

# Revisiting Ambedkar's Perception on Religious Identity and Political Modernity in India

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## Abstract

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, an architect of a futuristic India, was a jurist, social reformer, as well as the founding father of the Indian Constitution. He was the first Law and Justice Minister of independent India, who served in first Nehru ministry during 1947–52. He dedicated his entire life for the betterment of India, Indian society, and the lives of the underprivileged in the nation. His goal was to make India more equitable, secular, and free. This goal guided all of his thoughts, projects, and achievements. Drawing on the teachings of Gautam Buddha, Jotirao Phule, and Kabir Saheb, Dr. Ambedkar challenged Hindutva from all directions, offering a fact-based and well-reasoned critique of Hinduism's attitudes, practices, culture, and sacred texts. Seeking a religious solution for the untouchable issue, he and his numerous followers renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism in 1956. He believed that Buddhism was the most egalitarian and inclusive religion and that it aligned with his social justice and equality principles. He disagreed with majoritarianism, which in Indian parlance meant unbridled Hindu dominance. Dr. Ambedkar was an insightful individual with an incredible personality and multifaceted character. He firmly believed that India didn't need to formally become a Hindu state by amending the Constitution to make Hinduism the official state religion. Dr. Ambedkar's quest for justice, liberty and equality finds no match in the making of the Constitution of India. His farsightedness has laid the foundation of social, economic and political revolution in Indian society.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Equality, Hinduism, Indian Constitution, Religion, Secularism, Social Justice.

## Introduction

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was a lawyer, social reformer, and the founder of the Indian Constitution. He was also an architect of a futuristic India. He devoted his whole life for the betterment of India, Indian society, and the lives of the country's poor. His ideas, projects, and works were all driven by the desire to improve India and make it a more egalitarian, secular and a free country. He was born on April 14, 1891, in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh. Throughout his early life, he faced profound discrimination as a member of the oppressed caste. Despite social and economic discrimination, Ambedkar has a legacy of rising from the margins of society to the forefront of the Indian freedom struggle. His academic achievements laid the foundation for his future role as a social reformer and legal luminary. Dr. Ambedkar exemplifies his in-depth understanding of social justice and equality by drafting a trailblazing Constitution. As the chairman

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of the Drafting Committee, he played a crucial part in shaping the fundamental principles that govern the world's largest democracy. Furthermore, his support for justice, equality, and individual rights is demonstrated by constitutional provisions that aim to end discrimination and advance societal harmony. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had a critical perspective on Hinduism and its social structure. He was a strong advocate for social equality and the rights of marginalized communities, particularly of the Dalit people (called as "untouchables"). His insistence on including provisions for affirmative action, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, reflects his foresight in addressing historical injustices. These measures were aimed at creating a more inclusive society by providing opportunities for historically marginalized communities to uplift themselves. Dr. Ambedkar's quest for justice, liberty and equality finds no match in the making of the Constitution of India. Dr. Ambedkar's farsightedness has laid the foundation of social, economic and political change in the society of India. The writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar embody the vision to build India in which all sections and communities are politically empowered, socially and economically awakened. According to Dr. Ambedkar, the ideal State for India is casteless and classless society, and this ideology has broadened the sphere of religion, culture, social and economic life of the citizens.

### **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Philosophy on Hindu Religion**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a prominent national leader who made a significant contribution to the drafting of the Indian constitution. Despite his religious beliefs, Dr. Ambedkar opposed religious hypocrisy. In his opinion, religion was a source of morality, and each person's character, behavior, likes, and dislikes should all be influenced by it. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy on Hindu religion was rooted in his commitment to social justice, equality, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Babasaheb said in his book, *"I hate Hinduism because it nurtures wrong ideals. Leads a wrong social life. My protest is about the principles of Hindu religion."*<sup>3</sup> He states strongly that the main reason he despises Hinduism is the belief that the caste system is the essence of the religion. Additionally, Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs have all been contaminated by caste. Babasaheb asserts fearlessly that the Hindus have become degenerate, which is worse than being cruel, if Muslims have been cruel. He likens the entire social behavior of Hindus to the restrictive and corrupt customs of primitive tribes, where the notion of good and evil is confined to the confines of the community. Their main worry is whether or not to resist their caste, rather than supporting the good and denouncing the evil. Ambedkar thought that the Shudras were forced to become total slaves of the three Varnas by the Hindu religion, which imposed its flaws onto them. The shudras' condition in life was worse than that of animals. The three religions Hinduism, Brahminism, and their guardian, Manu treated women similarly. The women were prohibited from reading the Vedas by Manu. They are impure in the same way that lies are dirty because they lack the right to read the Vedas. Since there was no room for humanity in the Hindu faith, he did not see anything good in it and clearly criticized the wrong ideals of Hindu religion.<sup>4</sup>

According to Dr. Ambedkar *"In the first place it must be recognized that there has never been such as a common Indian culture, that historically there have been three Indias, Brahmanic India, Buddhist India*

<sup>3</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, *"Thoughts on Pakistan,"* Writings and Speeches, Volume-8, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Forward Press, "Dr. Ambedkar on Brahminism and Hinduism," retrieved from <<https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/10/dr-ambedkar-on-brahminism-and-hinduism/#:~:text=In%20his%20book%2C%20Revolution%20and,book%20he%20says%20that%20the>> visited on Feb 10, 2024.

and Hindu India,<sup>5</sup>” adding further that, “the history of India before the Muslim invasions is the history of a mortal conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism.” During the Mauryan empire Ashoka was greatly inspired by Buddhism and therefore declared it as the religion of the state. The Brahmins were reduced to a subordinate and secondary status and lost all their official support. Ashoka prohibited animal sacrifices in their entirety, which were central to Brahmanic religion. In addition to losing the support of the state, the Brahmins also lost their primary source of income, which was offering sacrifices in exchange for an extremely large payment. For approximately 140 years, the Brahmins were thus the oppressed and downtrodden Classes during the existence of the Mauryan Empire. Subsequently, a plot emerged to overthrow the Buddhist regime and reestablish Brahmin authority. Pushyamitra, a minister in Mauryan empire raised the banner of revolt against the rule of the Mauryas. Pushyamitra was a Samvedi Brahmins, who believed in animal sacrifices and was the first to be aimed to end the degradation of the Brahmin by destroying the Buddhism and to free them to practise their old Brahmanic religion. He achieved this object with the murder of the last Mauryan king Vrihadhrat, and established Brahminism as per Manusmriti’s code of laws. He issued proclamation against the Buddhist monks. This proclamation declared a price of 100 gold pieces on the head of each Buddhist monk. He transformed Varna into Caste system which was the most selfish task in which Brahminism became prominently engaged after this time. The primary objective was to maintain the Brahmins’ high status and standing, regardless of their abilities or morality. This implied that all Brahmins should be elevated to positions of honor and prestige, regardless of how corrupt or undeserving they may be. At a certain point in the Manusmriti, it states that, just as in the Shastras, the common fire and Lord Agni are both noble. Brahmin, therefore, is a noble god regardless of whether he is a scholar or an idiot in both forms, and he must be worshipped in all respects despite his inhumane actions. Babasaheb writes that it was done in the name of religion. Brahminism uses religion as an object for fulfilling their greedy and for selfish political gains. This Brahminism got incorporated into Hinduism and made shudras and women live miserable lives for thousands of years.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar strongly criticized the caste system prevalent in Hindu society, because he saw it as a fundamental injustice and a barrier to social progress of the society. He believed that the caste system perpetuated inequality and discrimination which leads to the oppression of lower caste. Ambedkar was also critical of various other Hindu scriptures, rituals, and practices that he believed to be based of caste discrimination and inequality. According to him these texts and traditions were not conducive to a just and egalitarian society. Dr. Ambedkar has advocated for social reform within Hindu society in order to eradicate caste-based discrimination and promote equality amongst the different sections of society. Therefore when he drafted the Indian Constitution, he enshrined principles of social justice, equality, and the rights of all citizens as the basis of the Constitution.

### **Ambedkar’s Conversion to Buddhism**

Drawing inspiration from Gautam Buddha, Jotirao Phule, and Kabir Saheb, Dr. Ambedkar challenged Hindutva from all angles, a reasoned and rational criticism of Hinduism, its culture, attitudes, customs, and sacred texts using reasons and facts. The Hindu elite were outraged by this and began to attack Ambedkar. One of them, Mahatma Gandhi, was so offended by Ambedkar’s book ‘Annihilation of Caste’

<sup>5</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, “*Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*,” Writings and Speeches, Volume-3, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Forward Press, “Dr. Ambedkar on Brahminism and Hinduism,” retrieved from <<https://www.forwardpress.in/2018/10/dr-ambedkar-on-brahminism-and-hinduism/#:~:text=In%20his%20book%2C%20Revolution%20and,book%20he%20says%20that%20the>> visited on Feb 10, 2024.

that he responded to it with a long article, to which Babasaheb provided a suitable response. Gandhi claimed in his article that Dr. Ambedkar poses a threat to Hinduism. Gandhi's questions were addressed by Dr. Ambedkar, who wrote, "I oppose Hindus and the Hindu religion because I am convinced that it propagates the wrong ideals and has a social life of the wrong kind." He witnessed the caste system's discrimination in Hindus and therefore denounced it saying that "*it was not in my control to take birth in Hindu religion but I will not die in Hindu religion,*" he saw Buddhism as a more egalitarian and inclusive religion than any other, that aligned with his principles of social justice and equality, therefore in 1956, in search of a religious remedy for the untouchable issue, he renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism along with his large number of followers. There are two main reasons why Dr. Ambedkar chose Buddhism over Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. As Buddha is a religion of ethics, morals, and learning; caste is not relevant in Buddhism, secondly it has its origins in India. The persons who wished to convert to Buddhism were given 22 vows by Dr. Ambedkar. He significantly transformed the lives of India's downtrodden, disadvantaged, and oppressed classes.<sup>7</sup> According to Dr. Ambedkar, "*the religion of Buddha has the capacity to change according to times, a quality which no other religion can claim to have and if you study carefully, you will see that Buddhism is based on reason. There is an element of flexibility inherent in it, which is not found in any other religion.*" Ambedkar considers that the rise of Buddhism in India was as significant as the French Revolution. He perceived deep affinities between Buddhism and the French Revolution. Therefore he declared, "*Positively, my Social Philosophy, may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French-Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place....*"<sup>8</sup> He gave the highest place to fraternity as the another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion. In that sense, Buddhism is a democratic religion and Ambedkar, eventually found in this religion the societal principles he had tried to promote via political democracy.<sup>9</sup> These were the qualities of the Buddhism which inspired him the most. During his whole life Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of education and empowerment for marginalized communities, particularly of Dalits, as a means to challenge social hierarchies and achieve equality in the society. Overall, he sought to challenge and reform aspects of Hinduism that were leading to discrimination and inequality among the people by advocating for a more inclusive and just Indian society for all.

### **Dr. Ambedkar's Ideology and the Contemporary Indian Politics**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's in his book "Pakistan or the Partition of India"(1946) said, "*If Hindu Raj becomes a reality then it would be greatest menace to this country. Whatever may Hindus say, actually it does not make a difference that Hinduism is a danger to Independence, Equality and Brotherhood. Thus it is an enemy of democracy. We should make all out efforts to stop Hindu Raj from becoming a reality.*"<sup>10</sup> He opposed majoritarianism, which in Indian terms meant unrestricted of the Hindu majority. Ambedkar was insightful in that he believed there was no need to legally declare India a Hindu state by changing the

<sup>7</sup> Bardia, Meena. "DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR HIS IDEAS ABOUT RELIGION AND CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM." *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2009, pp. 737–49. JSTOR, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42742756>> Accessed 10 Feb. 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, All-India Radio broadcast speech on 3 October 1954.

<sup>9</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "Ambedkar, Buddhism and Democracy," retrieved from <<https://m.thewire.in/article/books/ambedkar-democracy-buddhism/amp>> visited on Feb 10, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (India: Samayak Prakashan, 2013) Page 354-355.

Constitution and designating Hinduism as the official state religion. Administrative actions can accomplish the same goal. The Supreme Court has also held “secularism” to be part of the basic structure of the Constitution which cannot be discarded even by constitutional amendment.<sup>11</sup>

In present time it is a compulsion for several politicians, for the sake of their vote bank, to remember Babasaheb. In actuality, they claim to adhere to Babasaheb’s principles in order to deceive the general public, particularly the underprivileged segments. However, this goal is still limited to founding a Hindu nation. If we apply this to the BJP-ruled states and the Modi administration at the federal level, it can be clearly seen how they propagate their religious ideology. In 2014, the first single-party majority in India’s parliament in thirty years brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political party based on the ideology of Hindu nationalism, to power. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the head, the BJP overthrew the Congress Party, which had ruled India for the majority of its political history since independence. Narendra Modi was previously Gujarat’s chief minister for nearly a decade. With accusations of “pseudo-secularism” and pandering to minority groups in India instead of the country’s overwhelming Hindu majority, the BJP saw a revival that suggested a change to a more assertive, pro-Hindu kind of nationalism. Expanding its reach throughout vast regions of India, the BJP has steadily taken political ground from the Congress Party and numerous regional rivals, building on its remarkable achievement in 2014. Again after five years almost 900 million Indians had voted in the country’s seventeenth general election, which has take place in the spring of 2019 after independence in 1947.<sup>12</sup>

People have now officially entered a Hindu state, led by the anti-Muslim RSS pracharak Narendra Modi as prime minister and Yogi Adityanath, whom he nominated as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India. With a population of over 200 million people, including the disputed sites of Ayodhya and Babri Masjid, Uttar Pradesh is known for being the state that makes or breaks general elections and for being the symbolic center of the Hindi heartland.<sup>13</sup> A gathering of 150 Hindu organizations convened in Goa on June 18, 2017, with the goal of pushing for the creation of “Hindu Rashtras” out of India and Nepal. Yogi Adityanath declared on June 7, Hindu Swaraj Diwas, that no Indian should be ashamed of their Hindu identity. Currently serving as a member of parliament for the BJP, Yogi Adityanath is known for being a fierce Hindu religious leader who promotes a strong form of majoritarianism that even some sacred Hindus find offensive. Adityanath has previously supported the conspiracy theory known as “love jihad,” which holds that groups of Muslim males subjected on Hindu women with the intention of converting them to Islam. Additionally, he has a close association with the controversial ghar wapsi (homecoming) movement, which seeks to convert minorities to Hinduism on the grounds that they were all originally Hindus and were tricked into converting.<sup>14</sup> Yogi Adityanath has also focused his efforts on renaming administrative divisions and cities that honor their Islamic past, such as Faizabad (Ayodhya) and Allahabad (Prayagraj). Despite the BJP has not used its position in New Delhi to aggressively push some of the most divisive aspects of its traditional social agenda, it has nonetheless provided leading support to various states and sub-states for Hindutva initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> S.R. Bommai vs Union of India (1994, 3 SCC 1).

<sup>12</sup> Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hinton, “The World’s Largest Election, Explained,” retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/india-elects-2019> visited on Feb 10, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Indian Ministry of Home Affairs Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, “2011 Census Data.”

<sup>14</sup> Manjari Katju, “The Politics of Ghar Wapsi,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 1 (January 3, 2015): 21-24.

<sup>15</sup> Milan Vaishnav, “The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism,” retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/bjp-in-power-indian-democracy-and-religious-nationalism-pub-78677> visited on Feb 11, 2024.

### **Ram Mandir Verdict vis-à-vis Hindu Raj**

The Ayodhya temple's history is rooted in one of the most horrific chapters of contemporary Indian history, a chapter that profoundly impacted the nation's politics and exposed deep religious divisions within its populace. At a location which is believed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram, a highly respected role model and the triumph of good over evil, the Ram Mandir is being constructed on a disputed plot of land in the northern Indian city of Ayodhya. However, it was the Babri Masjid, a mosque named for the Mughal emperor Babur that stood there until the early hours of December 6, 1992. Following almost ten years of a furious and occasionally violent campaign, a crowd of Hindu nationalists demolished the mosque while yelling religious slogans. India's Supreme Court declared in November 2019 that the land had to be given to a trust that would be especially established to supervise the construction of a Hindu temple, following years of closure to the public. In order to build a mosque that would eventually replace the Babri Masjid, Muslims were given a separate plot of land in the Dhannipur hamlet on the outskirts of Ayodhya. Although many sections of the Indian populace expressed satisfaction with the ruling, others criticized it for violating India's secular and democratic constitutional values and for lacking a strong legal foundation. The decision also raised concerns that it will inspire right-wing Hindus nationwide to undertake such initiatives to demolish other mosques. After years of legal disputes and even violent protests over the land and its history, the temple's inauguration officially establishes the location as a center of Hindu worship. Among the three fundamental pledges made by the BJP were the construction of the Ram temple at the location of the former Babri Masjid; the other two were the removal of Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, which was abandoned in 2019, and the creation of a uniform civil code for personal laws. The Ram Mandir movement has already paid great dividends to the political fortune of BJP, its inauguration just before the national elections is going to be a Trump Card for this government.<sup>16</sup> While India is constitutionally secular, the construction of the Shri Ram Mandir is seen by many as an assertion of the Hindu identity and a frontier for India to become a Hindu Raj. And if the political parties are propagating it with this intention of converting India into a Hindu Rashtra, the same should be prevented to become the truth as according to Ambedkar the establishment of Hindu Raj will be the biggest threat for the independence and brotherhood of the country. The religious diversity that coexists in India should be acknowledged & respected by ensuring that the temple construction should become a celebration of faith rather than a source of division.

### **Uniform Civil Code vis-à-vis Secularism**

Ambedkar's endorsement of a UCC is being used by BJP leaders to justify their positions in Parliament, but this does not exactly align with the vision of the man who drafted the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar was aware of the significant concerns raised by a few Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly against the Uniform Civil Code, but he still supported its inclusion in the DPSP. Additionally, Ambedkar had anticipated that no government would use its authority to impose a uniform code in a way that would incite a Muslim rebellion. During an ongoing discussion on the UCC on November 23, 1948, Ambedkar tried to reassure the Constituent Assembly's minority members. Ambedkar believed that the UCC could be implemented at first as a voluntary code and that the Parliament would not compel people to abide by it. The State is under no responsibility to abolish personal laws. It only bestows a power. Therefore, there is no need for anyone to be concerned that, should the State obtain authority, it will use it to carry out or

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<sup>16</sup> Areesha Lodhi, "Why is India's Ram temple in Ayodhya controversial?," retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/22/why-is-indias-ram-temple-in-ayodhya-controversial> visited on Feb 11, 2024.

enforce laws in a way that the Christian, Muslim, or any other Indian community may find offensive. Ambedkar also mentioned modifications to Shariat law that facilitated divorce proceedings for women. Furthermore, he emphasized that a mature society cannot rule out the State's involvement in personal law since "even members of a particular community may desire to have their personal law changed." Ambedkar therefore understood the concerns of all members, particularly the Muslim leaders, who were apprehensive about the UCC and religious freedom.<sup>17</sup>

On Wednesday, February 7, 2024, the Uttarakhand Assembly passed the State's Uniform Civil Code. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami referred to it as a "historic moment," stating that the Assembly had been the first legislature in India after independence to enact a bill imposing common laws on marriage, divorce, inheritances, and cohabitation for all communities with the exception of Scheduled Tribes. The president of All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen, Asaduddin Owaisi, stated that the Bill was merely a Hindu Code that applied to everyone because it did not affect the Hindu Undivided Family or the tribal population. He makes the case for why Hindus are excluded. If a legislation doesn't apply to most of the State, can it still be considered uniform? Additionally, Mr. Owaisi asserted that the BJP government had submitted before the Supreme Court that only Parliament could enact the UCC. He proceeded by saying that this Bill went against federal laws such as the Hindu Marriage Act and the Shariah Act and Special Marriage Act. On other hand, Mr. Dhami referenced Baba Bhim Rao Ambedkar in asserting that some anti-social, anti-national individuals occasionally exploited certain constitutional phrases. He also mentioned a number of nations that have adopted a uniform civil code, including Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Japan, the United States, Canada, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The Chief Minister also referred to the Shah Bano and Saira Bano incidents, stating that anti-social groups sought to maintain divisions among various communities for political gain; this, too, will come to a stop in Uttarakhand as the UCC grants equal rights to all.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, was an incredible personality with a multifaceted character. The second decade of the twentieth century saw the start of his unrestricted assistance. He belonged to the category of leaders who prioritized the welfare of humanity over their own administration. Despite being brief in life, Dr. Ambedkar led an exceptionally extraordinary life. An incredible inventor, educator, political rationalist, rigorous mentor, and above all, an exceptional humanitarian without comparison among his contemporaries. He was a true liberator of the Dalits and a religious person in real sense. Ambedkar's persona possessed strong humanist foundations for each of these attributes. Rather than only being a Dalit or a pioneer of the backward classes, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a national innovator and the father of modern India. It was Babasaheb who, through his efforts, had given India its manufacturing during its early years. After fighting for India's independence, they made an effort to create the India they had always desired. It's sad that Ambedkar has been viewed by the media, both historically and currently, primarily as a fierce critic of Hinduism but in real sense he was one of the distinctive producers of the Modern India. In conclusion, Dr. Ambedkar can be credited with popularizing the phrase "Life should be great, rather than long," which he demonstrated firsthand and set an example for others.

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<sup>17</sup> S. N. Sahu, "What Ambedkar Really Said About Uniform Civil Code," retrieved from <<https://www.newsclick.in/what-ambedkar-really-uniform-civil-code>> visited on Feb 12, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Ishita Mishra, "Uttarakhand Assembly 'creates history' by passing Uniform Civil Code: Pushkar Dhami," *The Hindu* (February 7, 2024).