BODHI SPECTRUM
Global Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

Social Transformation and the Emancipation of Marginalised Communities in Ambedkar's Thought

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's intellectual and political oeuvre represents one of the most comprehensive projects of social reconstruction in modern India. Departing from reformist paradigms that sought merely to ameliorate the excesses of the Hindu social order, Ambedkar advanced a radical theory of social transformation rooted in the complete annihilation of caste, substantive constitutional democracy, economic democratization, gender justice, and ethical-religious reconstruction. This article examines the sociological, legal, economic, and moral dimensions of Ambedkar's thought concerning the emancipation of marginalised communities—specifically Dalits, women, and the labouring classes. The study analyzes five core pillars of his emancipatory praxis: his diagnosis of caste as superimposed endogamy and "graded inequality" sustained by scriptural authority; his Deweyan conception of social democracy anchored in liberty, equality, fraternity, and constitutional morality; his political economy of State Socialism and labour rights; his intersectional critique of Brahmanical patriarchy and advocacy for the Hindu Code Bill; and his turn toward Navayana Buddhism as a rationalist ethic of human dignity. Drawing upon primary texts from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches alongside contemporary scholarship, this article demonstrates that Ambedkar's vision rejects piecemeal reform, demanding instead a simultaneous transformation of material structures, legal institutions, and social morality.

Keywords: *Annihilation of Caste, Graded Inequality, Constitutional Morality, State Socialism.*

In the landscape of twentieth-century anti-colonial and post-colonial political thought, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar occupies a singular position as both a trenchant critic of indigenous hierarchies and an architect of modern democratic institutions. While mainstream Indian nationalism largely prioritized political independence from British colonial rule over internal social reform, Ambedkar inverted this hierarchy of priorities. He contended that political emancipation without prior or concurrent social transformation would merely transfer power from foreign rulers to an entrenched domestic oligarchy, leaving the historically oppressed in a state of perpetual subjugation.[1]

1 Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed., pp. 211–218). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

Ambedkar's project of emancipation was forged at the intersection of lived experience as a member of the untouchable Mahar community and rigorous interdisciplinary training in economics, sociology, anthropology, and jurisprudence at Columbia University and the London School of Economics.[2] Influenced by John Dewey's pragmatism, Enlightenment rationalism, and indigenous anti-caste traditions such as Kabir, Phule, and the Buddha, Ambedkar conceptualized human liberation not as an abstract metaphysical ideal, but as a concrete restructuring of social relations.[3] For Ambedkar, the emancipation of marginalised communities required dismantling the ideological, economic, and legal pillars that normalized structural violence and denied human dignity to millions.

A foundational premise of Ambedkar's emancipatory philosophy is that effective social transformation necessitates an accurate diagnosis of the pathology of oppression. In his 1916 Columbia University seminar paper, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, Ambedkar rejected colonial racial theories and simplistic economic determinism, identifying endogamy superimposed upon exogamy as the defining structural mechanism of caste.[4] by enclosing social groups within rigid matrimonial boundaries, caste prevented social fusion and institutionalized hereditary hierarchy.

Two decades later, in *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar deepened this sociological critique into a devastating moral and political indictment. He argued that the caste system is not merely a "division of labour," as its apologists claimed, but an unnatural "division of labourers" into watertight compartments devoid of individual aptitude, choice, or mobility.[5] Crucially, Ambedkar formulated the concept of graded inequality to explain the extraordinary resilience of the caste order.[6] Unlike binary class conflict, where a unified proletariat confronts a bourgeoisie, graded inequality arranges castes along an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt. Because every intermediate caste enjoys superiority over those below it while suffering subordination to those above it, the oppressed are prevented from forming a unified revolutionary coalition against the system as a whole.[7]

Furthermore, Ambedkar demonstrated that caste destroys public spirit, civic empathy, and the capacity for collective action what he termed "anti-social spirit."[8] Because caste loyalty supersedes universal human solidarity, virtue becomes caste-bound and morality is reduced to ritual compliance. Consequently, Ambedkar argued that piecemeal reforms such as temple entry or inter-caste dining were wholly inadequate.[9] True emancipation required the annihilation of caste itself, which meant repudiating the sacred authority of the *Shastras* and *Smritis* (such as the *Manusmriti*) that provided theological sanction to social inequality.[10] Ambedkar's political philosophy reimagined democracy far beyond the procedural mechanics of periodic elections, majority rule, and parliamentary institutions. Drawing directly on John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, Ambedkar defined democracy as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" and "essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen."

In his celebrated address to the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, he warned that India was entering a "life of contradictions":[11] political equality ("one man, one vote, and one vote, one value") was being established alongside entrenched social and economic inequality. [12]

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2 Zelliot, E. (1996). *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar movement* (pp. 53–78). Manohar.

3 Omvedt, G. (2004). *Ambedkar: Towards an enlightened India* (pp. 15–32). Penguin Books.

4 Ambedkar, B. R. (1979). Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 8–10). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1917)

5 Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition (S. Anand, Ed., p. 233). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

6 Zelliot, E. (1996). *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar movement* (pp. 53–78). Manohar.

7 Omvedt, G. (2004). *Ambedkar: Towards an enlightened India* (pp. 15–32). Penguin Books.

8 Ambedkar, B. R. (1979). Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 8–10). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1917)

9 Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed., p. 233). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

10 Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr Ambedkar and untouchability: Analysing and fighting caste* (pp. 31–44). Permanent Black.

11 Ambedkar, B. R. (1989). Untouchables or the children of India's ghetto. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 5, pp. 101–102). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1945)

12 Ambedkar, B. R. (1989). Untouchables or the children of India's ghetto. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 5, pp. 101–102). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1945)

To resolve this contradiction, Ambedkar articulated a tripartite framework of liberty, equality, and fraternity, insisting that these principles form an indivisible trinity.[13] Without equality, liberty produces the supremacy of the few over the many; without liberty, equality kills individual initiative; and without fraternity which Ambedkar equated with social endosmosis and deep human solidarity liberty and equality cannot become a natural course of things, requiring constant police enforcement.[14]

Recognizing that formal majoritarian democracy in a caste-ridden society risked degenerating into permanent communal majoritarianism, Ambedkar championed constitutional morality.[15] Borrowing the term from George Grote, he argued that democratic institutions require citizens and state actors to subordinate traditional religious customs, caste prejudices, and populist passions to the supreme authority of constitutional norms. Through his stewardship of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar embedded transformative provisions into the Indian Constitution, beginning with the Abolition of Untouchability (Article 17), which criminalized untouchability in all forms and thereby intervened directly in the private social sphere rather than merely regulating state action.[16]

He further secured Substantive Equality and Non-Discrimination (Articles 14, 15, and 16) by prohibiting discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, while enabling affirmative action (reservations) in public employment and education to rectify historical exclusion.[17] Finally, he institutionalized Constitutional Remedies (Article 32), empowering marginalized citizens to directly approach the Supreme Court to enforce fundamental rights, a provision Ambedkar famously described as the "heart and soul" of the Constitution.

While radical critics have interrogated the limits of liberal constitutionalism in overcoming entrenched caste hegemony, Dalit movements across India have historically appropriated the Constitution as a radical charter of emancipation and self-respect against upper-caste backlash. Moreover, Ambedkar's earlier constitutional memoranda demonstrated his persistent effort to secure separate political safeguards so that depressed classes would not be handed over unprotected to majoritarian rule.

Trained primarily as an economist, Ambedkar understood that social degradation and economic exploitation are mutually reinforcing. In his seminal essay *States and Minorities*, submitted to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation, Ambedkar formulated a blueprint for State Socialism within a parliamentary democratic framework. He argued that laissez-faire capitalism inevitably forces the poor and marginalized to surrender their fundamental liberties in exchange for basic subsistence, rendering constitutional rights illusory for the landless and unemployed. To safeguard marginalized communities from both feudal village landlords and industrial capitalists, Ambedkar proposed:

Nationalization of Key Industries and Agriculture: Advocating that key industries be owned and run by the state, and that agricultural land be nationalized and leased to collective farms without distinction of caste or creed, thereby breaking the agrarian monopoly of dominant castes over Dalit agricultural labourers.[18]

As Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946), Ambedkar pioneered foundational labour legislation in India, establishing the eight-hour workday, minimum wages, dearness allowance, trade union recognition, employment exchanges, and the Employees' State Insurance scheme.[19] In the Bombay Legislative Council, he campaigned tirelessly to abolish the *Mahar Watan* system a hereditary feudal arrangement that bound Mahars to perform unpaid or poorly compensated village menial duties and the *Khoti* system of exploitative landlordism in

13 Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed., p. 244). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

14 Limboo, I. Y. (2025). B.R. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste: A comprehensive analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 13(3), 412–418.

15 Parmar, R. P. (2026). Comments on the Indian social system concerning Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste. *Research Journal of English, 11*(1), 280–289. https://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.01.289

16 Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed., p. 260). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

17 Ambedkar, B. R. (1994). Speech on the adoption of the Constitution in the Constituent Assembly (November 25, 1949).

18 Rodrigues, V. (Ed.). (2002). *The essential writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (pp. 263–265). Oxford University Press.

19 Thorat, S. (2009). *Dalits in India: Search for a common destiny* (pp. 28–39). SAGE Publications.

the Konkan region.[20] This legislative struggle against agrarian serfdom established the material foundation for Dalit self-assertion in western India.[21] For Ambedkar, untouchability was not merely a religious taboo; it was "a system of unmitigated economic exploitation" without obligation on the part of the exploiter.[22] Economic independence achieved through land redistribution, state-led industrialization, modern education, and dignified non-hereditary employment was therefore indispensable for breaking the material dependency of marginalised communities.[23]

Long before the term "intersectionality" entered contemporary feminist theory, Ambedkar identified the structural entanglement of caste and patriarchy. In *Castes in India*, he demonstrated that the survival of caste endogamy depended entirely on the rigid policing of female sexuality through institutions such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, and *sati*.[24] Women, he observed, were treated as the "gateways" to the caste system; controlling women was the primary mechanism for maintaining caste purity and numerical parity within enclosed groups.[25]

Ambedkar's feminist praxis was both theoretically rigorous and legislatively transformative:

Grassroots Mobilization: During the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) and the Kalaram Temple Entry movement (1930), Ambedkar explicitly mobilized Dalit women to discard caste-imposed markers of inferiority, educate their daughters, and claim public space as autonomous political agents.[26] He famously declared that he measured the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women had achieved.[27]

Reproductive and Labour Rights: In 1938, Ambedkar supported a resolution in the Bombay Legislative Assembly advocating access to birth control for women to protect their health and personal autonomy, while later introducing the Mines Maternity Benefit Act and championing equal pay for equal work for women workers.[28]

The Hindu Code Bill: As independent India's first Law Minister, Ambedkar drafted the comprehensive Hindu Code Bill, seeking to codify and reform Hindu personal laws by granting women absolute property and inheritance rights, abolishing polygamy, legalizing inter-caste marriages, and recognizing a woman's right to divorce and maintenance.[29] When orthodox elements inside and outside Parliament stalled the bill, Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in 1951, stating that leaving inequality between class and class, and between sex and sex, untouched while passing economic legislation would be to "build a palace on a dung heap."[30]

In the final phase of his life, Ambedkar concluded that legal rights, political representation, and economic development, while necessary, were insufficient to eradicate the psychological and cultural degradation inflicted by centuries of untouchability. Because caste was anchored in religious belief, true emancipation required a spiritual and ethical revolution a "conversion" of consciousness. Having declared at the Yeola Conference in 1935 that though

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20 Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India* (pp. 151–164). SAGE Publications.

21 Audi, M. J. (1989). Ambedkar's struggle for untouchables: Reflections. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 307–320. [suspicious link removed]

22 Ambedkar, B. R. (1989). Untouchables or the children of India's ghetto. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 5, p. 94). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1945)

23 Mendelsohn, O., & Vicziany, M. (1998). *The untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India* (pp. 118–136). Cambridge University Press.

24 Ambedkar, B. R. (1979). Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development. In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 1, pp. 11–14).

25 Rege, S. (2013). *Against the madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's writings on Brahmanical patriarchy* (pp. 13–36). Navayana.

26 Paik, S. (2014). *Dalit women's education in modern India: Double discrimination* (pp. 44–62). Routledge.

27 Ambedkar, B. R. (2003). Speech at the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, Nagpur (July 20, 1942). In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 17, Part 3, p. 282). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1942)

28 Jodhka, S. S. (2012). Caste: *Oxford India short introductions* (pp. 88–95). Oxford University Press.

29 Begari, J. (Ed.). (2021). *B.R. Ambedkar and social transformation: Revisiting the philosophy and reclaiming social justice* (pp. 112–128). Routledge.

30 Ambedkar, B. R. (1995). Statement on resignation from the Cabinet on the Hindu Code Bill (October 10, 1951). In V. Moon (Ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 14, Part 2, p. 1325). Education Department, Government of Maharashtra. (Original work published 1951)

born a Hindu, he would not die a Hindu, Ambedkar spent two decades studying world religions before embracing Buddhism on October 14, 1956, at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur alongside nearly half a million followers.[31] In doing so, he framed the Buddhist conversion as a historic counter-revolution against Brahmanical orthodoxy and a reclamation of India's egalitarian heritage.

In his posthumously published magnum opus, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar articulated Navayana (the "New Vehicle"), a rationalist, socially engaged reconstruction of Buddhism[32] He stripped traditional Buddhism of fatalistic interpretations of *karma* and rebirth which blamed the oppressed for their suffering in past lives and recentered the *Dhamma* on rational understanding (*Prajna*) and compassion (*Karuna*).Scholars further observe that Ambedkar's Buddhist ethics deeply informed his judicial and constitutional philosophy, grounding human rights in moral interdependence rather than mere state coercion.

Through the Twenty-Two Vows administered during the 1956 conversion, Ambedkar inaugurated a counter-hegemonic cultural revolution. Rejecting Hindu deities, priests, and caste distinctions, *Navayana* Buddhism offered marginalised communities a dignified moral identity and an emancipatory internationalism rooted in human solidarity.[33] Today, this Buddhist normativity continues to serve as a vital instrument of anti-caste cultural assertion and social justice across contemporary India.

Contemporary Relevance and Critical Reflections

In the twenty-first century, Ambedkar's framework of social transformation remains vital for addressing persistent structural inequalities. Despite seventy-five years of constitutional governance, caste endogamy remains overwhelmingly dominant and classical notions of justice frequently obscure radical anti-caste critiques.[34] Simultaneously, Dalits and Adivasis remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and precarious labour, while neoliberal privatization has eroded public-sector affirmative action.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship engages critically with the tensions within Ambedkar's legacy. Radical commentators emphasize the need to reclaim Ambedkar's anti-capitalist and anti-caste praxis from symbolic co-optation by state and majoritarian forces. Meanwhile, political theorists highlight how Ambedkar's synthesis of constitutionalism, economic democracy, intersectional gender justice, and ethical humanism provides an enduring theoretical grammar of public life from the social margins.[35] Across diverse global contexts, his writings continue to inspire subaltern struggles seeking substantive dignity and democratic transformation.

Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy of social transformation offers a holistic, multi-dimensional blueprint for the emancipation of marginalised communities. By demonstrating that caste is an integrated system of sociological enclosure, economic exploitation, patriarchal control, and religious sanction, Ambedkar showed that liberation cannot be achieved through partial remedies. His enduring motto "Educate, Agitate, Organize" encapsulates this comprehensive praxis: intellectual awakening to demystify oppressive ideologies, collective political struggle to dismantle unjust power structures, and institutional organization to sustain democratic solidarity. Ultimately, Ambedkar's thought transcends the boundaries of Indian social history, standing as a universal philosophy of human dignity, substantive justice, and radical democracy.

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31 Meshram, P. S. (2021). *Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar: 14th October 1956, the greatest-ever religious conversion, Nagpur* (pp. 65–89). Buddhist World Press.

32 Ambedkar, B. R. (1992). *The Buddha and his Dhamma. In V. Moon (Ed.), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and speeches* (Vol. 11, pp. 121–134).

33 Queen, C. S. (2024). Buddhist roots of Ambedkar's judicial philosophy. CASTE: *A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, 5*(2), 287–301. https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v5i2.2289

34 Guru, G. (2018). The classical and the radical in the concept of social justice. In C. J. Thomas & P. Kakoti (Eds.), *Towards social justice* (pp. 49–64). Pentagon Press.

35 Rodrigues, V. (2024). *Ambedkar's political philosophy: A grammar of public life from the social margins* (pp. 210–238). Oxford University Press.

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