

Relevance of Ambedkar's Political Philosophy in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's political philosophy, rooted in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, continues to resonate with pressing issues in contemporary India. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar envisioned democracy not merely as a form of government but as a tool for social transformation. This article critically examines the core tenets of Ambedkar's political thought—social democracy, constitutionalism, annihilation of caste, and economic justice—and evaluates their relevance against today's backdrop of caste-based violence, economic disparity, and political polarization. Drawing on his contributions to labor rights, his radical opposition to the caste system, and his strategic embrace of Buddhism as a form of resistance, the paper explores how Ambedkar's ideas have been both co-opted and misinterpreted by contemporary political forces. It further analyzes the dilution of Ambedkarite politics among Dalit elites and NGOs, the ideological tensions and potential alliances with Left movements, and the growing urgency of embedding Ambedkar's vision in current governance and civil society. Ultimately, the article argues for a renewed commitment to Ambedkar's emancipatory framework as a means to safeguard India's democratic ethos in the face of rising authoritarianism and social inequality.

Keywords: *B.R. Ambedkar, social democracy, constitutionalism, political philosophy, Dalit politics, social justice.*

I. Introduction

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) was the principal architect of India's Constitution and a towering visionary in Indian political thought. He dedicated his life to “fighting discrimination” and reimagining Indian democracy. Ambedkar's political philosophy defined democracy not merely as elections or the rule of law, but as a tool for radical social and economic transformation. As one scholar summarizes, Ambedkar's ideas were “centered on liberty, equality, fraternity, and the complete dismantling of the caste system”. In practical terms he strove to extend the principles of political democracy into everyday life – stressing that formal freedom and self-government mean little if society remains stratified by birth. In Ambedkar's own words: “We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well,” for otherwise democracy “will not survive for very long”.

This article examines Ambedkar's core political ideas and asks: to what extent do they still offer a guide for India today? We draw on Ambedkar's writings, scholarly analyses, and party literature (including CPI's *People's Democracy*) to assess how Ambedkar's ideals of social democracy, economic justice and caste annihilation remain relevant, and how they are being misinterpreted or forgotten in contemporary politics.

II. Understanding Ambedkar's Political Philosophy

Ambedkar's political philosophy blended liberal-democratic institutions with radical social reform. He famously critiqued standard Western definitions of democracy. Walter Bagehot's phrase “government by discussion” and Lincoln's “government of the people, by the people, for the people” did not satisfy him. Rather, Ambedkar insisted democracy must involve “**fundamental changes in the social and economic life of the people**” achieved without violence. He argued that legal equality alone could not break India's old hierarchies; democracy had to be linked to social revolution. In his view, Indian “democracy” meant using political power to achieve economic and social equality on a mass scale.

Ambedkar envisioned **social democracy** – a society of liberty, equality and fraternity – as the only stable foundation for political democracy. He insisted that the goal of society was to allow everyone “to have a full and satisfying life” and to remove **all social barriers** between people. In such a society, “the value of a man, not his origin, is the measure of man”.

Ambedkar's liberal-humanist ideals are captured in the trinity *swarajya–swaraj–swarajya* (self-government–self-rule–self-realization), as he defined it, meaning that social and economic emancipation must accompany political liberty. He famously declared that India's democracy had to be “social democracy” at its base.

Several **key principles** follow from Ambedkar's philosophy:

- **One Man, One Vote, One Value:** Beyond recognizing each adult's political vote, Ambedkar insisted on “one man, one vote, one value” in **social and economic** life. In other words, caste and class hierarchies must not translate into unequal treatment or worth in society. Political equality had to penetrate into employment, education, property and family life.
- **Constitutionalism and Socialism:** Ambedkar combined faith in constitutional democracy with socialism. He believed change should come through **constitutional means** – legislation, planning, welfare programs – rather than rebellion. Yet he also demanded **state intervention** for equity: progressive taxes, land reform, and even state ownership of “primary industries” to ensure workers and peasants shared in national wealth. His conception of socialism thus mixed state-guided redistribution with parliamentary democracy.
- **Annihilation of Caste:** For Ambedkar, caste was the principal barrier to Indian democracy. He called for the “*annihilation of caste*” through mass education and economic uplift, not just ritual reform. As he stated in 1950, the only way to end caste was “by virtue of socio-educational-economic upliftment” of the depressed majority. This meant not only political representation for Dalits and Adivasis but policies like land redistribution and separate settlements to give them material independence from upper castes.
- **Liberty, Equality, Fraternity:** Ambedkar anchored all his reforms in these three ideals, which he saw as inseparable. He repeatedly emphasized that Indian society must be founded on equal worth of all individuals and mutual respect. Any political order must also guarantee civil liberties and communal tolerance – Ambedkar was an uncompromising secularist, insisting democracy include freedom of conscience and religion.

Ambedkar defined democracy in expansive terms. It was not mere majority rule, but **social revolution without violence**: “revolutionary changes in the economic and social lives of people” effected by law and education, not force. In Ambedkar’s view, India’s political philosophy needed to be a program of social transformation.

III. Ambedkar and the Constitution: A Political Tool for Social Change

As Chairman of the Constituent Assembly’s Drafting Committee (1947–49), Ambedkar was uniquely positioned to embed his ideas into the Constitution. He viewed the Constitution itself as an instrument of peaceful revolution. He famously said that democracy allows “revolutionary changes in the economic and social lives” “*without the use of violence*”. In debates, Ambedkar insisted that the new Republic must guarantee not only universal suffrage but also equality before law, abolition of untouchability, free speech, and state welfare obligations – thereby using constitutional law to attack social privilege.

At the same time, Ambedkar warned of a fatal contradiction: India would proclaim universal voting yet be unable to practice social equality. In the Constituent Assembly on 26 January 1950, he remarked:

“On this day... we shall live in a life full of contrasts. In politics we shall accept one man, one vote; as far as social and economic life is concerned, [however], we can never accept one man, one value... How long shall we continue living a life full of contrasts?”.

He cautioned that persisting in this hypocrisy would “jeopardize” Indian democracy. Ambedkar thus saw the Constitution not as an end but as a **framework** for ongoing struggle: it could outlaw old injustices, but must be backed by mass social change. Even after 1949, he continued to speak of the Constitution as a “flag” for future reforms (for example, by advocating constitutional amendments to empower the poor).

Despite Ambedkar’s hopes, many of these contradictions remain. Scholars note that the Indian Constitution’s lofty ideals of equality and fraternity are still being tested by social realities. Nevertheless, the fact that India’s legal foundation contains Ambedkar’s social-

democratic commitments provides a basis for activists and reformers to appeal to in ongoing struggles.

IV. Labour Rights and Economic Justice: A Political Act

Ambedkar's politics were profoundly rooted in the lot of India's workers, peasants and women. In 1936, well before independence, he founded the **Independent Labour Party (ILP)** in Bombay (and later in other provinces) to campaign specifically for labour interests, since the Congress showed little concern for them. The ILP's platform demanded fair wages, regulated working hours, safe work conditions, affordable housing, and land reform for peasants. For example, under Ambedkar's influence the official workday was cut from fourteen to eight hours. In the late 1930s ILP teamed with socialist groups to lead peasants' marches and strikes; one historian notes that Ambedkar's ILP was India's "first leftist party," and that it and allied union groups organized mass demonstrations of peasants and workers against feudal and colonial labor laws.

After independence, as India's first Labour Minister, Ambedkar translated these goals into legislation. He drafted or championed many pioneering labor laws. These included the **Women and Child Labour (Protection) Act**, the **Maternity Benefit Act**, and a new **Factories Act** (for example, limiting overtime and improving safety). He launched the **Employees' State Insurance (ESI) scheme** to provide healthcare and accident insurance for workers. He secured a new safety law for coal miners (Coal Mines (Stowing) Act 1944). In 1943 he even introduced a bill to mandate employer recognition of trade unions – an unusually militant step for the time. Later measures for labour welfare (like dearness allowances, wage boards, health insurance schemes) also trace to Ambedkar's influence.

These accomplishments reflect Ambedkar's belief that the voiceless poor were central to democracy. As one summary puts it, Ambedkar was "the consummate speaker for the voiceless members of society, including women, landless labourers, small peasant farmers, and working-class employees". He saw political power for workers not as a concession but as *the core* of democracy. In an oft-quoted formulation, he argued that placing political power in the hands of the oppressed majority would itself go a long way toward "annihilating caste" and inequality. In short, Ambedkar's labour politics turned social and economic rights into a "political act," treating workers' welfare as the essence, not the fringe, of democratic reform.

V. Ambedkar's Political Strategy Against Caste Hierarchy

At the heart of Ambedkar's thought was a rigorous analysis of India's caste order. He showed that Indian society was built on "**graded inequality**", in which people were ranked by birth. He wrote that "the basic foundations of Indian society were built on a foundation of graded inequity" under religious dogma. This understanding informed his entire strategy. He detailed how caste enslaved Dalit labour in rural areas, preventing them from improving their condition. Ambedkar argued that the combination of feudal landholding, hereditary occupation and debt bonded Dalit workers to landlords, which in turn stifled economic progress. To address this, he advocated sweeping agrarian reforms. Among his proposals were **collective or equalized land holdings** and **distribution of waste or government land to the landless**. He urged the government to provide farm inputs (credit, tools, seeds) and guaranteed minimum wages to ensure Dalit and peasant families could sustain themselves. In effect, Ambedkar pushed for land ceilings and land reform (some of which post-independence governments later attempted) as a way to break the caste-based monopoly on land.

Ambedkar also famously proposed **separate settlements for Dalits** (Dalit bastis) in villages, arguing that physical separation could free Dalits from upper-caste social control. While this idea was controversial even among his followers, it showed his willingness to imagine radical departures from the caste system. His larger point was that dismantling caste required structural change in rural India – not merely moral appeals. As one commentary notes, Ambedkar's political demands for separate electorates, urban jobs for Dalits, and land distribution were all aimed at giving oppressed castes a base outside Hindu orthodoxy.

Most dramatically, Ambedkar concluded that Indian emancipation required a break with Hinduism itself. He came to believe that caste could not be reformed from within. As the CPI author B.V. Raghavulu explains, Ambedkar "firmly believed that as long as Hinduism exists, caste system and untouchability will exist," so Dalits could only be freed by escaping its hold. In 1956 Ambedkar enacted this belief by converting to Buddhism along with roughly half a million followers – a collective act of resistance proclaiming a new egalitarian faith. This move underscored the political nature of his anti-caste strategy: caste was not merely a social issue but a political one requiring a break in cultural allegiance.

Ambedkar's ultimate aim in attacking caste was "annihilation of caste" – ending it through empowerment and solidarity. He insisted this would occur through "socio-educational-economic upliftment" of the oppressed. In summary, Ambedkar confronted graded inequality by advocating land and labour reforms in the villages, building Dalit social institutions, and ultimately seeking to exit the caste orthodoxy altogether.

VI. Contemporary Political Appropriation and Misinterpretation

Today, Ambedkar has become a contested symbol in India's political landscape. Major parties vie to claim his legacy, often twisting it to their own ends. For example, the Congress Party has been "trying to re-embrace Ambedkar" to recapture Dalit support after losing ground in recent elections. Similarly, the BJP-led Sangh Parivar has courted Ambedkar's image – but in a highly selective way. Sangh outfits often depict Ambedkar as a Hindu reformer or nationalist who 'purified' Hinduism of excesses. They emphasize his conversion to Buddhism as a "Hindu" act and downplay his critique of caste. As Raghavulu scathingly observes, these attempts to co-opt Ambedkar are disingenuous: Ambedkar's ideas are "completely against" the Hindutva project. He devoted his life to annihilating caste and ultimately rejected Hinduism for precisely that reason. Thus, while parties claim his mantle, they often omit the radical content of his thought.

Parallel to partisan appropriation is a kind of **Ambedkar symbol-worship** that obscures substance. Numerous NGOs, temple trusts and politicians now use Ambedkar's name and image, but often as a branding exercise. As one analysis notes, there are "a large number of nongovernmental organisations... that bear the name Babasaheb Ambedkar," yet his real ideas "are not getting through" to ordinary people. Many such organizations focus on conferences, statues and fund-raising rather than grassroots agitation. Equally, the cult of Ambedkar as a quasi-deity has grown. Ironically, Ambedkar himself warned that if Dalits ever start worshipping his portrait or idolizing him, that will mark the *death* of his movement. Commentators underline that what Ambedkar demanded was *following his philosophy*, not erecting shrines to his memory.

In practice, this conflation of Ambedkar with image has meant that much of the contemporary "Ambedkarite" scene is driven by ritual, personal ambition, or bureaucracy rather than mass action. The result is a gap between Ambedkar's revolutionary program and its

heirs today. In short, Ambedkar's thought is widely evoked – but often as an empty symbol rather than a concrete guide to reform (as we will explore in the next section).

VII. Disconnect Between Ambedkarism and Present-Day Dalit Politics

Scholars and activists frequently lament that mainstream Dalit politics has drifted from Ambedkar's original vision. A new **Dalit elite** has emerged: better-educated, often affluent individuals who have scaled the socioeconomic ladder but who may be disconnected from the masses. Some commentators argue that capitalism has “absorbed” Dalit talent into the upper strata, reinforcing rather than dismantling inequality. In practical terms, this means that a few Dalit leaders enjoy power and privilege (sometimes even aligning with conservative parties) while the majority of Dalits see little change.

A vivid critique of this trend comes from studies of “neo-ambedkarite” culture. One author describes a class of prospered Dalits who have “enjoyed a seemingly rich culture” and treat Ambedkar more as a badge of status than a mobilizer. This new elite often shelters their children from hardship (in contrast to older activists) and rarely engage in collective struggle. The sense of solidarity that Ambedkar demanded appears diluted. Alongside this, many Dalit organizations have taken bureaucratic or NGO forms. Instead of popular movements, much of Ambedkarite activism now operates through formal committees, governmental boards, or international development channels. Critics note that these NGOs “are more concerned with making money off of the government's coffers than... disseminating Ambedkar's message”.

Perhaps most worrying, observers report a **weakening transmission** of Ambedkar's ideals to younger generations. As one study finds, “very few people subscribe to [his] social philosophy” today. Mass media and education in many places celebrate Ambedkar's portraiture and personal story, but rarely teach his ideas about social democracy or class struggle. Meanwhile, religious or cultural currents have filled the vacuum. Many Dalits have turned to devotional or spiritual movements – even reviving traditions of Hindu saints – for identity and social uplift. Commentators note that “religious and spiritual ideology [is] coming to dominate social ideology” among Dalits. In short, Ambedkar's secular, systemic critique of oppression has not been effectively passed down. The Dalit movement's historical anti-Brahmin, anti-feudal edge has given way in many places to a more accommodating or individualistic stance.

Without sustained organization and education, Ambedkarism risks becoming a few slogans or rituals, rather than a living movement of the oppressed.

VIII. Need for Ambedkarite Political Philosophy Today

Despite these challenges, most analysts agree Ambedkar's political philosophy still speaks powerfully to India's conditions. India's **caste violence and inequality** have not vanished. Dalits continue to face brutal crimes – murders, rapes, honor killings – especially when they attempt to assert equality (e.g. by inter-caste marriage or challenging discriminatory practices). Even Dalit political representatives often encounter threats and repression by local caste majorities. These facts underscore that Ambedkar's life work remains unfinished. In the words of recent scholarship, these “modern manifestations of caste discrimination” only reinforce Ambedkar's insistence on dismantling caste **in everyday life, not just on paper**.

Ambedkar's prescriptions – universal education, affirmative state support, political empowerment of the downtrodden – are routinely cited as still necessary. He believed that empowering Dalits with education and economic resources would enable them to escape exploitation. Today India still struggles to provide quality schooling and jobs for its poorest citizens. Affirmative action policies (quotas) have expanded, but new analysts note that without social reform, legal safeguards are not self-executing. In this vein, Ambedkar's distinction between **law** and **social change** is frequently invoked: the Constitution abolished untouchability by law, yet caste stigma persists in villages and institutions, just as Ambedkar warned.

Beyond caste, India is grappling with religious **communalism and democratic backsliding**. Ambedkar championed secularism as essential to equality. His vision demanded “dignity, education, and empowerment” accessible to all “regardless of caste, creed, or religion”. At a time of rising Hindu nationalism and shrinking space for dissent, Ambedkar's commitment to constitutional morality and minority rights is often cited as a corrective. Moreover, he repeatedly warned that unresolved social injustices would undermine democracy itself. As Ambedkar told the Constituent Assembly, “If we persist in denying equality in our social and economic life, we will put our democratic system in jeopardy”. In short, the “crisis of democracy” in India – manifesting as polarization, corruption and inequality – calls for Ambedkarite remedies: equal citizenship, social solidarity, and institutional checks on power.

Every major challenge India faces today — caste oppression, economic exclusion, communal strife — is one that Ambedkar's political philosophy anticipated. His ideal of a social democracy, linking political rights with social justice, remains a potent framework for reform. As Dash (2025) concludes, Ambedkar's vision of social justice "remains just as relevant today as it was during his time", guiding activists who seek to convert formal equality into real, everyday equality.

IX. Ambedkar and the Left: Scope for Political Unity

Ambedkar and the Marxist Left in India have had a complex relationship, marked by both tension and overlap. Ambedkar was never formally a Marxist; he described himself as a "socialist." Yet he engaged deeply with socialist ideas, and at times his analysis ran parallel to Marx's critique of capitalism. For example, Ambedkar came to see caste as essentially a form of class. As one scholar notes, Ambedkar treated a caste as "an enclosed class," blending economic and social dimensions. He even reportedly sketched out a work titled *India and Communism* and interacted with communist thought in the 1940s.

In practice, Ambedkarism and Marxism sometimes overlapped. His Independent Labour Party (ILP) collaborated with Socialist and Communist groups in organizing peasants and workers in the late 1930s. Historians point out that in 1938, ILP joined with the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and the CPI-affiliated AITUC to lead a 20,000-strong peasant march, explicitly fusing caste grievances with class demands. The ILP also co-led a mass strike of one lakh workers in 1943 against exploitative labor laws, alongside communist unions. Such episodes show how Ambedkar's movement could – at least then – merge class and caste struggles. Ambedkar himself conceded that caste oppression and class exploitation were interlinked; he never denied the importance of economic struggle, even as he insisted social reform was fundamental.

Despite these commonalities, political differences have often driven the two movements apart. In the decades after independence, many Dalit activists viewed communism with suspicion or outright hostility. Left thinkers have criticized this as a strategic mistake. Anand Teltumbde argues that Dalit politics became obsessed with rejecting Marxism, allowing many Dalit leaders to enter ruling circles (even far-right ones) while scorning cooperation with leftists. He notes, for instance, that several prominent Dalit politicians later joined the BJP and

denounced alliances with communists, even though Ambedkar's own grandson pressed for a united front of socialists and communists in the 1990s. Teltumbde and others insist that Ambedkar's anti-caste vision is compatible with left ideals: Ambedkar explicitly stated that if socialists want real socialism, they "must recognise that the problem of social reform is fundamental".

Some contemporary left-wing commentators and Dalit activists argue for bridging the divide. They point out that India's capitalist system has constantly co-opted Dalit talent to stabilize itself – an analysis that echoes both Marx and Ambedkar. CPI theorists emphasize that only a class-caste united movement can truly end mass oppression; they lament that many Dalit intellectuals remain "anti-Marxist" and fail to see how capitalism sustains caste hierarchy. In recent years, there have been calls for strategic unity: for example, Ambedkarites and communists jointly organized 'anti-communal' platforms against Hindutva. Even parties like the CPI(M) and CPI sometimes foreground Ambedkar's socialist ideas in their election manifestos, aiming to appeal to Dalit workers.

There is scope for political convergence. As Chaman Lal observes, Ambedkar was "in constant dialogue with Communist thought" on key issues. While the two traditions have different origins and emphases – Marxists historically prioritized class, Ambedkarites prioritized caste – both fundamentally oppose inequality and exploitation. In the face of today's neoliberal and sectarian challenges, many activists argue that "class-caste unity" is more necessary than ever. The life of India's poor and Dalit majority, they note, often shows no clear separation between caste exploitation and economic exploitation: hybrid strategies that draw from both Ambedkarite and Marxist thought are needed. The future of progressive politics may well depend on forging such coalitions.

X. Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's political philosophy continues to have profound relevance for India. As one recent study concludes, his vision for social justice "remains just as relevant today as it was during his time". The ideals he championed – of liberty, equality, fraternity and democracy for all – still point the way toward addressing India's deepest problems. Ambedkar's insistence that political rights must be matched by social and economic empowerment remains a vital lesson. In practice, India's current struggles – against caste

violence, landlessness, economic exclusion and communalism – mirror those Ambedkar identified, and his solutions (mass education, land and labour reforms, secularism, federated rights) remain touchstones.

However, the path forward requires more than symbolic homage. Ambedkar himself warned that mere reverence would betray his mission: “the day people begin to worship me will be the day I have really passed away”. Today’s task is to **embed** Ambedkar’s spirit into policy and movement. This means working to implement the principles he laid out – for instance, genuine social justice legislation, robust welfare programs, and grassroots mobilization of the poor – rather than settling for the form of democracy or honoring his memory alone. As scholars argue, our duty is “to transmit Ambedkar’s philosophy to subsequent generations” and adapt it to contemporary needs. Only by placing real political power in the hands of the disadvantaged (the “majority”) can India begin to realize Ambedkar’s dream of annihilating caste and securing liberty, equality and fraternity for all.

Ambedkar’s political philosophy offers a living critique of Indian democracy and a blueprint for its renewal. His continuing relevance lies in its call for action: to use constitutional democracy to win economic justice and social inclusion. Whether through policy reforms or grassroots movements, rekindling the Ambedkarite commitment to equality remains crucial if India is to overcome its contradictions and fulfill the promise of its own Constitution.

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