical behavior, which in turn would support democratic values. Nehru, on the other hand, was more skeptical of religion's role in politics and advocated for a secular state where religion would be separate from the functions of government. Ambedkar, who was deeply concerned with issues of social justice and equality, viewed religion as both a potential source of oppression and a tool for liberation, depending on how it was interpreted and practiced. The interplay of these differing perspectives has had a lasting impact on the Indian political landscape, influencing both policy and public discourse.

This study aims to examine the influence of religion on political philosophy by exploring how Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar incorporated religious perspectives into their political ideologies. The study will investigate the distinctions in their beliefs, particularly how religion shaped their visions for a democratic India. By analyzing the implications of this interplay, the study will provide insights into the ways in which religion has influenced the development of India's political

system. Additionally, the study will explore the concept of secularism as understood by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar, critically evaluating their differing interpretations. The analysis will include an examination of how each thinker supported the separation of religion from the state and how their ideas have contributed to the development and sustainability of democracy in India.

In addition to exploring secularism, the study will look into the approaches of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar to social justice and equality within the framework of religion and democracy. This analysis will focus on how each thinker addressed issues of caste, class, and other forms of social inequality, and will assess the impact of their ideologies on the promotion or hindrance of inclusive democratic principles in the Indian context. The study will also evaluate the lasting impact of the religious and democratic ideologies proposed by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar in contemporary Indian society. By analyzing how their visions have shaped India's political, social, and cultural landscape, the study will assess the relevance of their ideas in addressing current challenges and opportunities related to the intersection of religion and democracy in India.

Furthermore, the study will consider the international relevance of the ideologies of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar. It will explore how their principles might inform global discussions on the relationship between religion and democracy, particularly in diverse societies where multiple religious and cultural traditions coexist. The study will address several key research questions: How have the philosophies of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar shaped the evolution and continuity of democracy in India, and what lessons can other democracies learn from these perspectives? What role does the middle class play in either perpetuating moral degradation or advocating for reform within democratic systems, and how can their influence be harnessed positively? What historical precedents exist for religion attempting to influence or control democratic processes, and how can Gandhi and Nehru's philosophies be applied to counteract biases and promote inclusivity?

Another important question the study will explore is how the concept of a 'third way' for democracy, which balances religious philosophy as a way of life while maintaining separation from institutional control, can foster harmonious coexistence and pluralism in diverse societies. This idea of a 'third way' suggests that it is possible to integrate religious values into the democratic process without allowing religion to dominate or undermine the secular nature of the state. The study will examine how this balance can be achieved and what lessons can be learned from the Indian context that might be applicable in other countries facing similar challenges.

The methodology for this study involves the use of normative theory, which explores the ethical principles and values underlying political systems. Normative political philosophy addresses fundamental questions related to authority, justice, rights, and the role of the state in society. By examining these questions, the study aims to develop frameworks that can inform and guide individuals, policymakers,

and societies toward the realization of morally justifiable political structures. Normative theories often address issues such as distributive justice, human rights, democracy, and the nature of political obligation, providing a foundation for ethical deliberation and decision-making in the realm of political governance.

In addition to normative theory, the study will employ the comparative method to elucidate the varying perspectives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar on the topic of religion. By juxtaposing their views, the study will discern both commonalities and divergences in their conceptualizations of religious phenomena. This approach involves a meticulous examination of the nuances within each thinker's writings, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their respective positions on the nature, role, and significance of religion. Through the comparative method, the study will draw connections between shared themes or identify contradictions, fostering a comprehensive analysis of the thinkers' perspectives. This method not only illuminates the richness of individual viewpoints but also provides a broader understanding of the multifaceted nature of religious thought, promoting a more holistic comprehension of the complexities inherent in the philosophical discourse on religion

The Theoretical Intersection of Religion and Democracy

Exploring the intersection of religion and democracy through the perspectives of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar requires a careful comparison of key texts, each of which offers distinct insights into how these thinkers approached the role of religion in shaping Indian society and its governance.

In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi presents his vision for an independent India, emphasizing the importance of non-violence, self-governance, and a return to traditional Indian values. He critiques Western civilization and modernity, advocating for religion to serve as a moral guide for both personal and social life. Gandhi argues that true self-rule, or 'Swaraj', cannot be achieved without a strong spiritual and ethical foundation, which he believes religion provides. This view contrasts sharply with Ambedkar's perspective in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). Ambedkar critically examines the Hindu caste system and its deep roots in religious doctrines like the Manusmriti. He argues that caste is a social hierarchy enforced by religion, which perpetuates inequality and injustice. Ambedkar calls for a radical restructuring of Indian society, advocating for the complete annihilation of caste to establish a truly democratic and just society. This comparison highlights the tension between Gandhi's belief in the positive moral role of religion and Ambedkar's critique of religion as a source of oppression.

Nehru's *The Discovery of India* (1946) offers another perspective by focusing on India's cultural and historical heritage. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru approaches religion from a secular standpoint, acknowledging its cultural significance but arguing for its separation from politics. He views religion as a cultural force that

has shaped Indian civilization but insists that India's progress should be guided by secularism, scientific temper, and democratic values rather than religious principles. Nehru's vision contrasts with Gandhi's integration of religion into governance, illustrating differing views on how religion should interact with the state. While Gandhi sees religion as essential for moral governance, Nehru believes in maintaining a clear boundary between religion and politics to ensure a pluralistic and inclusive democracy.

M.M. Thomas's *Gandhi and Religion* (1964) provides further insight into Gandhi's religious philosophy and its influence on his social and political actions. Thomas explores Gandhi's interpretations of Hinduism and his efforts to promote interfaith harmony, which were central to his approach to social issues like untouchability and poverty. When compared with Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, Thomas's analysis shows the contrast between Gandhi's use of religion to foster social change and Ambedkar's view that religion, particularly Hinduism, perpetuates social inequalities and must be reformed or abandoned for true democracy to flourish. This discussion deepens our understanding of the debate on whether religion can be a force for positive social change or if it inherently maintains oppressive structures.

B.N. Pande's *The Hindu Renaissance and Its Apologetic* (1920-1940) (1975) and Sunil Khilnani's *The Idea of India* (1997) offer broader historical and cultural contexts that frame the ideas of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar. Pande examines the intellectual and cultural revival of Hinduism in the early 20th century, which influenced Gandhi's use of Hindu traditions to inspire his vision for India. Khilnani, on the other hand, explores the idea of India as a pluralistic democracy, highlighting how the country's historical and cultural diversity shapes its democratic ethos and presents challenges in balancing religious identity with democratic principles. Comparing these works reveals how the resurgence of Hinduism influenced political thought in India and underscores the ongoing struggle to reconcile religious traditions with the needs of a modern, secular democratic state.

Discussion

In the Indian constitutional framework, the term 'Religion' is prominently featured, appearing explicitly 28 times. Each reference to 'Religion' is carefully positioned to underscore a crucial principle: religion should not directly influence the functions of the state. Instead, the focus is on the state's role in safeguarding the citizens' rights to practice and choose their own religious beliefs. The frequent mentions of religion in the Constitution reflect the framers' deep concern about the potential for religious issues to disrupt the democratic system. Their approach demonstrates a profound respect for the philosophical underpinnings of various religious traditions while striving to prevent any religious bias from undermining democratic governance. It is to be noted that, the democracy was a foundational

principle of the nation, inherently understood rather than needing extensive elaboration. The emphasis on religion, therefore, reflects a concern about how religious issues might impact democratic processes, prompting the framers to carefully delineate the role of religion within the constitutional framework.

This careful balance between religion and democracy is reflective of India's diverse religious landscape. The question of whether a complete separation of religion from the state's functions is feasible arises naturally. If such separation were entirely achievable, it would imply that religion is purely a private matter, subject to rejection or modification at will. However, this perspective raises fundamental questions about the essence and role of religion in human experience. Mahatma Gandhi's reflections on religion offer valuable insights into this debate. Gandhi argued that religion is an inherent part of human life, asserting, "No man can live without religion. There are some who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying that he breathes but that he has no nos[2]." This statement underscores Gandhi's belief in the intrinsic role of religion in human existence, suggesting that even those who claim to reject religion are, in fact, engaged with its principles in some form.

Gandhi further elaborated on this notion, emphasizing that all humans, regardless of their religious stance, establish some form of relationship with the divine. He observed,

> Whether by reason, or by instinct, or by superstition, man acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine. The rankest agnostic or atheist does acknowledge the need of a moral principle, and associates something good with its observance and something bad with its non-observance. Bradlaugh, whose atheism is well known, always insisted on proclaiming his innermost conviction. He had to suffer a lot for thus speaking the truth, but he delighted in it and said that truth is its own reward. Not that he was quite insensible to the joy resulting from the observance of truth. This joy however is not at all worldly, but springs out of communion with the divine. That is why I have said that even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion.[3]

Gandhi's perspective highlights that religion, even when dismissed or minimized, remains a fundamental aspect of human life and social interaction.

From a Gandhian perspective, the role of religion is critically examined within the framework of a true democracy. Gandhi viewed democracy as grounded in the principle of equal rights for all citizens, which necessitates the active promotion of equal co-existence among diverse religious beliefs. The contemporary global scenario illustrates the detrimental effects of biased interpretations of religion on democratic rights. The pervasive intolerance witnessed worldwide, often justified in the name of religion, creates significant barriers to the effective functioning of

2. *Young India*, 23-1-'30, p. 25
3. Ibid

democratic systems. This underscores the need for promoting tolerance as an integral component of democratic governance. Gandhi's view on tolerance was not merely about passive acceptance but about actively engaging with and respecting diverse religious beliefs.

The normative theory of political philosophy often relegates religion to the private sphere, advocating for tolerance and religious freedoms. While this approach emphasizes individual rights and freedoms, it may not fully address the complexities of managing religious diversity in practice. The absence of constitutional protections for religious minorities can lead to their marginalization and potential societal tensions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar provided a pragmatic critique of this approach, highlighting the intersection of religion and power dynamics. Dr. Ambedkar observed that,

> …. religion is the source of power is illustrated by the history of India where the priest holds a sway over the common man often greater than the magistrate and where everything, even such things as strikes and elections, so easily take a religious turn and can so easily be given a religious twist.[4]

Ambedkar's observation that "Religion is the source of power" illustrates how religious identity can intersect with political authority, influencing societal structures[5]. His critique of Hinduism and the caste system reveals his concern about the use of religion to justify social inequalities. Ambedkar's critical stance on Hinduism was perceived as a challenge to Indian nationalism, leading to tensions with contemporaries, including Gandhi. As Banerjee explains,

> ...when Ambedkar criticized Hinduism, it offended many of his contemporaries, including Gandhi, because it appeared to be also a criticism of Indian nationalism. But this did not deter Ambedkar. He openly stated that a nationalism that excluded and persecuted a large section of the nation's people – namely, the Untouchables – was hardly nationalism worth its name.[6]

Ambedkar's commitment to social justice and equality was evident, even at the cost of alienating key allies and challenging established norms.

Ambedkar's approach to religion was complex. Sampathkumar says, "B.R. Ambedkar claimed himself to be an atheist and found no need of religion. But he was ready to use it as a mode of political action to attain political gains[7]." This statement reflects Ambedkar's strategic use of religious discourse to challenge

4. *Selected Works of Dr BR Ambedkar*, http://drambedkarbooks.wordpress.com p.92

5. Prathama Banerjee, "Ambedkar's Rethinking of Religion", *Ambedkar and Ambedkarism*, Pramod Ranjan (Ed) BFC Publication, 2022, pp.38

6. Ibid

7. M.Sampathkumar *Comparative Study B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi*, *Historical Research Letter*, vol. 23, 2024, p. 8

social injustices, even as he personally rejected religious belief. However, the term 'political gain' does not reflect any personal political gain; rather it is a matter of greater social interest in the case of Ambedkar.

Nehru's perspective on religion was shaped by his experiences and the philosophical influence of Gandhi. Nehru recognized the profound diversity of the Indian religious landscape and embraced what Bhargava describes as a faith in modern humanism and rationality. Bhargava notes,

> Nehru learnt from his own experience and from under the influence of Gandhi that this deep diversity was a major feature of the Indian religious landscape. Nehru himself embraced Religion—a faith in modern humanism and rationality. He held it and the values yielded by it, as the highest normative ideals, but he also realised that this Religion A was one among many others. He accepted that while each of these were sufficient, none were necessary for self-realisation.[8]

Nehru's acknowledgment of diverse religious perspectives underscores his commitment to secular pluralism and rational humanism.

The Indian Constitution, inspired by the principles of Gandhi and Nehru, reflects a deep commitment to secularism. It abolished untouchability and maintains neutrality in religious matters. As Guha highlights, "Inspired by Gandhi, and guided by Nehru, the Indian Constitution both abolished untouchability and proclaimed the state neutral in matters of religion".[9] This framework ensures that the state does not interfere with personal religious beliefs or endorse any particular religion, striving to maintain a balanced and equitable approach to religion in public life.

Gandhi's concept of Swaraj is particularly relevant within this discussion. Swaraj, as conceived by Gandhi, integrates political and economic independence with moral and social dimensions. This holistic vision for a self-reliant and equitable society reflects Gandhi's belief in a comprehensive approach to governance. He envisioned a nation where these elements formed a cohesive framework, asserting that the integrity of this framework depended on the truthfulness of each aspect. Gandhi's rejection of a singular religious concept in favor of a broader, inclusive approach emphasizes the importance of respecting diverse beliefs. As Gandhi noted,

> In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions.[10]

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8. Rajeev Bhargava, "Nehru against Nehruvians on Religion and Secularism", Economic & Political Weekly, February 25, 2017, p. 34-40

9. Ramchandra Guha, *India After Gandhi*, Pan Macmillan, 2017, p256

10. *Harijan*, 2-2-'34, p. 8

Nehru's concept of 'metaphysical democracy' also reflects his confidence in applying religious philosophies to foster equality and acceptance within society. He highlighted the strength of the Indo-Aryan culture in breaking down barriers of caste, class, and other internal and external differences. Nehru envisioned a society where individuals, perceiving a common spirit in everyone, would naturally treat each other with respect. While acknowledging that this was a theoretical concept, he believed it undeniably influenced life, creating an atmosphere of tolerance, reasonableness, and acceptance of free thought in matters of faith—a dominant feature of Indian culture. Nehru's concept of 'Metaphysical Democracy' aligns with Gandhi's philosophical foundations, both leaders advocating for a vision of society that transcends narrow religious boundaries.

In contrast, Dr. Ambedkar's approach was marked by a critical examination of religion's role in perpetuating social inequalities. He openly criticized the caste system and questioned the role of religious scriptures in justifying social injustices. Ambedkar engaged in debates, including with Gandhi, regarding the practical role of 'Sastras' in everyday life. His critique was not merely a personal rejection of religion but a broader challenge to how religious doctrines could be used to justify and perpetuate societal injustices.

The discussion of the views espoused by Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar remains highly relevant in the context of modern democracy. The persistence of intolerance and dishonesty within democratic systems raises concerns about the sustainability of democratic ideals. Modern literature attempts to address these issues, but the influence of contemporary forces often diminishes its effectiveness. The evolving structure of democracy in countries like India underscores the continued relevance of the philosophies of these great thinkers.

Dr. Ambedkar's predictions about the influence of religion on democratic systems have proven insightful. His observations about the intersection of religion and politics remain pertinent in addressing contemporary issues related to religious influence in governance. The complexities of managing religious diversity within a democratic framework highlight the ongoing relevance of Ambedkar's critique. The challenge of balancing respect for religious beliefs with the need for a secular, inclusive governance structure continues to be a central issue in democratic societies, particularly in a diverse nation like India.

Nehru's emphasis on secularism and rational humanism, combined with Gandhi's vision of a just and inclusive society, underscores the importance of integrating diverse religious perspectives while ensuring that the state remains neutral. Their combined philosophies offer a robust framework for navigating the delicate balance between respecting individual religious freedoms and maintaining a democratic governance structure.

The current structure of democracy in countries like India has evolved continuously, underscoring the relevance of the philosophies of great thinkers. The ill forces within the system that have sought dominance lack the transformative potential required for a significant change. The middle class, both victimized by

and complicit in the degradation of moral and ethical values, plays a pivotal role. As predicted by Dr. Ambedkar, religion has often sought to influence the democratic system. Yet, by embracing the philosophies of Gandhi and the ideals of Nehru, which reject bigotry and bias, the democratic system can be reformed. The continued relevance of the thoughts of these great theorists becomes evident in the pursuit of a third path for the future of democracy. This third path involves neither offering a distinct position to religion within democracy nor completely ignoring it as a way of life for the common people. Instead, it envisions a democratic system where religion becomes a philosophy of life rather than a divisive tool. Striking a delicate balance, this approach aims to integrate the principles of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar into a transformative vision for a democratic future that embraces pluralism, equality, and social justice.

Findings & Conclusion

From the above discussion it is come to the light that, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy continues to hold significant relevance in the context of modern democracy. His emphasis on understanding the philosophical foundations of religion, promoting tolerance through 'Ahimsa' (non-violence), and rejecting the idea of a single dominant religion remains impactful. Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of 'Metaphysical Democracy' is notable for its focus on applying religious philosophies to promote equality and acceptance, with a vision to dismantle barriers of caste and class by drawing strength from Indo-Aryan culture.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's critical stance on religion's role in sustaining the caste system is evident in his advocacy for questioning the sanctity of religious Sastras and debating their practical relevance in daily life. Concerns are raised about the challenges facing modern democracies, such as racism, intolerance, and the decline of ethical values, which threaten citizen accountability and have deeply penetrated democratic systems. Despite these challenges, there is an affirmation of the continuity of the democratic legacy, highlighting the importance of the philosophies of Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar in the ongoing evolution of democracy in countries like India.

The middle class is recognized as both a victim and a contributor to the erosion of moral values, holding significant power to either perpetuate this decline or actively engage in reforming the democratic system. Historical attempts by religion to control democratic systems, as observed by Ambedkar, are acknowledged, with a call for using the philosophies of Gandhi and Nehru to combat bigotry and bias, advocating for a reformative approach to religion's role in democracy.

Finally, a 'third way' is proposed for the future of democracy, seeking a balance where religion serves as a philosophy of life, avoiding both full integration into the democratic system and complete exclusion, thereby promoting a harmonious

coexistence of diverse beliefs. This may be helpful in eradicating the religious interference.

In summary, the discussion underscores the enduring relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy in modern democracy, focusing on understanding the philosophical base of religion, promoting tolerance through 'Ahimsa,' and rejecting the existence of one particular religion. Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of 'Metaphysical Democracy' is explored, emphasizing the application of religious philosophies for equality and acceptance. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's critique of religion's role in perpetuating the caste system is discussed, advocating for the destruction of beliefs in religious Sastras. Concerns are raised about challenges in modern democracies, including racism, intolerance, and ethical erosion, posing a threat to citizen accountability. Despite challenges, the discussion affirms the continuity of the democratic legacy, with Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar integral to its ongoing evolution. The role of the middle class is highlighted as a powerful force that can contribute to degradation or reform in the democratic system. Historical attempts of religion to control democracies are recognized, with a call to use Gandhi and Nehru's philosophies to combat bigotry and bias. The proposal of a 'third way' for democracy suggests finding a balance where religion becomes a philosophy of life, avoiding complete integration or exclusion, fostering harmonious coexistence of diverse beliefs.

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