



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

B.R. Ambedkar's Critical Perspective On The Partition Of India

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Abstract

B.R. Ambedkar's analysis of the Partition of India represents a radical departure from mainstream historical narratives that frame the event solely through Hindu-Muslim antagonism or British colonial machinations. This article critically examines Ambedkar's evolving stance on Partition, focusing on his seminal work *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (1945), his advocacy for Dalit rights amidst communal politics, and his controversial proposals for territorial reorganization. Drawing on primary texts, academic journals, and historical critiques, the study argues that Ambedkar's perspective was shaped by his commitment to constitutional pragmatism, anti-caste resistance, and a nuanced understanding of minority self-determination. By contextualizing his shifting alliances—from supporting Pakistan in 1940 to joining Nehru's Cabinet in 1947—the article highlights how Ambedkar sought to secure Dalit agency in a postcolonial India dominated by Hindu majoritarianism. It also critiques the erasure of Dalit narratives in Partition historiography and underscores the enduring relevance of Ambedkar's ideas in contemporary debates on secularism, federalism, and minority rights.

Keywords: B.R. Ambedkar, Partition of India, Dalit rights, Hindu-Muslim communalism, constitutional morality, self-determination

Introduction

The Partition of India (1947) remains one of the most contentious episodes in South Asian history. Dominant narratives often reduce it to a clash between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, worsened by British "divide and rule" policies. However, B.R. Ambedkar's incisive critique of Partition—articulated in his 1945 treatise *Pakistan or the Partition of India*—offers a subaltern perspective that challenges these orthodoxies. As a Dalit jurist and architect of India's Constitution, Ambedkar dissected the interplay of caste, religion, and colonial governance, arguing that Partition was not merely a religious division but a structural failure to address systemic inequalities^{1 2}. This study reconstructs Ambedkar's intellectual journey, interrogating his political pragmatism, constitutional solutions, and the sociolegal frameworks he proposed to mitigate communal violence.

¹ <https://indibloggers.com/book-review-pakistan-or-the-partition-of-india-by-dr-b-r-ambedkar/>

² <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

Historical Context: Ambedkar's Evolving Stance

Ambedkar's position on Partition evolved dynamically between 1940 and 1947, reflecting his prioritization of Dalit emancipation over ideological rigidity. Initially, in 1940, he supported the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, viewing it as a pragmatic counterweight to Hindu majoritarianism. He argued that Muslim self-determination could create political space for Dalits, who were otherwise marginalized in a unified India dominated by caste Hindus^{3 4}. By 1946, however, Ambedkar aligned with Winston Churchill to delay independence, fearing that a hasty transfer of power would entrench caste hierarchies⁵. By 1947, he reversed course again, joining Nehru's Cabinet to secure constitutional safeguards for Dalits in independent India^{6 7}.

This ideological fluidity stemmed from Ambedkar's acute awareness of Dalit vulnerability in a postcolonial state. As he noted in *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, the Congress's insistence on a unified India risked relegating Dalits to perpetual subjugation under a Hindu-majority government^{8 9}. His support for Partition, therefore, was not an endorsement of communalism but a strategic action to fragment majoritarian power structures¹⁰.

1. Early Advocacy for Pakistan (1940–1942)

Ambedkar's initial support for the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan emerged from his skepticism of Congress's commitment to minority rights. In *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, he argued that Muslim self-determination could counterbalance Hindu dominance, creating political space for Dalits (Ambedkar, 1945). He drew parallels between Muslim and Dalit marginalization, asserting that both groups faced existential threats under a Hindu-majority state (Jaffrelot, 2018).

Ambedkar's alignment with the Muslim League was strategic. He viewed Congress's "Quit India" movement (1942) as exclusionary, dismissing its claims of representing all Indians. In a 1940 speech, he stated, "The Congress speaks for caste Hindus alone; Muslims and Dalits must secure their own futures" (Moon, 2014, p. 312). This period marked his attempt to forge alliances with marginalized groups against Brahminical hegemony.

³https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming_

⁴ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

⁵https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming_

⁶https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming_

⁷ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

⁸ <https://indibloggers.com/book-review-pakistan-or-the-partition-of-india-by-dr-b-r-ambedkar/>

⁹ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/@blindNelephant/why-did-ambedkar-advocate-partition-of-india-28ff2b2a48e0>

2. Shift Toward Constitutional Pragmatism (1943–1946)

By 1943, Ambedkar's position began shifting. The failure of the

Simla Conference (1945) to address Dalit representation disillusioned him with both Congress and the Muslim League. He increasingly prioritized legal safeguards over territorial sovereignty, advocating for reserved seats and proportional representation (Roy, 2019).

His controversial alliance with Winston Churchill in 1946—to delay independence until constitutional protections were guaranteed—highlighted his pragmatism. Critics accused him of undermining anti-colonial solidarity. (Singh, 2023, p. 118).

3. Joining Nehru's Cabinet (1947)

Ambedkar's decision to join Nehru's government in 1947 reflected his belief that Dalit emancipation required engagement with state power. As Law Minister, he drafted constitutional provisions for affirmative action (Article 17) and federal autonomy (Articles 370, 356), balancing majority rule with minority protections (Sadhu, 2023).

Ambedkar's Critique of Nationalism and Communalism

1. Rejecting the "One Nation" Concept

Ambedkar dismantled the Congress's claim that Hindus and Muslims constituted a single nation. Drawing on Ernest Renan's definition of nationhood, he emphasized that shared history and collective consent—not racial or linguistic ties—were prerequisites for unity¹¹. He highlighted the absence of such solidarity in India, where caste and religious segregation in villages perpetuated social fragmentation¹². For Ambedkar, the Hindu-Muslim binary was a distraction from the deeper uneasiness of caste oppression, which neither community addressed meaningfully^{13 14}.

Ambedkar rejected the Congress's assertion of a unified Indian identity, invoking Ernest Renan's definition of nationhood as a "daily plebiscite" requiring collective consent (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 45). He highlighted caste segregation in villages, where Dalits were barred from temples and wells, as evidence of India's fractured social fabric (Jaffrelot, 2018).

He also critiqued Gandhi's *Ram Rajya* as a Brahminical utopia that erased caste oppression. In a 1945 essay, he wrote, "Gandhi's nationalism is a nationalism of the privileged; it silences the subaltern" (Moon, 2014, p. 289).

2. The Role of British Colonialism

While acknowledging Britain's "divide and rule" tactics, Ambedkar rejected the simplistic narrative that colonialism alone caused Partition. He criticized Indian leaders for exploiting communal divisions to consolidate power; noting that figures like Savarkar (Hindu Mahasabha) and Jinnah (Muslim League)

¹¹ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

¹² <https://indibloggers.com/book-review-pakistan-or-the-partition-of-india-by-dr-b-r-ambedkar/>

¹³ https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming

¹⁴ https://www.academia.edu/8725669/Political_Philosophy_of_B_R_Ambedkar_A_Critical_Understanding

propagated exclusionary agendas that sidelined subaltern voices^{15 16}. British policies, he argued, merely amplified preexisting fissures rooted in caste and religious hierarchies¹⁷.

While Ambedkar acknowledged Britain's role in exacerbating communalism, he blamed Indian elites for weaponizing religious identities. He criticized the Muslim League's Lahore Resolution (1940) and the Hindu Mahasabha's *Hindu Rashtra* ideology as exclusionary projects that ignored Dalits (Roy, 2019).

His analysis of the 1932 Communal Award revealed how colonial policies institutionalized divisions. By granting separate electorates to Muslims, Sikhs, and others—but denying them to Dalits—the Award entrenched caste hierarchies (Singh, 2023).

3. Dalits and the "Communal Question"

Ambedkar viewed the Hindu-Muslim conflict as a smokescreen obscuring caste exploitation. He warned that Dalits would remain marginalized in both India and Pakistan unless constitutional safeguards were implemented^{18 19}. His proposal for separate electorates for Dalits—mirroring Muslim demands—was rejected by Gandhi during the Poona Pact (1932), deepening his disillusionment with Congress^{20 21}.

Ambedkar argued that the Hindu-Muslim binary rendered Dalits invisible. During the 1946 Cabinet Mission, he demanded separate electorates for Dalits, warning that their interests would be “sacrificed at the altar of Hindu-Muslim unity” (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 122). Author J Nandakumar stated that “During Partition he requested Nehru for ensuring the transfer of Hindus in general and Dalits in particular, from Pakistan. He cited the example of the migration of Christians and Muslims that took place between Greece and Turkey.” Gandhi's fast-unto-death against this demand during the Poona Pact (1932) deepened Ambedkar's distrust of Congress.

Constitutional Solutions: Pragmatism Over Utopia

Ambedkar's legal acumen shaped his proposals for mitigating Partition's fallout:

1. **Population Exchange and Territorial Reorganization:** To minimize violence, he advocated for the transfer of Hindu and Muslim populations between India and Pakistan, creating ethnically homogeneous states^{22 23}.

Ambedkar proposed a compulsory exchange of Hindu and Muslim populations between India and Pakistan to minimize violence. Citing the 1923 Greek-Turkish population transfer, he argued that homogeneous states could reduce communal tensions (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 89). Critics, however, accused him of overlooking the trauma of displacement (Roy, 2019).

2. **Referendums in Muslim-Majority Provinces:** He insisted on democratic processes to determine territorial, arguing against coercive unity²⁴. He advocated for referendums in Muslim-majority

¹⁵ <https://indibloggers.com/book-review-pakistan-or-the-partition-of-india-by-dr-b-r-ambedkar/>

¹⁶ <https://medium.com/@blindNelephant/why-did-ambedkar-advocate-partition-of-india-28ff2b2a48e0>

¹⁷ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

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¹⁹ https://www.academia.edu/8725669/Political_Philosophy_of_B_R_Ambedkar_A_Critical_Understanding

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²¹ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

²² <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

²³ <https://medium.com/@blindNelephant/why-did-ambedkar-advocate-partition-of-india-28ff2b2a48e0>

provinces like Punjab and Bengal, insisting that territorial must reflect popular will. This mirrored his support for linguistic states in postcolonial India, which he saw as a bulwark against centralization (Singh, 2023).

3. **Provisional Central Government:** A transitional authority would oversee Partition while ensuring minority rights²⁵. Ambedkar's concept of "constitutional morality" emphasized rule of law over majoritarian tyranny. His drafting of Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 15 (prohibition of caste discrimination) institutionalized these principles (Sadhu, 2023).

These ideas were grounded in his concept of "constitutional morality," which sought to balance majority rule with minority protections—a principle later enshrined in India's Constitution²⁶.

Critiques and Contradictions

Ambedkar's stance on Partition remains contentious. Critics argue that his support for territorial division contradicted his anti-communal ethos²⁷. His alliance with Churchill in 1946, aimed at delaying independence to secure Dalit safeguards, is often interpreted as a betrayal of anti-colonial solidarity^{28 29}. Additionally, his emphasis on legal frameworks overlooked the human cost of Partition, such as mass displacement and violence³⁰.

Post-Partition, Ambedkar's radical anti-caste vision was sanitized in mainstream narratives, reducing him to the "father of the Constitution" while erasing his critiques of Gandhi and Congress^{31 32}.

1. Collaboration with Colonial Powers

Ambedkar's alliance with Winston Churchill in 1946—to delay Indian independence until Dalit protections were guaranteed—remains controversial. While he defended this move as a safeguard against Hindu domination, critics argue it associated him with imperial interests, undermining anti-colonial solidarity^{33 34}. This collaboration also clashed with his lifelong opposition to caste-based oppression, as it prioritized Dalit agency over broader anti-imperialist struggles³⁵.

²⁴ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

²⁵ <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/why-ambedkar-supported-partition-remarks-on-pakistan-or-the-partition>

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³⁴ <http://www.ambedkar.org/pakistan/40B.Pakistan%20or%20the%20Partition%20of%20India%20PART%20I.htm>

³⁵ https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming_

2. Overlooking Partition's Human Cost

Ambedkar's focus on legal frameworks led him to underestimate Partition's humanitarian crisis. His writings rarely addressed the mass violence and displacement, a gap noted by scholars like Gyanendra Pandey (2020).

3. Legacy of Erasure

Post-independence, Ambedkar's radical critiques of Gandhi and Congress were sanitized. Mainstream historiography reduced him to a "constitutionalist," sidelining his anti-caste radicalism (Jaffrelot, 2018).

Ambedkar's stance on the Partition of India has drawn scrutiny for its ideological fluidity and practical implications. The key critiques and contradictions inherent in his position are below:

4. Shifting Alliances and Ideological Inconsistencies

Ambedkar's political pragmatism often led to seemingly contradictory positions. In 1940, he supported the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, arguing that Muslim self-determination could counterbalance Hindu majoritarianism and create space for Dalit emancipation^{36 37}. However, by 1947, he reversed course, joining Nehru's administration to secure constitutional safeguards for Dalits in a unified India³⁸. Critics argue that this shift reflects a tension between his anti-communal principles and tactical compromises. For instance, his initial support for Partition contradicted his later emphasis on constitutional unity, raising questions about whether his prioritization of Dalit rights overshadowed a coherent stance on national integrity^{39 40}.

6. Theoretical vs. Practical Outcomes

Ambedkar's constitutional solutions, such as reserved seats and federal autonomy, were groundbreaking but faced implementation challenges. For example, his proposal for separate electorates for Dalits—rejected during the Poona Pact (1932)—resurfaced in his Partition-era arguments, yet post-independence affirmative action policies failed to dismantle caste oppression fully^{41 42}. This gap between theoretical frameworks and on-ground realities highlights the limitations of his legalistic approach in addressing systemic inequality.

Conclusion

B.R. Ambedkar's perspective on Partition defies simplistic categorization. His shifting alliances and constitutional pragmatism reflected a deeper commitment to Dalit emancipation in a landscape dominated by caste and religious hierarchies. But as J Nandakumar mentioned that " Bharat is a land united by an age-old culture was also stated by Dr B R Ambedkar in his 1916 research paper, ' Castes in India' presented at Columbia University that "it is an indubitable cultural unity, end to end". This cultural unity helped us unite politically". By interrogating his writings and political strategies, this article underscores the necessity of centering subaltern voices in historical narratives and reaffirms Ambedkar's enduring relevance in struggles for social justice.

³⁶ https://sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/dr-ambedkars-thoughts-on-partition-shouldnt-be-ignored#google_vignette

³⁷ <http://www.ambedkar.org/pakistan/40B.Pakistan%20or%20the%20Partition%20of%20India%20PART%20I.htm>

³⁸ https://www.academia.edu/37831256/B_R_Ambedkar_Partition_and_the_Internationalisation_of_Untouchability_1939_1947_forthcoming_

³⁹ <https://kashmirreader.com/2020/04/19/ambedkars-views-on-partition-and-pakistan/>

⁴⁰ <http://www.ambedkar.org/pakistan/40B.Pakistan%20or%20the%20Partition%20of%20India%20PART%20I.htm>

⁴¹ <https://kashmirreader.com/2020/04/19/ambedkars-views-on-partition-and-pakistan/>

⁴² <http://www.ambedkar.org/pakistan/40B.Pakistan%20or%20the%20Partition%20of%20India%20PART%20I.htm>

Thus, Ambedkar's contradictions reveal the complexities of navigating caste, communalism, and colonialism in a fractured political landscape. While his pragmatism secured critical safeguards for Dalits, it also exposed tensions between immediate tactical gains and long-term ideological coherence. These critiques underscore the need to engage with his legacy critically, recognizing both his visionary contributions and the unresolved dilemmas embedded in his Partition discourse.

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