

Global Conflict and the Indian Context: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Reflections on the Second World War

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 18th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025 Keywords: Global Conflict Indian Context Dr. B. R. Ambedkar	The Second World War unfolded at a time of deep global uncertainty, and its impact was strongly felt in colonial India due to Britain's direct involvement in the conflict. Against this background, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar articulated a carefully considered stand that defended democratic ideals while rejecting Nazism and imperial control. He stressed the central role of labour and reaffirmed the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity as vital for India's progress. Instead of blindly aligning with British war objectives, Ambedkar evaluated India's position through a long-term national lens. This perspective reveals his wide international awareness and underlines his role as a thoughtful and forward-looking political leader.
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Objective

- 1) To examine Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's position during the Second World War, with special attention to his commitment to democratic values and India's future interests.
- 2) To study Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution during the war years, particularly his efforts in labour reform, maintaining industrial harmony, and strengthening the role of workers in national growth.

Hypothesis

During the Second World War, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar promoted democratic values and labour reforms, viewing workers as essential to both the war effort and India's future development.

Introduction :

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar stands out in modern Indian history as a visionary leader whose intellectual engagement extended far beyond immediate political concerns. His work reflects a deep commitment to rational inquiry, scientific reasoning, and critical analysis. Across his writings and public interventions, Ambedkar consistently approached social and political problems through logic rather than sentiment. When his diverse contributions are examined closely, it becomes evident that he did not remain detached from global developments; instead, he actively engaged with them, particularly during the turbulent years of the Second World War.

The Second World War represented a moment of profound global disruption, reshaping political systems, moral values, and power structures across continents. Despite its far-reaching impact, very few Indian leaders articulated a coherent and well-reasoned position on the war. Ambedkar was among the rare Indian thinkers who assessed the conflict in its global context and openly expressed his views with intellectual clarity. His engagement with the war was not opportunistic but grounded in a long-term concern for democracy, human freedom, and India's political future.

Ambedkar clearly understood the dangers posed by fascism and Nazism. He warned that a victory for Hitler would not merely alter European politics but could threaten democratic institutions and civil liberties worldwide. At a time when such arguments were unpopular or misunderstood, Ambedkar emerged as one of the few Indian intellectuals who openly identified fascism as a fundamental enemy of democratic society. He argued that India's participation in the war should be guided by the objective of ensuring the triumph of democratic forces, believing that such an outcome would create conditions favourable for India's independence after the war.

This position exposed Ambedkar to sharp criticism and political isolation. Yet he remained firm, accepting personal attacks and ideological opposition without retreating from his convictions. His stance during the war years reflects a rare combination of political courage and intellectual integrity. Even today, when democratic norms are under pressure in various parts of the world, Ambedkar's wartime reasoning continues to offer valuable insights into the relationship between global politics and domestic democratic struggles. From the early stages of the war, Ambedkar supported the Allied powers and maintained this position until the conflict ended. However, his support did not imply unconditional loyalty to British rule. His politics were firmly rooted in the interests of the Bahujan masses and the broader struggle for social justice. While engaging with the British administration during the war, he consistently raised issues related to civil rights, political freedom, and the everyday hardships faced by marginalized communities. Contemporary records reveal that he did not hesitate to criticise colonial policies whenever they conflicted with Indian interests.

The establishment of the Independent Labour Party in 1936 and its impressive electoral performance in 1937, securing fifteen out of seventeen contested seats, marked Ambedkar's growing recognition as a mass leader, particularly among the oppressed sections of society. It was during this phase of political consolidation that the Second World War began. Ambedkar's ability to interpret global events and connect them with India's future was evident in his analysis of the war. Recognising fascism and Nazism as direct threats to democracy, he publicly supported Britain's war effort, arguing that such support was strategically necessary for safeguarding India's long-term political and democratic interests. His statement published in *The Times of India* on 14 September 1939 reflects this carefully reasoned position.

Main description

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Position on the Second World War

The outbreak of the Second World War placed India, like many other colonised societies, in a deeply challenging situation. The war was not merely a distant international conflict; it raised urgent questions about India's political future, internal security, and the fate of democratic values under colonial rule. As global power relations began to change, Indian leaders were required to reflect seriously on how the war should be understood from an Indian standpoint. It was against this backdrop of uncertainty and debate that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar presented a carefully thought-out and independent view on India's position in the war. The outbreak of the Second World War placed India in a situation that

demanded careful judgment and political maturity. Decisions taken during this period were not merely about responding to a global conflict; they were closely linked to India's future as a nation. For Indian leaders, the central challenge was to understand what course of action would genuinely serve Indian interests and how India's position should be articulated in a rapidly changing international environment. Reaching a common understanding on these issues became a critical test of leadership.

This period, however, was marked by uncertainty and divergence among Indian political leaders. There was no consensus on whether participation in the war would accelerate India's freedom or further entrench colonial control. Serious doubts were raised about Britain's intentions, and questions were repeatedly asked about whether wartime cooperation would translate into meaningful political concessions after the conflict. At the same time, opinions varied widely regarding global powers such as Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. These differing assessments resulted in conflicting political positions and ideological confusion within Indian leadership. In contrast to this atmosphere of hesitation, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar approached the situation with analytical clarity. His thinking was rooted in a realistic understanding of global politics and ideological conflict. Rather than reacting emotionally to colonial rule, he examined the likely consequences of different wartime outcomes for India. Ambedkar argued that India needed to adopt a position that was both strategically sound and aligned with democratic principles. He warned that a victory of fascist powers such as Germany, Italy, and Japan would not remain confined to Europe or East Asia but could have serious repercussions for India, strengthening authoritarian tendencies and undermining democratic aspirations. Keeping these risks in mind, Ambedkar articulated his position while fully recognising the challenges and criticism it would invite. He sought to explain what choices India should make during the war and why those choices were justified when viewed from an Indian perspective. His intervention was not limited to short-term political gains; it was guided by concern for India's long-term security, democratic future, and social stability.

The international developments that followed soon underlined the seriousness of the situation. The war formally began on 1 September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Within days, on 3 September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany, announcing its decision to support Poland. On the same day, the British Prime Minister addressed the nation, confirming Britain's entry into the war. Later that evening, the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, announced that India was also at war—without prior consultation with

Indian political leaders. This unilateral declaration intensified debates across the country and further sharpened questions about colonial authority, political responsibility, and India's future path toward self-rule.

When Lord Linlithgow declared that India was entering the Second World War, he also made it clear that the country would fight on the side of the Allied powers. This announcement immediately placed Indian political leaders under pressure to explain where they stood on the war. Soon after, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru spoke to the press and outlined the Congress position. He suggested that the Congress was not looking at the war only from a narrow nationalist angle, but from a wider international perspective, and that India's own interests were closely connected with the global developments taking place at the time.

This view, however, did not remain consistent for long. As discussions continued within the Congress leadership, particularly after Nehru's consultations with Mahatma Gandhi, the party began to rethink its approach. Gradually, Nehru's position on the war shifted, reflecting the wider uncertainty and debate within the nationalist movement about how India's struggle for freedom should relate to the unfolding world conflict.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar presented his position on the war on 12 September 1939. He expressed support for Britain's involvement in the war, believing that the defeat of fascist powers was essential for the protection of democratic values. At the same time, he did not hesitate to criticize the Viceroy's conduct. Ambedkar strongly opposed the way in which India had been drawn into the war without any consultation with Indian leaders. In a press conference, he described this action as an example of arbitrary colonial rule and made it clear that supporting the war did not mean accepting undemocratic decision-making by the colonial government. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's position on India's cooperation with Britain during the Second World War was shaped by a deep commitment to democratic principles rather than by loyalty to imperial power. He believed that the global conflict was not merely a struggle between nations but a decisive confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism. From this standpoint, Ambedkar argued that India should stand with those forces that represented democratic values and civil liberties.

In line with this belief, Ambedkar strongly supported the participation of Indians from all social backgrounds in the British Indian Army. He made direct appeals to members of the Mahar community, urging young men to enlist in the armed forces. For him, military service was not only a contribution to the larger democratic cause but also an

opportunity for historically marginalised communities to assert their dignity, capability, and rightful place in public life. His well-known appeal published in *The Times of India* on 31 January 1940, calling upon Mahars to join the army, reflected this dual concern for political responsibility and social empowerment. Similar encouragement was extended to members of the Kunbi community during the same period. Ambedkar's support for the Allied war effort stemmed from his clear opposition to ideologies such as Nazism, dictatorship, and forms of authoritarian communism that suppressed individual freedom. He viewed these systems as fundamentally hostile to human rights and social justice. In his view, cooperation in the war was justified only in so far as it contributed to the defeat of such forces and the preservation of democratic ideals.

At a civic reception held in his honour at Mahad on 19 March 1940, Ambedkar offered a thoughtful assessment of India's struggle for freedom. While acknowledging that a British defeat in the war might accelerate India's political independence, he cautioned against viewing political freedom as an end in itself. He repeatedly emphasized that independence would remain incomplete unless it was accompanied by economic security and social equality.

Ambedkar warned that an unstable international outcome, particularly Britain's collapse, could complicate India's efforts to secure these deeper forms of freedom. Ambedkar also offered a critical evaluation of the Soviet Union's conduct during the early years of the war. He expressed concern that Russia's actions in countries such as Poland, Finland, Latvia, and Romania weakened their independence and indirectly strengthened Hitler's expansionist ambitions. He argued that such a strategy was short-sighted and ultimately dangerous. Ambedkar predicted that the unchecked growth of Nazi power would eventually threaten Russia itself, a warning that proved prescient when Germany and the Soviet Union entered into direct conflict, compelling Russia to align with Britain and the Allied powers.

These views highlight Ambedkar's exceptional political insight and international awareness. He consistently maintained that a durable and just world order could emerge only if democratic nations acted collectively and decisively against totalitarian forces. According to him, a victory for Nazism would lead to a world defined by oppression and inequality, whereas the triumph of democracy held the promise of a global order grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Through his reflections on the Second World War, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar clearly underscored the close connection between global conflict and the future of democracy.

His approach to international relations during this period reveals a statesman who looked beyond immediate political gains and focused instead on the long-term moral and social foundations of freedom, both for India and for the wider world.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Role during the War Years

In 1941, with the establishment of the National Defence Academy, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar came to occupy a position of considerable responsibility. Around the same time, his appointment to the Viceroy's Executive Council further strengthened his role in wartime governance. These responsibilities allowed him to articulate an independent and reasoned stance during the Second World War. While he consistently upheld democratic ideals, his loyalty to India's national interest remained firm and unquestionable. Serving as the Labour Member of the Executive Council, Dr. Ambedkar devoted particular attention to labour welfare during the war years. He believed that social stability and industrial harmony were vital under wartime conditions. The labour policies and reports introduced under his guidance aimed at ensuring fairness and equality in labour laws, and they significantly improved working conditions. He also laid down clear ideas on the functioning of industries during wartime, stressing the importance of discipline, justice, and cooperation between workers and employers.

Dr. Ambedkar viewed the Second World War largely as a struggle centred on production and supply. From this perspective, he argued that both industry and labour were indispensable to national defence as well as to the creation of lasting peace after the war. He repeatedly emphasised the need for strong leadership in times of crisis and believed that such leadership could emerge from the working classes. In his view, workers were not only essential to the war effort but also central to the long-term reconstruction and development of the nation. He firmly held that the defeat of Nazism depended upon the organised strength and unity of labour across nations. At a time when the Quit India Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi was gaining momentum, Dr. Ambedkar took a different position. He felt that confronting the British government during an ongoing global war was neither practical nor in India's best interest. According to him, such a course of action could expose the country to greater risks in an already unstable international situation. Dr. Ambedkar also expressed strong reservations about the role of Indian communist leaders during the war. He urged them to support Britain, arguing that authoritarian communism posed a serious threat to India's future. He was critical of communist wartime strategies, believing that they neither aligned with democratic principles nor addressed India's long-term political and strategic needs.

Taken as a whole, Dr. Ambedkar's wartime positions reveal a consistent commitment to democracy. His firm opposition to both Nazism and authoritarian communism reflected his broader resistance to all forms of dictatorship. He advocated cooperation among India, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union as a necessary step toward defeating fascism and preserving global peace. These views are clearly reflected in his speeches, public statements, and press interactions during the war years. Underlying all his positions were the foundational values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which Dr. Ambedkar regarded as essential to India's social and political progress. His approach to wartime politics was shaped by a long-term vision that prioritised peace, stability, and national development. Through his actions and ideas, Dr. Ambedkar stands out not only as a national leader but also as a globally minded thinker, whose diplomatic insight and international outlook continue to underline his deep concern for India's place in a changing world.

Conclusion

1)The study indicates that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's approach to the Second World War was shaped by a strong belief in democratic principles and a practical understanding of international realities. His resistance to Nazism and imperial control went beyond abstract ideology and reflected a genuine concern for India's future political and social well-being. By adopting a measured and thoughtful stance during the war, Ambedkar sought to align India's national interests with the wider global effort to defend democratic values.

2)The analysis also shows that Ambedkar placed workers at the centre of both wartime stability and the long-term reconstruction of the nation. By focusing on labour reforms, maintaining industrial peace, and encouraging worker participation, he connected social justice with national progress. His ideas during the war reflect a practical and forward-looking leadership, where democratic values were closely tied to real policy concerns. Through this approach, Ambedkar presented a vision of India based on equality, social stability, and an informed understanding of global realities.

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