Re-reading the Poona Pact: Roy's Interpretation of the Gandhi–Ambedkar Conflict on Political Representation

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Abstract:

This research paper explores Arundhati Roy's reinterpretation of the 1932 Poona Pact in her well known non-fiction The Doctor and the Saint: Caste,Race and Annihilation of Caste and the book focuses on the tensions between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar regarding political representation for the depressed and marginalized classes (now Dalits). Roy argues that the Poona Pact was a turning point that shaped India's democratic structure while simultaneously limiting Dalit political autonomy and she sees the Pact as giving structure to Indian democracy while simultaneously undercutting Dalit political freedom.

Through close reading, historical contextualisation, and ideological comparison, this paper analyses how Roy exposes contradictions in Gandhi's moral politics and foregrounds Ambedkar's critique of caste hierarchy and reveals the flaws or inconsistencies in Mahatma Gandhi's moral and political ideas and also Roy brings attention to, or emphasizes, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's strong criticism of the caste system (caste hierarchy). The paper concludes that Roy's intervention challenges dominant nationalist historiography and resurrects the political significance of Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates as a form of emancipation and it directly disagrees with and questions the common, established way that Indian nationalism and history are usually taught and understood.

It brings back and highlights the historical importance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's original demand for "separate electorates." The paper frames Ambedkar's demand (separate electorates) as a way for Dalits to achieve true freedom (emancipation) and control their own political voice (self-representation), rather than relying on the general electoral system.

Keywords: *Poona Pact, Arundhati Roy, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Political Representation, Caste, Dalit Politics.*

Introduction:

The Poona Pact of 1932 remains one of the most contested events in the political history of India. It brought two major leaders—M.K. Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar—into direct conflict over the future of political rights for the Depressed Classes. The event was a direct showdown between two major leaders, M.K. Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, because they completely disagreed on the future political rights and representation for the Depressed Classes (now known as Dalits).The agreement forced a compromise that many felt either undermined Gandhi's vision of unity or limited Ambedkar's vision of true political power for the Dalits.

Roy's reading reframes the Poona Pact not as a moral victory of unity but as a political concession forced upon Ambedkar under extreme pressure. By contextualising caste politics and revisiting the strategies of both leaders, Roy offers a radical critique that has significant implications for contemporary debates on caste, democracy, and representation.By looking closely at the politics of caste and the methods of both Gandhi and Ambedkar, Roy provides a powerful, revolutionary criticism that is highly relevant to today's arguments about caste and Indian democracy.

Research Methodology:

This research uses a qualitative textual analysis approach, drawing upon:

1. Close Reading of Arundhati Roy's The Doctor and the Saint to understand her interpretation of events, language, and ideological framing.

2. Historical-Analytical Method using primary sources such as the Poona Pact text, Ambedkar's What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables, and Gandhi's writings.

3. Comparative Analysis of Gandhi's and Ambedkar's differing views on political representation.

4. Secondary Literature Review including scholarly interpretations from Dalit studies, political theory, and modern Indian history.

This methodology allows for a balanced examination of Roy's interpretative strategies, the historical debate itself, and the long-term effects of the Poona Pact.

Analysis and Discussion:

1. Historical Background to the Poona Pact

The Poona Pact emerged from a major constitutional moment during British rule. The Communal Award of August 1932 granted separate electorates to minorities, including the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar supported the Award because it enabled Dalits to elect their own representatives without interference from upper-caste Hindus.The Communal Award gave separate voting groups (electorates) to several minority groups, including the Depressed Classes (Dalits).

Ambedkar's Support: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly supported this Award.

Why: He believed it was essential because it meant Dalits could elect their own representatives in government without being controlled or influenced by upper-caste Hindus. This was seen as the path to true political power for the community.

Gandhi, however, saw separate electorates as a threat to Hindu unity and began a fast-unto-death in Yerawada Jail. The immense emotional pressure created by the fast forced Ambedkar to negotiate. The result was the Poona Pact, which replaced separate electorates with reserved seatsan arrangement Roy describes as politically diluted and morally coercive.The final agreement, the Poona Pact, got rid of the separate electorates and replaced them with reserved seats (Dalits got a certain number of seats, but everyone in the constituency voted for them).

Roy's View:

Roy describes this final arrangement as:

Diluted: It weakened the Dalits' true political power. Morally coercive: It was forced upon Ambedkar using emotional and moral blackmail (Gandhi's fast). Roy argues that the fast was not merely a moral tool but a political weapon wielded by someone with far greater social power. For her, the Pact symbolises the

compromise of Dalit political self-determination under the weight of Gandhi's nationalistic agenda. Arundhati Roy argues that Gandhi's fast was not just a moral tactic, but a powerful political tool because of his huge social influence.For Roy, the Poona Pact represents the moment when the Dalits' ability to determine their own political future (self-determination) was compromised and crushed by the overwhelming importance of Gandhi's larger national goal of Hindu unity.

2. Gandhi's Moral Politics vs. Ambedkar's Democratic Demand

Roy's interpretation highlights a fundamental ideological tension:

Gandhi's Position: caste should be reformed but not annihilated. Untouchables were "Harijans" who needed uplift through moral persuasion. Separate electorates would divide Hindu society. Roy argues that Gandhi's stance maintained the cultural authority of caste Hindus. His use of moral language—purity, unity, the need to "save Hinduism"—reveals a deep-rooted investment in preserving social harmony over structural justice. Roy claims that Gandhi's use of moral concepts like:

Purity:

Unity:

The need to "save Hinduism" and it shows that he was deeply committed to maintaining social peace and harmony among all Hindus, rather than focusing on achieving fundamental structural justice (fixing the deep-seated problems of the caste system) for the Dalits. Dalits required independent political power, not paternalistic uplift. Separate electorates were essential for authentic representation.

Caste is a system of graded inequality that cannot be morally reformed.According to Roy, Ambedkar's political modernism was grounded in rationality, individual rights, and constitutional equality. The Poona Pact betrayed his principle that oppressed groups should choose their ownleaders.Insimple words, Roy argues that the Poona Pact was a betrayal of Ambedkar's core belief: that oppressed groups must have the right to choose their own political leaders.

3. Roy's Interpretation of the Fast as Coercion:

A crucial contribution of Roy is her reinterpretation of Gandhi's fast: Roy frames it as a form of emotional blackmail rather than a spiritual protest.She argues that Ambedkar faced a situation where Gandhi's death would provoke nationwide violence against Dalits.Thus, the Pact was not a compromise but a capitulation under duress.Roy challenges the dominant nationalist narrative that treats Gandhi's fast as an act of moral heroism. Instead, she exposes the power imbalance: Gandhi had the symbolic power of the nation, while Ambedkar represented the most oppressed community. she points out the huge difference in power between the two leaders:

Gandhi's Power: Gandhi held the symbolic power and influence of the entire Indian nation behind him. Ambedkar's Position: Ambedkar, in contrast, represented only the most oppressed and powerless community (the Dalits).Roy argues that the fast was used to force Ambedkar into a settlement because of this unequal balance of power.This reframing is radical because it reverses the traditional moral hierarchy between the "saintly" Gandhi and the "political" Ambedkar.

4. The Poona Pact and Its Consequences:

Roy argues that the Pact had long-term consequences:

a. Dilution of Dalit Autonomy: Reserved seats meant Dalit candidates were elected by "general" voters—mostly upper-caste.This made Dalit leaders dependent on dominant castes, weakening their political independence.

b. The Rise of Congress-Controlled Dalit Politics: Dalit representation became mediated by upper-caste political structures. Roy notes that this helped the Congress consolidate power while claiming to represent all Indians.

c. Structural Problems in Modern Indian Democracy: The Pact's legacy is visible in today's caste-based political inequalities. Dalits still struggle for independent political voice despite formal reservations. Roy contends that Ambedkar's original proposal would have created a radically different democratic architecture where the most oppressed had autonomous representation. Roy believes Ambedkar's proposal would have given the most oppressed groups (Dalits) independent political power (autonomous representation).

5. Roy's Critique of Historiography: Who Gets Remembered?

Roy also critiques how history is written: Gandhi is celebrated as the "Father of the Nation," while Ambedkar's radical critique is often softened or ignored.Textbooks and popular discourse portray the Pact as a harmonious nationalist victory.Roy challenges this selective memory, calling it an "erasure" of Dalit political resistance.

Her intervention aims to restore Ambedkar as a central intellectual figure whose ideas remain crucial for contemporary struggles against caste discrimination.

6. Relevance for Contemporary India:

The debate Roy revives is not historical alone—it has living implications.

a. Debates on reservation policy: The Pact laid the foundation for reservation, but in a form that compromised Dalit autonomy.

b. Contemporary caste violence: Roy suggests that the inability to challenge caste hierarchy is rooted in the moral contradictions embodied in Gandhi's stance.

c. Dalit political movements: Modern Dalit parties' struggle for independent political voice echoes Ambedkar's original demand.Through this connection, Roy positions the Poona Pact as a key to understanding India's present social and political inequalities.

Conclusion:

Arundhati Roy's reinterpretation of the Poona Pact reopens a debate that mainstream historiography tends to simplify. Her reading reveals the unequal moral and political power that shaped the encounter between Gandhi and Ambedkar. While Gandhi sought unity and moral reform, Ambedkar fought for political autonomy and structural justice. Roy's interpretation shows that the meeting between Gandhi and Ambedkar was shaped by a massive difference in moral and political power:

Gandhi's Goal: He focused on achieving Hindu unity and moral reform (trying to change hearts).

Ambedkar's Goal: He fought for true political independence (autonomy) and structural justice (fixing the deep, unequal system).

Roy highlights that Gandhi's influence ultimately overshadowed Ambedkar's demand for genuine political power.Roy argues that the Pact, shaped under coercive circumstances, diluted Ambedkar's vision of self-representation and reinforced the dominance of upper-caste politics within India's democratic framework. Roy argues that the Poona Pact, which was agreed to under pressure (coercive circumstances), ended up weakening Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's idea that Dalits should choose their own leaders (self-representation).

The Impact:

Ultimately, Roy claims the Pact helped to cement the control (reinforced the dominance) of upper-caste politics within the new democracy of India.By challenging Gandhi's saintly image and foregrounding Ambedkar's rational critique of caste, Roy provides a counter-narrative that questions the foundations of Indian democracy. She questions the traditional, saintly image of M.K. Gandhi. Highlights Ambedkar: She brings attention to and supports Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's logical criticism of the caste system.The overall result is that her view questions the fundamental basis (foundations) of how Indian democracy was first established.Her interpretation is not merely an academic exercise—it is a political intervention that urges contemporary India to revisit its past honestly in order to confront its present inequalities.In simple words, the significance of Arundhati Roy's interpretation is that it is more than just a historical study; it is a political action meant to:

Challenge Modern India: Urge people in modern India to look truthfully at their history.

Fix Current Problems: Force them to deal with the inequalities and injustices that still exist today.

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