

# Revisiting Ambedkar In The Era Of Socio-Political Crisis

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## Abstract

India has been experiencing the era of perverted socio-political order, in which the majoritarian are rudely dominating all the political institutions and the sufferings of the marginalised are heightening further. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made optimum efforts towards establishment of the egalitarian social order and freeing the marginalized and Dalits from the cruelty of India's social and political evils. However, despite the constitutional safeguards, Dalits are not allowed to be free from the humiliation, violence and discrimination. Seemingly, Indian society at large failed to develop humanism towards the marginalised. Even today India is grappled with myriad social, economic, political and other problems including the pathetic and exploitative situation of the labours mostly belonged to the backward and depressed castes/Dalits, the worsening violence and heinous crimes against women mostly the Dalits, and the perverted democratic phase that leading towards the fanatic totalitarianism or democratic-fascism. Given the prevailing sombre socio-political ambience, Ambedkar's philosophy matters a lot. This paper tries to revisit Ambedkar's perspective on the welfare of the labours and women, and on the democracy of his dream.

## Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution as the main architect of the constitution for Independent India upheld great applause and appreciation. His vision in the constitution has been aimed at discouraging the discrimination on the basis of caste, class, gender and others. In the words of Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2020), "Through the drafting of the Constitution and his politics, Ambedkar played a role in undercutting the possibility of varna dharma dictatorship getting established immediately after the British left." However, today's India has been appearing to be overpowered and controlled by the religious chauvinism, which is pushing India's constitutional democracy into an irreparable upheaval. Many anti-Ambedkarites and the higher caste-chauvinists who do not believe in humanity and human equality and justice, have been vehemently active against the soul of the constitution and have been demanding the rewriting of the constitution to include and legalise the caste hierarchy. And it seems that they have been very proactive in this direction since when they have occupied power position in law making or law amending procedure. In other words, they have occupied all the political institutions only to exploit them whimsically for the self-interest and against the interests of the marginalised and Dalits. Even for that matter, the judiciary, which once was considered as the most trustworthy institution, also has lost its credibility as multiple criticisms are raised against the functioning of the institution.

However, the point here is that Ambedkar's vision of social justice not only represents the Dalits assertion, but it has been motivational for the masses of all sections in the Indian society except for those who wants to re-establish the traditional caste-based hierarchical order to re-dominate it. Ambedkar's philosophy focuses the development of humanism beyond any caste, creed or gender that discarding any sort of discrimination. In other words, 'Social Justice' is the basic aim of the constitution. The fact of the matter is that Ambedkar was never against Hinduism, but the inhuman practices in the Hindu social order. Contrarily, he was portrayed as a villain of the Hindus by few opportunist people who felt their hierarchical dominance fumbling because of Ambedkar's vision and movement for social order based on equality. Given his idea of social justice for the marginalised and Dalits, Kancha Ilaiah (2012) said, "Ambedkar is prophet to a people he created soul and politics for." D. Raja expressed that while describing 'caste as anti-national', Ambedkar wanted to address the scourge of caste discrimination and exclusion through the instrumentality of law, which he poetically described as 'the greatest disinfectant against inequality'. While stating India as an integral whole, Ambedkar during his speech in Constituent Assembly had cautioned, "The sooner we realize that we are not yet a nation in the social and

psychological sense of the word, the better for us. For then only we shall realise the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal.” Therefore, he stressed on justice, not only political and economic but also social justice. According to him, the key components of social justice are liberty, equality and fraternity. Ambedkar said, “The system of rank and gradation is simply another way of enunciating the principle of inequality, so it may be truly said that Hinduism doesn’t recognise equality.” Ambedkar, being a compassionate rebel, found Buddhism closer to his understanding of social justice”(Raja 2016).

The empowerment of people and the reclaiming of their dignity, believing and practicing the principles of liberty, equality, justice and fraternity can establish the just social order. But majoritarian forces in today’s India have been violating and murdering the great ideas of humanity that honestly propounded and dreamt by Ambedkar. Ambedkar’s philosophy has been used rhetorically by all the political parties and leaders merely in ‘decorating’ their speeches, however, in practice, they marginalise his teachings that aiming at the establishment of an egalitarian society. Besides, the politicians hypocritically admire and try to appropriate Ambedkar, but contrarily they hate Ambedkar’s people. Among myriad problems that India is facing because of the selfish and dysfunctional politicians who have majoritarian authority, the dangers to labours and employees and the threats to the life of the women, and the perverting democracy are major problems. Therefore, this paper attempts to revisit Ambedkar’s major efforts in making the life of labours more comfortable, upholding the equal rights and dignity to the women, and his ideas on democracy which he dreamt of.

### **Messiah of the Labours**

The ‘Rational Economist Ambedkar’ had been the great nation builder who had Ph.D. in Economics from the Columbia University on ‘The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India (1923)’ and D.Sc. from the London School of Economics and Politics on ‘The Problem of the Rupee: Its origin and its solution’. However, despite his excellence and expertise in the field of economics, the first government of independent India marginalized him from the policy affairs on economic, planning and development programmes for the country. He was leading expert on currency, banking, and other fields in economy such as free markets, gold standard, economic freedom etc. His Ph.D. thesis on ‘The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India’ had provided academic basis for the Finance Commission of India which was subsequently established under Article 280 of the Constitution to address problems of vertical and horizontal imbalances in finances. Similarly, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was established in 1935 which was conceptualized according to the guidelines presented by Ambedkar to the ‘Royal Commission on Indian Currency & Finance’ in 1925. This Commission’s members had found Ambedkar’s work on ‘The Problem of the Rupee’ as an invaluable reference tool and even the Central Legislative Assembly eventually had passed these guidelines as the RBI Act 1934(Mukherjee 2014). In fact, Ambedkar had the solutions to many of the economic problems in India. He in his research on ‘The Problem of Rupee’ had suggested the rotation or demonetization of the currency after every ten years to control the practice of corruption in India. However, the post-independent governments in India wittingly paid zero attention towards realising and accepting ‘an economist’ in Ambedkar.

In May 1942, a pre-independent period, Ambedkar was appointed as Labour Member in the Viceroy’s Executive Council, and he had performed his work successfully. While being the member, his contribution for the welfare of the labours was remarkable. He had set 8 hours as instead of prevailing 12 hours working for the labours. Besides, the facilities like the Dearness Allowances, Provident Fund, establishment of Employment Office or Exchanges in India, Women’s Labour Welfare Fund, and prohibition of women’s working in the mines, weekly holiday, health facilities, insurance, maternity leaves, Industrial Disputes and Trilateral Labour Council were his major contribution for the Indian labours which he had done with brilliancy, responsibility and commitment. According to Sukhdev Thorat, “The labour policy advocated by Dr. Ambedkar sought; (i) Provision of safeguards and social security measures, (ii) Equal opportunity for workers and employers to participate in formulation of labour policy, (iii) Establishment of machinery for enforcement of labour laws and settlement of disputes, and to achieve this Ambedkar wanted, (a) Setting up of an Indian labour conference and standing labour committees, (b) Enactment of labour laws, c) Establishment of chief labour commissioners, d) Constitution of investigative labour committees and e) Recognition of trade unions. These pioneering ideas have made a significant impact on the labour movements and industrial relations in India” (Thorat, 2000, p.1238).

Moreover, adding about Ambedkar’s contribution for the nation building, he was almost single handedly responsible for establishing the Central Technical Power Board, the National Power Grid

System and the Central Water Irrigation and Navigation Commission. During 1942-46, he evolved the new water and power policy to utilise the water resources of the country. Under the Labour Ministry, Central Energy Commission under his chairmanship focused on River, Dams, Irrigation, and electricity generation, which was known as Multipurpose River Valley Project. Ambedkar played an important role in the establishment of the Damodar Valley project, Hirakud project and Sone river project, Mahanadi Dam, Tungbhadra Dam, Bhangra Dam and others, and about total 8 dams were completed within 4 years because of Ambedkar's major efforts (Central Water Commission 2016). Even for that matter, Ambedkar had a well thought vision to deal with the matters of Inter-State rivers, and The Inter-State Water Disputes Act-1956, "for the adjudication of disputes relating to the waters of inter-state rivers and river valley" and the River Boards Act, 1956, that "provides for the regulation and development of Inter-State rivers valley." In other words, he had grand vision of inter-linking of rivers to prevent floods and divert excess water to drought-hit areas throughout India.

Ambedkar served in the cabinets of both British India and Independent India and also wrote and spoke extensively on political problem and the political process. In fact, from the very beginning since when he countered the social evils in India, he had bold ideas about India's multiple problems also. On Ambedkar's holistic approach towards the myriad problems in India, Eleanor Zelliot narrated;

...welfare of the labouring classes...the principle of the state management and state ownership of industry wherever it may become necessary in the interest of the people...to establish land mortgage banks, agriculturists producers' cooperative and marketing societies and to avoid fragmentation of land. Tenants under the oppressive khoti and talukdari land rent systems...would be protected, and the watan system (which bound mahar to his plot of land in the village by virtue of his hereditary duties) would be amended. Industry would be promoted to drain off the excess population on the land and technical education stressed. Worker's rights were to be guaranteed, unemployment relieved by schemes of land settlement and public works, the tax system reformed to relieve the poor (Zelliot,2001, pp.166-167).

Given majority of the labours are marginalized and Dalits, Ambedkar had suggested and made many provisions in the constitution to resolve the problems of labours and also incorporated the provisions in support and welfare of the labours in the constitution (Directive Principles of State Policy). However, Ambedkar's efforts for the welfare and progress of the marginalised and backward classes seem to be the part of history, now as it appearing, with the draconian anti-labour policies of the government of the day, the labours in India have been facing very pathetic and vulnerable situation. The life of the labour has become absolutely miserable and they are struggling for their survival. It seems that there is no one who can fight for the rights of labours. Even the labour unions or the leaders seem to be vanished or coercively hushed up completely from raising the issues of the labours and poor people. In fact, one of the largest chunks of the labours is Dalit population. The government overtly exhibited its pro-capitalist approach. Capitalist order has been occupying the larger space further merely to exploit and to oppress labours generally and the Dalits particularly. Eventually, despite the poor socio-economic condition which is not mature enough to think about complete privatisation or capitalism, it seems, capitalism is winning in India. Karl Marx's theory of exploitation of the labours by the capitalist forces, appearing to be still relevant and further occupying the larger space in India though Marxist/communist ideologues inclined to be faded. The pro-labour leaders and unions seem to be extinct.

With the rapid privatisation policy of the government, the backward classes and the Dalits appearing to be losing opportunities to occupy the higher positions and other employments in the public sector and even private sector also. In fact, during Congress regimes, educated Dalits could occupy larger space in the public sector jobs because of reservation policy which remained intact though was not implemented thoroughly and honestly, and even employment opportunities were appearing regularly. But now since the ouster of the Congress regime, the party in power wittingly maneuvered to throw out Dalits and backward classes from the employments and from public sector or positions of higher significance by bringing drastic anti-Dalit changes in the reservation policy and the employments in various sectors. The privatization of profit making public sector emerged as the despotic policy to further marginalize the traditionally and already marginalized Dalits and other backward communities only to flourish the well-off forward castes/classes and the capitalists. The tempo of marginalization and discrimination of the Dalits has always been there irrespective of which party occupied and remained in the power in India which is fully laden with the minds of castes. During the Congress regime it was, overtly/covertly, appeared like 'Snail's Walk', while now it appears absolutely overt and like 'Rabbit's

Run' in this process, and the severity of discrimination increased and became open practice. Ultimately, the dominating parties during their respective regimes always believed in the same line of thinking against the marginalized and Dalits, as the elites or policy makers, despite small in numbers, in both the major political parties belong to elite/higher class. Even for that matter, the leftist parties which claimed to be saviours of the labours are also dis-appearing and becoming extinct. The fact is also that even the leftist parties always nurtured the leaders of higher caste at the top of their organisations. During the lockdown period due to Covid-19 in India, it has already proved that labourers have no saviours. The life of labours has no meaning and value in India. Looking at the situation of the labourers, Ambedkar's efforts for the welfare of the labours in public sector and even private sector appearing to be futile today. Ambedkar being the part of the governments, both pre and post-independence, worked for the welfare of the labours, now the idea of labourer's welfare has lost the space from the minds of the men in power.

## On Feminism

Indian women have been living the abject life since a very long time. Ambedkar wanted the empowerment of the women in the Hindu social order and as a Labour Minister in the British Council, by insisting on the equal wages and representation of women on the welfare fund of the coal mines workers actually had begun his movement for the upliftment of the Indian women as a whole. Moreover, the right to maternity leave that the working women have been enjoying in India is because of the efforts made by Ambedkar. Further, he had also supported and emphasized the equal citizenship and women's right to economic development as crucial for women's problems. It has expressed that "Ambedkar's forceful counsel to the Constituent Assembly to frame a common civil code through the Hindu Code Bill needs to be seen as an effort recognized the politically equal Indian woman citizen as an Individual, and not merely as the bearer of the 'honour' of the family, kinship, and community (Rege, 2013, p.193). In this direction, his major efforts were incorporated in the Hindu Code Bill (HCB), which had posed major challenge before the Nehru government to pass it. And eventually the bill faced the opposition from the orthodox Hindus within and outside the government only to be failed. In fact, in 1948, Nehru had nominated Ambedkar as a head of a sub-committee to draft the Hindu Code Bill (HCB).

According to Ambedkar, the nation's progress depends on the degree of the empowerment of woman. In his own words, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved...Above all, let each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal and refuse to be his slave"(Ambedkar, 2003, pp.282-83). He had opined that "On wealth depends independence and a woman must be very particular to retain her wealth and rights, to help retain her freedom" (Rege,2013, p.199). The HCB has been seen as the 'Manifesto of Women's Liberation'. The HCB had the provisions of heightening the level of woman equal to man, which had been missing since very long time in the Indian social order. This was the major effort to maintain an equality of position between the son and the daughter. The HCB was to codify the diverse systems and practices of property related to men and women and had the provisions relating to altering and designing the new laws for the woman's rights of property, order of succession to the property, law of maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption, minority and guardianship, dowry etc(Rodrigues, 2000,pp.495-516). In other words, Ambedkar's HCB mentioned the unprecedented matters such as "the abolition of birthright to property, property by survivorship, half share for daughters, conversion of women's limited estate into an absolute estate, abolition of caste in matters of marriage and adoption, and the principle of monogamy and divorce" (Rege, 2013, p.193). However, the HCB had faced multiple criticisms from the Hindu society of the country. The Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, who later became the first President of India, Dr.Rajendra Prasad had argued that "his wife would never support the divorce clause and it was only 'over-educated' women who favoured the Bill" (Rege, 2013, p.195). It has stated that most of the criticisms were made on the clause related to the abolition of caste restrictions in marriage, monogamy, divorce, and equal share in property for women (Rege, 2013, p.195). Rege analyzed the opposition to HCB as;

Intense opposition came from all quarters. For one, the president threatened to stall the Bill's passage into law. Hindu sadhus laid siege to Parliament. Business houses and landowners warned a withdrawal of support in imminent elections...the Hindu Code Bill posed the imminent threat of women gaining access and control over resources and property, the possibility of removal of the restrictions of caste in marriage and adoption, and the dawn of the right to divorce. All this seemed

to intimidate the structural links between caste, kinship and property that form the very core of Brahminical patriarchy(Rege, 2013, p.200).

Even for that matter Nehru also surrendered before the anti-bill forces to save his government and position and stayed against his Law Minister and impassionate colleague, said Kancha Ilaiah (2016). Furthermore, according to the RSS, which was published in the Organiser in 1949, as stated by Guha, the HCB “as a direct invasion on the faith of the Hindus...its provisions empowering women to divorce is revolting to the Hindu ideology...We oppose the Hindu Code Bill. We oppose it because it is a derogatory measure based on alien and immoral principles. It is not a Hindu Code Bill. It is anything but Hindu. We condemn it because it is a cruel and ignorant libel on Hindu laws, Hindu culture and Hindu dharma” (Guha, 2016)). However, the April 17, 2016 issue of Organiser held Ambedkar as ‘Ultimate Unifier’; “Dr.Ambedkar is erroneously projected as a divisive figure by certain vested interest but recognition of his contributions will finally prove to be unifier for Bharat”(Guha, 2016). The HCB was held as ‘an Atom Bomb on Hindu Society’ by the chauvinist Hindus who wanted the status quo of the women’s position in the Indian society(Guha, 2015). Rege (2013) writes; “The Hindu Code Bill is seen as a manifesto of women’s liberation, and Ambedkar’s resignation as law minister over the sabotaging of the Hindu Code Bill is viewed as an act unparalleled in history.”

However, even in today’s modern world, women are credited secondary place in the extreme patriarchal society. The Fascist/Nazist forces have always bestowed women a secondary citizenship without conferring rights at par the male citizens. In fact, in Hitler’s state, the woman was degraded to just as child bearer and no more significant task was given. Women have been held vital just for their natural reproductive power. As quoted by Charu Gupta (1991), justifying women’s position, Adolf Hitler believed that “If we say that the world of the man is the state, the world of the man is his commitment, we could then perhaps say that the world of the women is a smaller world, for her world is her husband, her family, her children and her home...” and the ‘small world of women’ held vital for the stability of the ‘big world of the men’. However, today Germany has a woman Chancellor/head of the state. Germany could escape from such practices, but the secondary treatment is still given to the women in the developing countries, which perhaps adopted the new form of fascism/Nazism as ‘Neo-Fascism’ or ‘Democratic Fascism.’ India also could not escape from bearing such thinking about the women.

Unfortunately, despite Ambedkar’s major efforts for the safety and empowerment of women, the Dalit woman in India has to face multiple discriminations at the multiple levels as compared to the higher caste woman. The heinous crimes against the Dalit women have been increasingly highest. It is not a single day when a Dalit woman does not become a victim of heinous crimes, and culprits largely are found to be the men of higher caste, who are highly confident of committing such atrocities dauntlessly and regularly due to the direct/indirect support from the power centres or so-called high profile political patrons. The filthy caste politics due to the ‘mind of caste’ has dominantly occupied larger space in the present day prevailing socio-political crisis. The rape of Dalit woman/girl has become the practice of revenging or insulting or sabotaging the dignity and honour of the Dalit families by the so called few forward castes. The assertion of the Dalits has become intolerable. Even for that matter the Dalit politicians in the government became so self-centred that they do not raise voice against the heinous crimes against Dalit women. By and large, Ambedkar’s people, despite the constitutional safeguards, have been the soft targets of victimhood by the upper caste people. The rulers have deliberately botched the constitution.

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