



Relevance of Ambedkar's Democratic Ideas in Contemporary Period: A Study from Dalits Socio-Economic Perspectives

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Abstract

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a unique mix of a democrat, scholar, rebel, and statesman that we rarely come across in democratic societies. He was an outspoken supporter of democratic governance in India. Ambedkar strongly believed that a system can be termed as a genuine and comprehensive democracy only when it fulfils both political and socio-economic aspects of people's participation and satisfaction. In terms of democratic maturity, there is no doubt that India has progressed through a process of gradual but steady consolidation of representative institutions, the separation of powers and the inclusion of people from all sections of the society in electoral processes. Even the enormous inequalities revealed by BR Ambedkar during the preparation of the 1950 Constitution did not appear to stop the democratic procedures. But despite having a democratic character India is still struggling to establish democracy on a solid socio-economic and political foundation. The Ambedkar perspective of democracy is founded on social justice and aspires to achieve social change and human progress. It is very hard to accept that in spite of India's constitutional democracy's longevity, issues remain concerning our democratic mindset, which poses a threat to the democratic ideal envisioned by Ambedkar. The present paper attempts to assess Ambedkar's thoughts on democracy from a socio-economic viewpoint and their contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Democracy, social justice, human dignity, social change

Introduction

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is widely regarded as a steadfast supporter of democracy in India. He was a liberal democrat, a remarkable economist, a social reformer, a political philosopher, a protector of the disadvantaged, and above all a passionate humanist. He campaigned for the trinity values of social justice-cum-social democracy, such as liberty, equality, and fraternity during his life. Basically, his whole life was dedicated to emancipating the downtrodden and exploited. The constitution which he drafted was embedded with liberal values, and, of course, it guaranteed fundamental rights to all people without any discrimination. The admirability of his democratic thought helped him stand out among other democratic philosophers. For Ambedkar democracy is considered a way of life in which revolutionary changes occur among people's lives concerning socio-economic conditions.¹ The notion of the democratic process as conceptualized by him was not only a technical tool for constructing an elected government via power struggle among self-motivated people who wished for political offices. But for him, it was an articulation of both ends and means objectively which provides a vision for a good society based on the various democratic ideals. The distinctive side of Ambedkar is lying with his understanding of the intricacy of Indian society and the nature of questions that he raised about it. A number of questions were posed by Ambedkar that were both timely and unpleasant to consider. They were relevant because they were vital for the nation's development, and they were unpleasant because few people were ready to accept the existence of

such problems. Nobody was willing to deal with or address some critical concerns that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar brought up in his unique way, and no one was ready to take up or deal with them. He advocated the philosophy of democracy as a method of achieving social justice for India's underprivileged people. From theoretical explanations, democracy was more responsive to the demand for political involvement and equal citizenship rights. Its principal objective was political equality. In order to achieve this aim, societal biases must be dismantled and social disparities must be eliminated. He argued that a democratic form of administration necessitated a democratic type of social organization. It is widely accepted that if social democracy did not exist, the formal structure of democracy would be of little benefit and would even be a mismatch. Ambedkar had captured the essence of Indian society, in which politics was not only the expression of religion in practice but rather the fundamental nature of the society itself. Unless and until this was eradicated and society was secularized, the true democracy would be unable to operate at all.² Ambedkar made a significant contribution to the growth of democracy in India via his innovative and radical ideas. His approach is unmistakably revolutionary in that it aims to provide political, economic, and social space to the Dalits, who are among the most marginalized groups in the democratic system. A unique combination of theoretical and practical experience, Ambedkar came from a long history of the persistent battle against Untouchability, which is considered to be one of the most atrocious and horrible practices known to humankind throughout the history of Indian society. His experiences with Untouchability have led him to become both a victim and a warrior against it.³ In Ambedkar's democratic system, one of the most important aspects is that it provided a platform for historically disadvantaged segments of society to gain and then develop normative spaces encompassing not just equality and liberty, but also self-respect and dignity. Because his version of democracy is an appealing vision, it elicits varying degrees of subaltern participation in the effort of constructing an equitable India in his image. Besides, the nature of this democracy must be liberal, not merely in terms of its adherence to fundamental freedoms, but also in terms of its notion of social justice and equality.⁴ India's democratic culture is very dynamic and unique that the quest to comprehend its composition is both theoretically creative and philosophically illuminating. By comprehending the contemporary texture of democracy since the inauguration of the 1950 constitution, the proposed paper seeks to grasp the notion of democracy designed by Dr. Ambedkar from Dalit's perspective and its implication in contemporary times.

Theoretical Propositions of Democracy

In the contemporary world, democracy as a system of governance is the most well regarded and distinctive political phrase, and it is also the most widely practised. But the idea and meaning of democracy do not bear the same across time and space. For example, the Athenian democracy of Greek had a different notion of democracy because it permitted nearly half of its people to be slaves, who had no participation in the governmental structures in contrast to the modern democracy which is based on representative government. The others people who were regarded as the free citizens of Athens possessed full civil and political rights. Furthermore, even within a single country, the meaning of democracy is always evolving; democracy in India before 1947 was significantly different from the democracy we have now. As an analogy, democracy in England during and after the Revolution of 1688 was quite diverse from one another. Democratic institutions not only vary in appearance, but they also alter in their intended function. Ironically, the very fact that democracy has such a long history has actually contributed to confusion and disagreement, for "democracy" has meant different things to different people at different times and places.⁵ The name democracy may be traced back to ancient Greece, where it first appeared. Democracy is derived from two Greek words "demos" referring to the people and Kratos, meaning power, or rule.⁶ That is, in a democracy, power is held by the people. This meaning is specifically derived from the government that existed in several Greek city-states, particularly in Athens. Democracy is described today as a type of governance in which the ultimate authority is entrusted to the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly via a system of representation, which is frequently characterized by free elections on a periodic basis. Democracy has been defined in many ways by different political scientists. One of the most likeable definitions of democracy is being given by Abraham Lincoln, who said "Democracy is a government of the people, for the people, and by the people".⁷ Lord Bryce believes "Democracy really means nothing more or less than the rule of the whole people, expressing their Sovereign will by their votes".⁸ In another way, we could say that a government

is made by the people, that it is run by the people, and that it is set up for the benefit of the people. Today, however, the concept of democracy has widened its purview by encompassing the social and economic aspects of human existence within its cover and describing democracy as a mechanism of stressing human dignity. Besides, democracy is more than a form of government. It is essentially a complex phenomenon of economic, social, and political aspects that determine how a state interacts with its citizens by safeguarding essential freedoms such as freedom of expression, individual liberty, and governing functions. Certainly, Democracy, as a form of government, is designed to allow for wide representation and inclusivity of as many individuals and viewpoints as possible to feed into the operation of a fair and just society, and this is exactly what democracy is supposed to do. It is insufficient to describe democracy unless it is articulated in terms of societal and individual settings as well.

Ambedkar on Democracy

Ambedkar is undoubtedly a folk icon of democratic politics in India. When it comes to the relationship between Ambedkar and democracy, it is possible to say that his entire ideology can be summed up in a single word, which is democratic values. Ambedkar explained his notion of democracy at many points in his life, each time with a broader meaning than the one before it, surpassing all of its known features as described in the books. His democratic ideal was inextricably linked to his vision of a 'good society,' which he defined as one founded on 'liberty, equality, and fraternity.'⁹ Ambedkar saw the democratic process as the vehicle through which the ideal society could be realized. Indeed, it is a lofty notion, but putting it into reality is fraught with difficulties, akin to a chicken and egg conundrum. Ambedkar held a rationalist and all-encompassing view of democracy. He examined the notion of democracy in light of India's existing social predicament. His understanding of the democratic system was affected by his study of Indian society, and he insisted on the link between ancient India and fundamental democracy not as a coincidental association, but as a friendship between two friends. He claims that democracy existed in ancient India, but that it was gobbled up by the caste system, which created the dictatorship of social authoritarianism. He believed that if India takes the route of social revolution, it has the potential to expose the genuine picture of fundamental democracy. Because democracy for him "as a form and method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed".¹⁰ As the sole giant of our independence struggle who had first-hand knowledge of discrimination, segregation, and untouchability, the historical social and political subjugation of the group of "untouchables," Ambedkar's concept of democracy is particularly pertinent. It's crucial because he spoke out against the centuries-old repressive social-political system of "graded inequality." The caste system is based on a hierarchy of hatred and contempt with no mutual understanding. Caste is the greatest obstacle to democracy and constant denial of democracy itself.¹¹ Moreover, Ambedkar holds that "Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living of conjoint communicated experience and to be searched in the social relationship. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen".¹² As far as he was concerned, democracy meant the absence of slavery, caste systems, and coercive methods of governance. According to his conscience, the appropriate route to democracy would be one of freedom of opinion, choice, and the ability to live and let others live. Democracy is not a gift from the gods or the universe. It is a habit of social living that may be adopted by individuals for the sake of liberation and well-being in society. In the words of Ambedkar.¹³

Dalits Socio-Economic Conditions: Then and Now

The socio-economic marginalization of Dalits, historically termed "untouchables," is deeply entrenched in India's caste hierarchy, which for millennia relegated them to the lowest rungs of society through religious and social sanction. Codified in ancient texts like the Manusmriti (circa 200 BCE–200 CE), the caste system confined Dalits to degrading occupations such as manual scavenging, leatherwork, and sanitation, while denying them access to education, land ownership, and public spaces. Colonial rule (1757–1947) further entrenched these disparities by reinforcing upper-caste control over agrarian resources through exploitative land revenue systems, leaving Dalits landless and dependent on bonded labor. Practices like begar (unpaid forced labor), segregated housing, and caste-based violence including public humiliations and sexual violence against Dalit women were normalized,

perpetuating a cycle of poverty and exclusion. Pre-independence, Dalit literacy rates were near-negligible, as educational institutions remained dominated by upper-caste hegemony.

Post-independence constitutional reforms sought to dismantle this systemic oppression. India's 1950 Constitution abolished untouchability (Article 17) and introduced affirmative action via reservations in education, employment, and legislatures (Articles 15, 16). The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, criminalized caste-based discrimination. However, implementation gaps persist due to bureaucratic inefficiency and societal resistance, undermining the transformative potential of these policies.

Contemporary data reveals both progress and stark inequities. Economically, Dalits remain disproportionately marginalized. Despite land reform laws, they own only 9% of agricultural land (2015–16 Agricultural Census), perpetuating rural poverty. Over 60% rely on precarious casual labor (NSSO, 2019), while urban Dalit men earn 56% less than their upper-caste counterparts (World Inequality Lab, 2022). Manual scavenging, though outlawed by the 2013 Prohibition Act, still employs 95% Dalits (Safai Karmachari Andolan, 2023), highlighting systemic apathy. Educationally, Dalit literacy rates have risen to 66.1% (2011 Census), yet remain below the national average (73%). Reservation policies increased higher education enrollment (15.5% in 2020–21, AISHE), but dropout rates at the secondary level stand at 21.8% (NCERT, 2019–20), driven by economic barriers and institutional casteism, such as biased grading and social boycotts in elite universities.¹⁴

Social violence and discrimination remain pervasive. The National Crime Records Bureau (2021) documented 50,900 crimes against SCs, including rape, murder, and arson. High-profile cases like the 2020 Hathras gang rape and the 2006 Khairlanji massacre underscore the culture of impunity.¹⁵ Everyday discrimination persists, with a 2022 study in Tamil Nadu revealing 80% of Dalits face segregation in communal spaces,¹⁶ while casteist slurs proliferate online (Equality Labs, 2021). Politically, reserved seats ensure Dalits hold 17.5% of Lok Sabha positions, yet decision-making power remains limited, with only 4.5% of IAS officers being Dalit (DoPT, 2023). Emerging movements like the Bhim Army and Dalit Panthers advocate intersectional justice but face state repression.¹⁷

New challenges compound historical inequities. Dalit women endure 30% higher multidimensional poverty (¹⁸, facing triple oppression through caste, class, and gender. Climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities; landless Dalit farmers bear the brunt of agrarian crises and extreme weather (Navsarjan Trust, 2023). Globally, caste discrimination persists in diasporas, evidenced by lawsuits like California vs. Cisco (2020), prompting calls for anti-caste policies in the US and UK.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also severely affected Dalits, who are one of India's most socially and economically vulnerable communities, by exacerbating poverty, unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and limiting access to education and healthcare. Existing social and economic inequalities deepened, and government responses often failed to address the specific needs of Dalits.¹⁹ To improve Dalit livelihoods, the Indian government has introduced various measures, including job reservations, skill development programs, and economic schemes such as MGNREGA and NRLM. Institutions like the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes have also been established to support Dalit empowerment. Despite these efforts, significant improvements in Dalits' living conditions remain limited since independence.²⁰

Challenges In Realizing Ambedkar Democratic Vision

Despite constitutional guarantees and decades of affirmative action, the democratic ideals envisioned by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar centered on the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity remain only partially realized for Dalits in contemporary India. Socio-economic inequality continues to be a major barrier. The average per capita income of Dalits is significantly lower than the national average, and they remain underrepresented in professional and managerial roles (Round Table India, 2023). Access to institutional finance also remains limited, with only 10.7% of Dalit households benefiting from formal bank loans, further exacerbating economic exclusion²¹. In the field of education, while Dalit student enrollment in higher education increased by 25.43% between 2017 and 2022,

dropout rates remain high due to persistent discrimination and economic constraints. Notably, over 8,000 students from Scheduled Castes and other marginalized communities dropped out of institutions such as IITs and IIMs over a five-year period²². Faculty representation is disproportionately low, with only 149 Dalit faculty members out of over 9,000 teaching posts in IITs underscoring continued institutional exclusion.²³

Economic entrepreneurship among Dalits is further constrained by societal stigma. A recent study published in *The Hindu* found that Dalit business owners face an income gap of nearly 16% compared to similarly placed peers from other communities, largely due to what the study termed “institutional stigma” a reflection of negative caste-based perceptions that impede social mobility. Violence and systemic caste-based discrimination also continue to threaten the democratic rights of Dalits. Crimes against Scheduled Castes rose from 50,202 in 2020 to 57,428 in 2022, yet conviction rates remain distressingly low for instance, Karnataka recorded only a 4.6% conviction rate under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in 2020. Political marginalization adds another layer to this crisis. Dalits comprise only 3.5% of those in political office, and those who are elected often face intimidation and caste-based hostility, which limits their ability to effectively represent their communities.²⁴ Health care access for Dalits is also marked by structural exclusion. Discrimination by medical personnel and poor outreach in Dalit habitations contribute to substandard health outcomes.

Taken together, these challenges reveal a structural failure to implement the social and economic dimensions of Ambedkar’s democratic vision. Legal provisions alone have proven insufficient without a deeper societal transformation. Realizing Ambedkar’s vision in its entirety requires not only policy reforms but also a cultural shift to dismantle caste hierarchies and ensure equitable participation across all spheres of life.

Contemporary Movements Inspired by Ambedkarite Thought

The socio-political philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, India’s foremost advocate for caste annihilation and social democracy, continues to inspire dynamic movements that adapt his ideas to modern challenges. Central to these efforts is the Bhim Army, a grassroots organization founded in 2014 by Chandrashekhar Azad in Uttar Pradesh. Combining Ambedkarite principles with Marxist critiques of caste-class exploitation, the Bhim Army mobilizes Dalit communities through education drives, legal aid for caste atrocity survivors, and assertive political campaigns. Its slogan, “Jai Bhim, Laal Salaam”, reflects its dual focus on caste and class liberation. The movement gained national attention during the 2017 Saharanpur caste riots, where it challenged state complicity in anti-Dalit violence by organizing protests and filing police complaints against perpetrators. Despite state repression including Azad’s imprisonment under the National Security Act in 2020 the Bhim Army expanded its influence through electoral politics with the help of Azad Samaj Party, contesting elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Maharashtra²⁵.

Ambedkarite thought has also found resonance in global digital activism. Organizations like Equality Labs, a U.S.-based Dalit feminist collective led by Thenmozhi Soundararajan, use social media to expose caste discrimination in diasporic communities. Their 2018 #CasteInTheUS survey revealed that 67% of Dalits faced workplace harassment, sparking policy debates in Silicon Valley and academia. This advocacy gained legal traction in 2020 with the California vs. Cisco case, a landmark lawsuit alleging caste-based discrimination against a Dalit engineer, which underscored the global reach of institutional casteism and aligned with Ambedkar’s critique of Brahmanical capitalism²⁶. Transnational solidarity networks, such as the Ambedkar International Mission (AIM), further amplify these efforts by linking Dalit struggles to movements like Black Lives Matter and Palestinian liberation, as seen in the 2023 Ambedkar International Conference in New York, which framed caste as a pressing human rights issue.

Educational empowerment remains a cornerstone of Ambedkarite resistance. Student collectives like the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) in elite institutions such as IITs challenge institutional casteism through workshops, lectures, and protests against academic Brahmanism. In 2023, APSC members at IIT Madras resisted administrative censorship of discussions on reservation policies, embodying Ambedkar’s mantra of “Educate, Agitate, Organize.” Simultaneously, Dalit feminist groups like the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) integrate intersectionality into Ambedkarite pedagogy. Their 2022 report, *Silenced Screams*, documented how

78% of Dalit women endure caste-sexual violence, advocating for gender-sensitive reforms to anti-atrocity laws²⁷.

Culturally, Ambedkarite movements reject Brahmanical narratives by reclaiming Dalit identity through art and literature. Revivals of the Dalit Panthers' radical aesthetics and contemporary works like the 2021 film *Jai Bhim*, a Tamil legal drama highlighting caste violence that grossed ₹1.3 billion—demonstrate the power of cultural assertion. Writers like Chandrabhan Prasad promote “Dalit capitalism” as a means to escape caste-bound labor hierarchies, arguing in his 2023 manifesto *Why Dalits Need Capital* for economic self-reliance as a form of liberation²⁸. Yet, these movements face significant challenges. Fragmentation within Dalit politics, exemplified by the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), reveals tensions between electoral pragmatism and radicalism. Critics like Anand Teltumbde warn that NGO-ization risks diluting systemic critiques into donor-driven projects. Meanwhile, caste-Hindutva alliances, such as the co-optation of the Ramnami Samaj sect into the BJP's Hindu unity rhetoric, threaten Ambedkarite anti-assimilationist principles.²⁹

In the recent times, Ambedkarite movements illustrate the enduring relevance of his vision, adapting it to digital, global, and intersectional contexts. While they confront co-optation and internal divisions, their emphasis on education, cultural assertion, and transnational solidarity reaffirms Ambedkar's belief that “rights are protected not by law but by the social and moral conscience of society.” As caste oppression evolves under neoliberalism and authoritarianism, these movements remain vital to the unfinished project of caste annihilation.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophical vision remains the cornerstone for constructing an inclusive and egalitarian social order. His insistence on liberty, equality, and fraternity as the ethical foundation of democracy was not merely theoretical, but deeply rooted in the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities. Yet, despite the transformative potential of his ideas, Indian society has largely failed to internalize and implement them in practice. This continued marginalization of Ambedkari thought has led to the persistence of systemic injustices that contradict the democratic ideals enshrined in the Constitution. In the contemporary context, the relevance of Ambedkar's vision becomes even more urgent. The deepening socio-economic inequalities, rising incidents of caste-based violence, institutional discrimination against Dalits, and shrinking spaces for dissent reflect a disturbing erosion of democratic values. The privatization of education and healthcare, displacement due to unchecked development, and the precarious conditions of Dalit labourers in both rural and urban economies further reinforce the structural marginalization that Ambedkar so powerfully critiqued. The resurgence of majoritarian politics and the co-option of constitutional language by caste-dominant groups also raise questions about the sincerity of India's democratic commitments.

Ambedkar's warning that “political democracy cannot survive without social and economic democracy” serves as a prophetic critique of contemporary India's democratic crisis. His vision compels us to go beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion and to confront the entrenched caste hierarchies that continue to dictate access to resources, dignity, and rights. Today, as India grapples with growing inequality, social unrest, and the dilution of institutional autonomy, reclaiming Ambedkar's ideas is not just an academic necessity but a political and moral imperative. To truly honour Ambedkar's democratic legacy, India must reorient its policies, institutions, and public consciousness toward the values he espoused. Only then can we move toward a democracy that is not merely procedural, but substantively just and inclusive for all, especially for the most marginalized.

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