

Understanding Ambedkar's Vision of Social Justice: From Caste Oppression to Constitutional Equality

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Abstract

This research paper critically examines Dr B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice with particular emphasis on caste oppression and constitutional equality. This paper examines Ambedkar's vision of social justice, with particular emphasis on caste oppression and constitutional equality. He described the caste as a system of graded inequality that institutionalised social hierarchy and discrimination. Using a qualitative and analytical approach based on Ambedkar's writings, the Constitutional Assembly debates the interpretation of scholarly works. The paper argues that Ambedkar viewed political democracy as incomplete without social democracy and structural transformation in Indian society. The study highlights the relevance of Ambedkar's vision for cultural and social change in India by linking his philosophy with contemporary issues like caste discrimination in education, violence against the scheduled caste people, and unequal opportunities in India.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Caste System, Untouchability, Social Justice, Constitutional Equality, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

Introduction

The history of civilisation is not just a story of technology and politics; it is also a story of the social organisation of humans and the evolution of liberal principles such as justice, equality, rights and liberty, etc. Across the world, inequalities exist in terms of gender, race, region, and economic status. India is marked by a distinctive and deeply entrenched form of inequality in the form of the caste system (Guru, 2009). It is a system that has deeply influenced Indian society for around two thousand years with its caste-based hierarchy of graded inequality (Ambedkar, 2014). In this system, untouchability is an extreme condition of social exclusion that has deprived millions of centuries of basic human dignity. The Indian context is such that caste is a particular kind of oppressive social construct, although human behaviour may be influenced by biological predispositions as well as cultural environments. It determined one's occupation, social relations, religious involvement, and resources and education. Caste was not just a culture; it was an institutionalised system that marginalised whole communities, especially the Dalits, and was in place. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was an extremely virile critic of this system and stated that caste was the basic impediment in the path of democracy and equality of human beings (Ambedkar, 2014).

This situation was further complicated by the colonial era. British rule brought fresh policies of administration and economy, which, in fact, did not eliminate the caste system, but rather strengthened it. The depressed classes (now known as Scheduled Castes) were burdened with a dual burden as a result of

economic exploitation and entrenched social discrimination (Dirks, 2001). Therefore, any significant effort towards liberation would have to cover both political freedom from colonial rule and social emancipation from the oppression of caste. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was one of the most prominent reformers and thinkers in modern India in this historical and socio-political background. Ambedkar was a scholar, a jurist, and the Chief Architect of the Indian Constitution and carried a deep and personal understanding of the caste-based injustice in India.

Ambedkar felt that social democracy is essential to political democracy, or the promise of equality in the law would have a hollow effect. Equality was not only a philosophy to Ambedkar but a political and moral imperative as well. This research paper aims to study and critically analyse Ambedkar's idea of caste and equality in the context of India. It examines his philosophy, activism, and constitutional interventions and how they attacked the ideology and structure of caste. It also assesses the relevance of his thoughts in the ongoing struggle for social justice in India today.

Although there are a number of scholars who have discussed Ambedkar as the architect of the Indian Constitution, limited scholarly efforts have been devoted to analysing the linkage between annihilation of caste and constitutional equality and social democracy by Ambedkar. Furthermore, most research work is historical or descriptive in nature, with little discussion on the relevance of Ambedkar's constitutional ideals and how they can help solve the problems of caste-based discrimination, social exclusion and inequalities in India today (Omvedt, 2004). In the present study, an effort is made to fill this gap and critically examine the link between Ambedkar's perception of caste oppression and his constitutional framework of social justice and equality.

Objectives

1. To evaluate Ambedkar's constitutional contribution to social justice and equality.
2. To critically analyse Ambedkar's understanding of caste and untouchability.

This study used a qualitative and analytical research method and secondary data sources, including Ambedkar's writings, constitutional assembly debates, books, journal articles and scholarly interpretations related to social justice, caste and equality. Textual analysis has been used to critically interpret Ambedkar's ideas and their relevance in contemporary India. The scope of the paper is limited to Ambedkar's contributions related to caste, constitutional equality, and social democracy.

Ambedkar's Intellectual Foundation

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's life and intellectual legacy are deeply rooted in his personal experiences of caste discrimination and his exposure to modern democratic thought. He was born in an oppressed community, the Mahar caste and experienced caste discrimination in education, public spaces, and social life from an early age. These experiences helped him understand caste not as an abstract social category but as a lived system of humiliation and exclusion (Zelliot, 2005). From being denied access to clean drinking water and education, to being isolated by upper-caste students and teachers, these early experiences instilled in him an acute awareness of the brutalities of the caste system. Jyotirao Phule and Western liberal thought significantly shaped Ambedkar's worldview. His education at Columbia University exposed him to democratic theory, pragmatism, and social justice philosophy. Thinkers such as John Dewey influenced Ambedkar's understanding of democracy as a moral and social ideal rather than merely a political arrangement (Rodrigues, 2002). He advocated a social system based on equalisation in society among

individuals in all spheres of life. Being trained as a social scientist, he acquired deep knowledge in every field of human activity to become the founder of his own independent ideology. Human dignity and self-respect formed the core of Ambedkar's vision of social justice (Rajan & Barman, 2024).

During the independence movement, most of the freedom fighters prioritised political independence from British rule. Whereas Ambedkar thought social emancipation of marginalised and oppressed classes was also equally important. He argued that independence without social equality would merely transfer power from colonial rulers to upper-caste elites (Omvedt, 2004). Ambedkar's critique of caste was not limited to its hierarchical nature but was also deeply rooted in its religious and ideological foundations. He argued that caste was not just a division of labour but a division of labourers, enforced through birth and perpetuated through religious sanctions (Ambedkar, 2014). To him, the Hindu scriptures such as Manusmriti were not religious documents but documents of oppression that legitimised inequality and the oppression of the lower castes, even the untouchables. The rigidity of the caste system was hereditary, which Ambedkar did not like most. It determined socially who was who and socially assigned rights and occupation by birth, taking away the possibility of escaping from one's birth position. This rigidity dehumanised whole communities and also reduced the human potential, creativity and unity. Ambedkar felt that such an immoral society could not be moral, nor could it be democratic. He also feels that the principles of equality, freedom and fraternity based on Buddhism were a Buddhist Hantal (2022).

The Caste System of Graded Inequality

Ambedkar saw caste as a system of graded inequalities which institutionalized social hierarchy and deprived humans of their human dignity. He said that the 'Chaturvarna' system in the Hindu society was not just unfair but also intellectually wrong, in which the four social castes, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are divided. The structure was thought to be religiously sanctioned and institutionalised inequality by giving people a ranking according to birth and not merit or value (Ambedkar, 2014). Ambedkar stressed that Dalits or "untouchables" are not even part of this system, being outside and below the formal system of castes. This exclusion was almost a denial of their basic human beingness, and, therefore made their oppression more acute and entrenched. Caste has generated several inequalities in the Indian society since its inception such as social, economic, political and educational differences (Hiwrale, 2020).

Ambedkar called caste a "system of graded inequality", which implies that the caste hierarchy is not only vertical but hierarchical in an intricate fashion. There is a hierarchy of castes, one above the other, and there is no caste that is not subject to discrimination except the highest caste. Such an organisation promotes separation and continues to maintain exploitation on all levels. He states that caste is not a division of labour alone, but it's a division of labourers, and through religious teaching and social practice, it is denying people the liberty of choosing their jobs or social roles (Ambedkar, 2014). Ambedkar had a strong objection to the religious and ideological basis of caste, not only on the basis that he felt these texts, such as 'Manusmriti', gave scriptural sanction to social discrimination and untouchability, but also because he felt that these texts were linked to Hinduism and Brahmanism. Caste was for him not just a social problem, but a moral and human rights problem since it infringed upon the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity he considered integral to any democratic society (Raghavendra, 2016).

Ambedkar's criticism has been confirmed by modern scholars as well. According to Suraj Yengde (2019), caste is an evolved instrument of domination, and it is able to manipulate the resources, labour and opportunities of the society for the benefit of the upper castes. In a similar way, Isabel Wilkerson compares

the Indian caste system to the racial caste system in the U.S. in her book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, to the effect that both are systems of “invisible, but powerful social ordering”. Gopal Guru (2009) points to the fact that caste humiliation continues even in the present day in India. These writers point out that caste is not a cultural or historical reality, but a living, breathing system of inequality, embedded in institutions, behaviour, and attitude. So, to Ambedkar, caste was more harmful than slavery, as it was veiled in the name of tradition, and both oppressors and victims accepted it as a normal way of life. It was an attack on human dignity, and indeed, caste also became a human rights and justice movement, rather than a social reform.

Criticism of Brahmanical Social Order

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's criticism of caste was bound up with his criticism of Brahmanism as its ideological and structural basis for caste oppression in Hindu society. One has to be aware that Ambedkar wasn't attacking Hinduism as a religion, but the system which had developed around it, especially the Brahmanical interpretation, which made hierarchy and untouchability a sacred law. Ambedkar stated that Brahmanism brought in the concept of social stratification through the Varna system and gave Brahmanism the privilege over all other communities (Ambedkar, 2014). According to him, scriptures and religious literature were instrumental in building and sustaining a rigid caste structure, which dehumanised a major part of the society, including Dalits and Shudras (Ambedkar, 2024). The culture of the brahmins, who saw themselves as the keepers of knowledge and religion, allowed them to sustain a system that denied dignity, education and basic rights to others. Ambedkar launched his attack on Brahmanism in two directions: social and intellectual. Socially, he led people in public agitation, like the Mahad Satyagraha (1927), when Dalits demanded the right to draw water from a public tank, and burning of the Manusmriti in protest against its discriminatory content against the Dalits. The actions were intended to mobilise the oppressed masses to assert their rights and ask questions about the legitimacy of a religious order that was marginalising them.

Ambedkar was a prolific writer as well on the intellectual plane, attempting to understand the ideological origins of Brahmanism. He stressed that only reforms are not sufficient; the roots of caste should be eliminated totally. Ambedkar's ultimate goal was to awaken the social consciousness of the oppressed classes, encouraging them to stand up with dignity and demand liberty, equality and fraternity. He thought that the social revolution was essential for political and economic democracy in India. Rather than confrontation for confrontation's sake, his was a carefully considered and reasoned demand for justice, questioning the foundation of the Hindu social order, which sanctioned inequalities for centuries. The attack on Brahmanism, therefore, was not only an assault on the upper caste dominance, but it was also a visionary attempt to build a new Indian society on egalitarian and democratic lines (Ambedkar, 2014).

Ambedkar and Gandhi on Caste

The conflict between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar about the caste system and the condition of the untouchables is one of the most crucial intellectual quarrels that occurred in modern Indian political thinking. While for Gandhi, caste was a social institution that could be morally changed in Hindu society, Ambedkar was convinced that caste must be totally eradicated (Jaffrelot, 2005). Ambedkar heavily criticised Gandhi's advocacy for the Varna system and the inability of social reform in Hinduism to end structural inequality and untouchability. They manifested their differences in debates around the separate electorates of Untouchables (now Scheduled Tribes) in the Round Table Conferences and Poona Pact of

1932. Although Gandhi was against separate electorates because it would divide the society of Hindus, Ambedkar felt that separate political representation was the only way to empower and protect oppressed communities (Ambedkar, 1945).

This debate was the representative of two contrasting visions of social justice in India. Gandhi was a proponent of moral reform, social harmony and reform within the Hindu social structure, while Ambedkar was a champion of structural change through political rights, constitutional protections and social equality. Ambedkar felt that caste is not only a social prejudice but also a very strong institutionalised structure of inequality, which is based on religious, traditional and power aspects. Thus, he claimed that legal and constitutional means should be used to safeguard marginalized communities against social oppression, he argued. The Gandhi-Ambedkar debate is of great relevance as it provides insight into the ideologies behind Ambedkar's constitutional vision and the prevailing caste inequity in the country even today.

Constitutional Equality and Social Democracy

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was one of the most important figures in the shaping of a constitution which was characterised by equality, justice and social democracy, as he was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. The Constitution was not just a legal or political document for Ambedkar; it was a tool that could be used to change Indian society and secure the rights of those who had been marginalised. Hence, the Constitution provided certain Fundamental Rights for equality and the dignity of all people. The Constitution of India, 2024 guarantees equality before the law and the equal protection of laws (Article 14), bans the practice of untouchability in all forms (Article 17) and prohibits discrimination based on religion, caste, race, sex, and place of birth in public employment (Article 16). Ambedkar states that we shall enter a life of contradiction on the 26th of January 1950: "In politics equality, in social and economic life inequality".

Ambedkar forcefully insisted that democracy should not be restricted to the political sphere, but should be extended to social relations and life itself. He emphasised the importance of the values of liberty, equality and fraternity for the creation of a just and inclusive society. His concept of "constitutional morality" emphasized the need for democratic institutions, rule of law, accountability and the safeguarding of minority rights. If political equality is guaranteed without social and economic equality, it will generate serious tensions within the Indian democracy and can even undermine its stability (Ambedkar, 1949). Consequently, he saw the Constitution as a way to create an equalitarian social structure where the oppressed communities can find dignity, representation and justice (Rodrigues, 2002). He feels that the state must play a role in key industries, land and agriculture to avoid exploitation and ensure the distribution of wealth in an equitable manner (Klava, 2025).

Ambedkar's Legacy

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions go beyond being the pivotal figure in the drafting of the Indian Constitution. It is his transformational role in the consciousness of India in social, political and moral spheres. He was not just a legal reformer, a political leader, but a visionary social philosopher who awakened generations of oppressed people to their inherent dignity, rights and power. Ambedkar's impact on the social justice, equality and human rights agenda in India is also clearly visible in his influence on the debate (Omvedt, 2004). Ambedkar gave the Dalits a sense of resistance, pride and identity. His writings, speeches and activism created the foundations for the Dalit movement, which gave voice to the voiceless. He saw the caste system as a form of structural violence and dehumanising effects, and opposed the

religious justification of the caste system. Ambedkar's message of "educate, agitate, and organise" resonated with Dalits, inspiring them to rise above caste oppression by educating themselves and engaging in political action.

They came about as legal protection in the Constitution, including the abolition of untouchability and affirmative action, and also as the development of a Dalit consciousness that still influences the present struggle for equality. His legacy also played a significant role in the human rights discourse in India, in which he highlighted the importance of social and economic justice embedded within the framework of democracy. Ambedkar foreshadowed the universal language of rights, dignity, and anti-discrimination in many ways. It is pertinent to note that Ambedkar's moral courage and intellectual rectitude separated him. He did not refrain from challenging the dogma of Hinduism, nor did he hesitate to make scathing remarks about the colonial or post-colonial state when it was unworthy of the ideals of justice. The conversion of his people to Buddhism in 1956, like that of millions of others, was a strong rejection of a religion that sanctioned caste system and an affirmation of one that is based on compassion, rationality, and human dignity (Jaffrelot, 2005). Ambedkar's ideas continue to motivate the activists, scholars, and reformers who strive to eliminate discrimination in all forms, whether it is based on caste, class, gender, or religion. Statues of Ambedkar, Ambedkar Jayantis and academic study of his works bring his relevance to the fore. His memory continues to inspire Indians to pursue the ideals of social democracy in their nation, and every generation to fight for justice, liberty and equality. He believes that Political democracy is only possible with social democracy Mathur & Thakur (2022).

Suggestions

Based on the study of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice and efforts toward annihilation of caste, the following suggestions can be made to strengthen his vision in contemporary India:

- Ambedkar's ideas on equality and social justice should be incorporated into the educational curriculum at different levels.
- Strong enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws and accountability to curb caste-based discrimination and violence is also necessary.
- Marginalised communities should receive greater representation in political and administrative institutions.
- Community-level awareness programs should be encouraged to promote fraternity and mutual respect among various caste groups.
- Digital and legal literacy programmes should be expanded to empower marginalised groups.
- Periodic assessment of reservation policies in education and employment is essential to ensure fairness, effectiveness, and timely improvements.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy goes far beyond the boundaries of constitutional drafting or political activism; it represents a moral and social revolution aimed at uprooting India's most entrenched system of inequality, the caste system. Not only was his struggle to remove the untouchability or casteism from his society, but to build a social system which is just, dignified and equal among men. For Ambedkar, social democracy based on liberty, equality and fraternity is empty without social democracy. Ambedkar's work combined legal protections and visionary social ideals to redefine the ground rules of Indian modernity. He made the Constitution a weapon for social change, guaranteeing equality not only as a declaration of intent but as a

right to which citizens could turn. Through his work he enabled the marginalized to claim their identity and their right to belong to society. But caste discrimination does exist in India today, both as an overt and as a subtle form. Ambedkar's ideas are not only relevant but also very crucial in this context. His vision calls for a more fundamental change in India than the mere superficial reforms. If the real essence of democracy is to be lived, then the building of an inclusive society with justice and equality as given facts is a necessity for India.

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