

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR AND NELSON MANDELA'S HUMANISTIC ACTIVISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

*Aezaz Ahamed**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19633428>

ABSTRACT

This research article explores the humanistic activism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Nelson Mandela, two leaders who fought systemic oppression in India and South Africa. Dr. Ambedkar's activism centered on annihilating caste and assertion for equality in constitutional democracy, while Nelson Mandela's struggle dismantled the apartheid system and emphasized reconciliation through Ubuntu. Though their strategies differed-Ambedkar relied on law and education, Nelson Mandela on forgiveness and unity-both leaders envisioned societies rooted in dignity and justice. Their comparative legacies highlight complementary models of social justice: structural transformation and moral reconciliation.

KEYWORDS: *Humanistic Activism, Caste System, Apartheid, Ubuntu, Social Justice*

* **Aezaz Ahamed**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, GFGC, Chikkabasur, Byadagi.

Introduction

Humanistic activism is grounded in the belief that all human beings deserve dignity and equality. In the twentieth century, B.R. Ambedkar and Nelson Mandela represented this principle in distinct and different contexts. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, born into the Dalit community, confronted caste oppression through education, law, and constitutional reform. On the other hand, Nelson Mandela, born in South Africa, resisted apartheid through political struggle, imprisonment, and reconciliation. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar declared, "Caste is not just a division of labor, it is a division of laborers" (Annihilation 23). Nelson Mandela similarly affirmed, "I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony" (Long Walk 278). These statements reflect their shared commitment to human dignity. This article compares their activism across historical context, philosophy, strategies, and legacies, arguing that their combined visions remain vital for contemporary social justice movements.

Historical Context

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life was shaped by colonial India's caste hierarchy. Despite exclusion, he pursued higher education abroad, returning to lead movements such as the Mahad Satyagraha, which demanded equal access to public water (Zelliot 112). As chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, he inserted safeguards for marginalized communities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar insisted that democracy must be more than representation: "Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is essentially a form of associated living" (Annihilation 67). Nelson Mandela's activism unfolded under apartheid in South Africa. Joining the African National Congress, he initially pursued nonviolence under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, but later supported armed resistance through Umkhonto we Sizwe. His twenty-seven years in prison made him a global symbol of resistance and peace. Upon his release, Nelson Mandela prioritized reconciliation, leading South Africa into democracy in 1994 (Mandela 145). He reflected, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it" (Long Walk 423).

Philosophical Foundations

Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy emphasized liberty, equality, and fraternity. He argued that caste violated democracy and human dignity. His conversion to Buddhism reflected his belief in compassion and equality (Ambedkar, Buddha 56). Rohit Gaikwad observes that Ambedkar redefined democracy as "a moral community, not merely a political system" (Gaikwad 44). Nelson Mandela's philosophy was shaped by Ubuntu, the African idea of a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. He believed reconciliation was essential for healing South Africa. He wrote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies" (Long Walk 532). Desmond Tutu observed that Ubuntu was "lived practice in Mandela's reconciliation politics" (Tutu 89). Comparatively, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized structural justice through law, while Nelson Mandela emphasized moral justice through reconciliation. Both approaches reflect humanistic activism, though with different emphases.

Strategies of Resistance

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar relied on legal reform, education, and social movements. He drafted constitutional safeguards, led campaigns for temple entry, and encouraged Dalits to embrace Buddhism as a path to equality and social reform. His activism combined intellectual critique with grassroots mobilization. Nelson Mandela's strategies, on the other side, included political activism, armed struggle, and reconciliation. His leadership in the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe reflected militant resistance, while his later role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission emphasized forgiveness. Nelson Mandela balanced resistance with moral leadership, embodying both defiance and unity. Dr. Ambedkar's tools were law and education; Nelson Mandela's were activism and reconciliation. Both mobilized collective action and became symbols of justice.

Comparative Analysis

Dr. Ambedkar and Nelson Mandela faced distinct unjust systems-caste and race-but both recognized oppression as a systemic process. Dr. Ambedkar sought structural transformation through constitutional law, while Nelson Mandela sought moral transformation through reconciliation.

Themes	Dr. B.R. Ambedkar	Nelson Mandela
Form of Oppression	Caste discrimination	Racial apartheid
Primary tool	Law, Constitution	Political activism, reconciliation
Vision of justice	Annihilation of caste	Multiracial democracy
Legacy	Indian Constitution, Dalit rights	Democratic South Africa, global symbol of peace

Their activism converged in their insistence on human dignity. Dharmaji Kharat argues that both leaders “converged in their insistence on justice as a collective moral project” (Kharat 14).

Contemporary Relevance Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s critique of caste remains relevant in India, where discrimination persists (Debnath 80). Nelson Mandela’s model of reconciliation informs global debates on conflict resolution. Together, they inspire movements for equality, dignity, and justice worldwide. The critics, Moiz Tundawala and Salmoli Choudhuri emphasize that Ambedkar’s constitutional vision parallels Mandela’s reconciliation politics, both seeking to balance liberty with collective healing (Tundawala and Choudhuri 201). Their activism shows that social justice requires both structural transformation and moral reconciliation.

Conclusion Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Nelson Mandela exemplify humanistic activism in different contexts. Dr. Ambedkar emphasized structural change through law and education; Nelson Mandela emphasized moral change through reconciliation. Their combined visions offer a holistic framework for social justice. In a world still grappling with inequality, their legacies remain indispensable.

References:

1. Ambedkar, B.R. Annihilation of Caste. Navayana, 2014.
2. Ambedkar, B.R. The Buddha and His Dhamma. Oxford University Press, 2011.
3. Benageri, Mohan, and V. Basil Hans. "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Social Justice." Srinivas University Journal, 2025.
4. Debnath, Debashis. "Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Human Rights Movement and Contemporary Issues." Man in India, vol. 104, no. 1–2, 2024, pp. 77–92.
5. Gaikwad, Rohit Sudhakar. "Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Philosophy of Humanism and Its Relevance in the Present Indian Situation." Res Militaris, 2023.
6. Kharat, Dharmaji. "Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar and Nelson R. Mandela: The Similarities and Contrast in the Movement of Two Icons." Pune Research, 2024.
7. Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk to Freedom. Little, Brown and Company, 1994.
8. Tundawala, Moiz, and Salmoli Choudhuri. "Ambedkar's Liberty Concept in Comparative Constitutional Thought." Indian Yearbook of Comparative Law, Oxford Academic, 2018.
9. Tutu, Desmond. No Future Without Forgiveness. Doubleday, 1999.
10. Zelliott, Eleanor. Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement. Navayana, 2013.