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Democratic Ethics in an Age of Polarisation: Gandhi and the Limits of Tolerance

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Abstract

In many contemporary democracies, political life is increasingly marked by deep ideological divisions, hostility between political camps, and declining levels of civic trust. While electoral institutions continue to function, the ethical foundations that sustain democratic life which are tolerance, restraint, and respect for dissent appears increasingly fragile. This article revisits Mahatma Gandhi's conception of tolerance and examines its relevance in an era characterised by political polarisation and democratic anxiety. Gandhi's ideas of ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truth) frame tolerance not as passive acceptance but as a disciplined ethical practice grounded in humility, self-restraint, and recognition of the moral dignity of others. From this perspective, dissent is not merely permitted within democracy but becomes a moral responsibility. At the same time, Gandhi's tolerance reveals important limitations when confronted with entrenched social hierarchies, material inequalities, and institutional fragility. This article examines Ambedkar's and Marx's ideas to critique Gandhi's approach, arguing that his ethical framework, while morally attractive, doesn't fully address the underlying structural causes of political polarization. Ambedkar's critique of caste demonstrates the limits of moral persuasion in the context of institutionalised inequality, while Marxist analysis draws attention to the role of economic structures in shaping political conflict. Moreover, renewing democratic life requires a synthesis of ethical discipline, constitutional safeguards, and socio-economic transformation.

Keyword

Gandhi, democratic ethics, tolerance, dissent, polarisation, Ambedkar, Marxism.

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1. Introduction

Democracy in the twenty-first century presents a curious paradox. On the one hand, democratic institutions remain formally intact in many parts of the world. Elections are regularly conducted, political parties compete for power, and citizens continue to participate actively in public life. On the other hand, there has been an increasing erosion of the ethical norms that enable democracy to function effectively. Political disagreement is often expressed through hostility, suspicion, and moral condemnation rather than through reasoned debate.

Political scientists describe this phenomenon as affective polarisation. Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer argue in their influential article *Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy* (2018) that polarisation occurs when citizens begin to view members of opposing political groups with deep emotional hostility rather than as legitimate democratic rivals (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018, p. 18). Under such conditions, democratic erosion rarely begins with the formal breakdown of institutions. Instead, it often emerges gradually through the weakening of informal norms that sustain democratic life.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt make a similar argument in *How Democracies Die* (2018) They suggest that democratic systems depend not only on constitutional rules but also on unwritten norms such as mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. When these norms begin to disappear, democratic institutions become increasingly vulnerable (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 102).

The recent technological changes have intensified these trends. Cass Sunstein argues in *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (2009) that individuals who interact mainly with like-minded groups often adopt more extreme views over time (Sunstein, 2009, p. 45). Similarly, Zeynep Tufekci notes in *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017) that digital platforms frequently amplify outrage and accelerate the spread of polarising narratives (Tufekci, 2017, p. 73).

Within classical liberal democratic theory, the challenge of political disagreement has traditionally been addressed through institutional frameworks. John Rawls, for instance, argues in *Political Liberalism* (1993) that pluralistic societies can maintain stability through the idea of public reason and an overlapping consensus among citizens who hold different moral doctrines (Rawls, 1993, p. 133). Likewise, Jurgen Habermas emphasises in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996) that democratic legitimacy arises through processes of deliberative communication among citizens (Habermas, 1996, p. 107).

Yet these theoretical frameworks implicitly assume the presence of certain ethical dispositions. Democratic institutions function effectively only when citizens recognise their political opponents as legitimate participants in public life. When such ethical commitments weaken, institutional mechanisms alone may not be sufficient to sustain democratic practice.

It is precisely this ethical dimension of politics that Mahatma Gandhi sought to address. Gandhi approached politics not merely as a struggle for power but as a moral practice rooted in truth, self-discipline, and non-violence. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi argues that modern civilisation encourages domination rather than moral restraint and thereby produces subtle forms of violence within political life (Gandhi, 1997, p. 44). Political disagreement, in his view, should not lead to hatred or coercion but rather to dialogue grounded in humility and respect.

Nevertheless, Gandhian political thought has also been subject to important criticism. B. R. Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste* argued that deeply entrenched social hierarchies such as caste could not be dismantled through moral reform alone but required structural transformation and constitutional safeguards (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 50). Similarly, Karl Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* emphasise the role of economic structures in shaping political conflict and inequality (Marx & Engels,1978, p. 21).

These critiques suggest that while Gandhian ethics illuminates the moral foundations of democratic life, it may not fully address the structural sources of political polarisation.

2.Political Polarisation in Contemporary Democracies

Political polarisation has become one of the defining features of contemporary democratic politics. At its most basic level, polarisation refers to a process through which political attitudes, identities, and ideological positions move further apart, creating deep divisions within society. Instead of occupying a broad spectrum of moderate views, political positions increasingly cluster at opposing extremes, leaving limited space for compromise or dialogue.

Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer define polarisation as a situation in which society becomes divided into sharply opposed camps that view one another as existential threats rather than legitimate political competitors (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018, p. 18). Under such circumstances, political identities often become intertwined with social identities such as religion, ethnicity, class, or culture. Political disagreement thus spills over into everyday social relations. Scholars often distinguish between ideological polarisation and affective polarisation. Ideological polarisation refers to increasing differences in policy preferences or

ideological beliefs. Affective polarisation, by contrast, involves the emotional hostility individuals develop toward members of opposing political groups. Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood observe that such hostility frequently manifests as distrust, social distancing, and moral condemnation directed at political opponents (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 693).

The rise of affective polarisation poses serious challenges for democratic governance. When citizens begin to view their opponents as immoral or illegitimate, the willingness to engage in compromise diminishes significantly. Levitsky and Ziblatt note that democratic systems depend not only on formal rules but also on norms such as mutual toleration and institutional restraint (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 102).

Several structural factors have contributed to the intensification of polarisation. Changes in media ecosystems have played a particularly important role. As Sunstein argues, individuals increasingly consume information within ideologically homogeneous communities, reinforcing existing beliefs and encouraging more extreme positions (Sunstein, 2009, p. 45).

Digital platforms further amplify these dynamics. Tufekci observes that social media algorithms frequently reward emotionally charged content, thereby increasing the visibility of polarising narratives (Tufekci, 2017, p. 73).

Economic transformations have also contributed to political division. David Harvey argues in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) that neoliberal economic policies have widened socio-economic disparities and generated new forms of social insecurity (Harvey, 2005, p. 16). Economic inequality often fuels resentment that is expressed through polarised political discourse.

Consequently, the challenge posed by polarisation is not only institutional but also ethical. Democracies depend on citizens who are willing to recognise the legitimacy of opposing viewpoints even when they strongly disagree. When such ethical commitments disappear, democratic procedures may remain intact while the spirit of democracy gradually erodes.

3.The Gandhi–Ambedkar Debate: Tolerance, Caste, and the Limits of Moral Reform

One of the most significant critiques of Gandhian tolerance came from the writings and political thought of B. R. Ambedkar. While Gandhi emphasised ethical transformation as the primary path to social reform, Ambedkar argued that deeply entrenched systems of domination, particularly caste could not be dismantled through appeals to tolerance alone.

Gandhi believed that caste discrimination could be addressed through moral reform within Hindu society. Although he condemned untouchability, he initially interpreted varna as a division of labour rather than a fundamentally oppressive structure. In his journal *Harijan* (1993), Gandhi described untouchability as a moral crime within Hindu society and urged upper-caste Hindus to eradicate it through spiritual and social reform (Gandhi, 1933, Harijan, p. 11).

Ambedkar, however, fundamentally rejected this interpretation. In *Annihilation of Caste,* he argued that caste was not merely a social prejudice but a deeply entrenched system of graded inequality embedded within Indian society (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 50). As Ambedkar famously wrote, 'Caste is not merely a division of labour; it is also a division of labourers' (p. 66). For Ambedkar, the persistence of caste hierarchy demonstrated that moral persuasion alone could not dismantle systems of structural inequality. Instead, social justice required legal safeguards, political representation, and institutional reform.

The disagreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar became particularly visible during the debates surrounding the communal award of 1932, in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* which proposed separate electorates for the depressed classes. Ambedkar supported separate electorates because he believed they would ensure independent political representation for historically marginalised communities. Gandhi opposed the proposal, arguing that separate electorates would fragment Hindu society and weaken the nationalist struggle against colonial rule. His fast unto death while imprisoned in Yerwada Jail eventually led to the Poona Pact of 1932, which replaced separate electorates with reserved seats in a joint electorate system. Although the agreement increased the number of reserved seats, Ambedkar later expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome. He argued that the rhetoric of unity often concealed the persistence of caste domination within Indian society (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 134).

Ambedkar's conception of democracy differed significantly from Gandhi's ethical approach. In his speeches in the Constituent Assembly, later compiled in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Ambedkar argued that democracy must be understood as a mode of social life grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar, 1994, p. 298).

The Gandhi–Ambedkar debate thus highlights the limits of tolerance as a democratic principle. While tolerance may enable coexistence among diverse communities, it cannot by itself eliminate deeply embedded systems of inequality. Democratic justice requires both ethical transformation and structural reform.

4.Gandhi's Conception of Tolerance: Ethical Discipline and Democratic Responsibility

Gandhi's understanding of tolerance cannot be separated from the broader ethical framework that shaped his political thought. For Gandhi, tolerance was not merely a political virtue required for coexistence in plural societies; it was a deeply moral principle rooted in truth, non-violence, and humility. Unlike many liberal accounts of tolerance that emphasise passive acceptance of difference, Gandhi viewed tolerance as an active practice of ethical self-discipline.

At the heart of Gandhi's conception of tolerance lies the principle of ahimsa, or non-violence. Gandhi believed that violence extends beyond physical harm and includes attitudes or practices that deny the dignity of others. In *Hind Swaraj*, he argued that modern civilisation promotes domination, competition, and exploitation, thereby producing subtle forms of violence within political and social life (Gandhi,1997, p. 44). For Gandhi, the practice of tolerance requires resisting this impulse toward domination and recognising the moral worth of every individual.

Tolerance, in Gandhi's thought, is therefore closely connected to self-restraint. Rather than seeking to defeat opponents through coercion, individuals must cultivate the capacity to engage with disagreement without hostility. Gandhi repeatedly emphasised that political struggle should not lead to hatred of one's adversary. In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, he reflects on the importance of separating opposition to injustice from hostility toward individuals, arguing that 'hate the sin and not the sinner' should guide political action (Gandhi, 2008, p. 234).

Another important foundation of Gandhian tolerance is his conception of truth, or Satya. Gandhi believed that truth ultimately exists but that no human being can claim complete knowledge of it. Because individuals possess only a partial understanding, they must remain open to alternative perspectives. This recognition of human fallibility creates the basis for tolerance. Akeel Bilgrami in *Gandhi's Integrity* (2003) argues that Gandhi's commitment to truth implies a deep form of epistemic humility, requiring individuals to acknowledge the limitations of their own beliefs (Bilgrami, 2003, p. 39).

From this perspective, tolerance becomes an ethical response to uncertainty. If individuals cannot claim absolute possession of truth, they must approach disagreement with openness and humility. Bhikhu Parekh in *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* (1997) similarly observes that Gandhi's political philosophy was fundamentally pluralistic, encouraging dialogue across religious, cultural, and ideological differences (Parekh, 1997, p. 52).

Gandhi also connected tolerance with the practice of satyagraha, his distinctive method of non-violent resistance. Satyagraha, often translated as 'truth-force,' sought to challenge injustice without reproducing cycles of hatred or violence. Rather than coercing opponents, satyagraha attempted to appeal to their moral conscience. Gandhi believed that voluntary suffering undertaken by protesters could expose injustice and awaken ethical reflection among both oppressors and observers (Gandhi, 1997, p. 69).

In this sense, tolerance did not imply passivity. Gandhi strongly rejected the idea that tolerance meant accepting injustice or remaining silent in the face of oppression. On the contrary, he believed that dissent and resistance were essential components of moral politics. However, such resistance had to remain non-violent and guided by ethical discipline.

Gandhi's conception of tolerance, therefore, combines moral humility with active resistance to injustice. It emphasises the importance of engaging opponents with respect while simultaneously challenging unjust institutions and practices. In deeply polarised societies, this ethical framework offers a powerful reminder that democratic politics requires not only institutional procedures but also moral restraint and mutual recognition.

5.Marxist Critiques of Gandhian Ethics

While Gandhi's philosophy offers an important ethical perspective on democratic politics, it has also been criticised for insufficiently addressing the structural dimensions of power and inequality. Marxist theorists, in particular, argue that Gandhian emphasis on moral transformation and individual conscience may underestimate the role of economic structures in shaping political conflict.

Marxist theory views social and political institutions as deeply influenced by material relations of production. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that the economic organisation of society shapes political institutions, legal systems, and ideological beliefs (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 21). From this perspective, political conflicts often reflect underlying class antagonisms rooted in economic inequality.

Gandhi himself was critical of industrial capitalism and warned against the concentration of economic power. In *Hind Swaraj*, he criticised modern industrial civilisation for encouraging materialism and exploitation (Gandhi, 1997, p. 62). However, Gandhi's economic vision differed significantly from Marxist approaches. In *The Theory and Practice of Trusteeship,* he advocated revolutionary restructuring of economic systems, Gandhi proposed an alternative model based on decentralised

production, self-sufficient communities, and the principle of trusteeship. (Gandhi,1951, p.7-8)

The doctrine of trusteeship suggested that wealthy individuals should voluntarily use their resources for the benefit of society. Gandhi believed that moral persuasion could encourage economic elites to act responsibly toward the poor. However, Marxist critics argue that such reliance on voluntary ethical behaviour fails to address the structural mechanisms that produce economic inequality. (Gandhi,1951, p.10)

David Harvey demonstrates how modern capitalist systems often generate widening disparities in wealth and power (Harvey, 2005, p. 16). From a Marxist perspective, economic inequality is not simply a moral problem but a structural feature of capitalist economies. Addressing such inequality, therefore, requires institutional and political transformation rather than appeals to individual conscience.

Another Marxist criticism concerns the relationship between tolerance and class struggle. Marxist theory views political conflict as an inevitable feature of societies characterised by unequal control over economic resources. In such contexts, calls for tolerance may sometimes obscure or depoliticise legitimate struggles against exploitation.

From this perspective, Gandhian ethics risks framing structural conflicts as moral disagreements between individuals rather than as systemic problems embedded in economic institutions. While non-violence may help prevent cycles of retaliation, critics argue that it may also limit the ability of oppressed groups to challenge entrenched economic power.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Gandhian and Marxist thought is not entirely antagonistic. Both traditions share a concern with exploitation, inequality, and the moral consequences of modern industrial capitalism. Gandhi's critique of materialism and the Marxist analysis of capitalist exploitation both highlight the dangers of economic systems that prioritise profit over human dignity.

The key difference lies in their proposed solutions. Gandhi emphasised ethical transformation and decentralised social organisation, while Marxist theory emphasises structural change and collective control over economic resources. In the context of contemporary political polarisation, these perspectives highlight the importance of addressing both moral and material dimensions of democratic life.

A comprehensive approach to democratic ethics must therefore integrate insights from both traditions. Ethical principles such as tolerance and non-violence remain essential for sustaining democratic dialogue, but they must be complemented by

institutional reforms capable of addressing structural inequality. Without such reforms, appeals to tolerance alone may prove insufficient in societies marked by deep economic and social divisions.

6.Conclusion

The rise of political polarisation across contemporary democracies has exposed the fragile ethical foundations upon which democratic institutions ultimately depend. While constitutional structures and electoral procedures remain formally intact in many societies, the norms that sustain democratic coexistence such as mutual respect, restraint, and recognition of legitimate disagreement are increasingly under strain. In such circumstances, the question of democratic ethics becomes as important as institutional design.

Gandhi's political philosophy offers an important ethical perspective for addressing these challenges. His conception of tolerance, rooted in the principles of ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truth), emphasises humility, self-discipline, and respect for the dignity of political opponents. Gandhi reminds us that democracy is not merely a system of governance but a moral practice that requires citizens capable of engaging with disagreement without resorting to hatred or coercion. By framing dissent as a moral responsibility rather than a threat to political order, Gandhian ethics challenges the majoritarian tendencies that often accompany deeply polarised politics.

At the same time, the limitations of Gandhian tolerance become evident when viewed through the critical perspectives of Ambedkarite and Marxist thought. Ambedkar's analysis of caste demonstrates that systems of domination are not sustained merely through prejudice but through deeply embedded social and institutional structures. In such contexts, appeals to moral reform alone cannot dismantle structural inequality. As Ambedkar argued in *Annihilation of Caste*, genuine democracy requires the realisation of liberty, equality, and fraternity within the social order (Ambedkar, 2014, p. 50).

Similarly, Marxist critiques highlight the ways in which economic structures shape political conflict and social inequality. Political polarisation cannot always be understood simply as a failure of civic virtue; it is often rooted in material disparities, economic insecurity, and unequal access to power. Without addressing these structural conditions, calls for tolerance may risk masking deeper conflicts over resources and social justice.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that democratic renewal requires a more comprehensive understanding of democratic ethics. Gandhi's emphasis on moral restraint and non-violent engagement remains essential for sustaining dialogue

in plural societies. However, ethical discipline must be complemented by institutional safeguards and socio-economic reforms capable of addressing structural inequalities. In an age marked by ideological fragmentation, identity-based politics, and growing distrust in democratic institutions, the challenge is not simply to defend tolerance as a civic virtue. Rather, the task is to reimagine democratic ethics as a synthesis of moral responsibility, constitutional justice, and social equality. The dialogue between Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Marxist thought offers valuable resources for such a project. Ultimately, the future of democracy depends not only on the durability of its institutions but also on the ethical commitments of its citizens. A democratic society capable of accommodating deep disagreement must cultivate both the moral discipline emphasised by Gandhi and the structural justice advocated by Ambedkar and critical traditions. Only through this combination can democratic politics move beyond polarisation toward a more inclusive and resilient political order.

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