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## **DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S VISION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: EMPOWERING INDIA'S MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a towering figure in India's social and political history, dedicated his life to dismantling the caste-based injustices entrenched in Indian society. This article explores Ambedkar's concept of social justice, focusing on his relentless advocacy for the rights and dignity of oppressed communities, particularly the Dalits, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other marginalized groups. It examines the historical origins of untouchability, the constitutional safeguards he championed, and their relevance in contemporary India. Despite significant legal and policy advancements, systemic inequalities persist, highlighting the state's challenges in fully realizing Ambedkar's vision. The article underscores the importance of social consciousness and comprehensive reforms to achieve an egalitarian society rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity.

**Keywords:** Social Justice, Ambedkar, Caste System, Dalits, Untouchability, Indian Constitution, Equality, Marginalized Communities, Reservation Policy, Human Dignity.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?”*

*- Martin Luther King Jr.*

In India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands as a beacon of social justice, tirelessly advocating for the eradication of caste-based oppression. He identified the caste system, deeply embedded in Hinduism, as a primary source of injustice in Indian society. This system has historically marginalized lower castes, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and religious minorities, depriving them of fundamental human rights. The caste system, with its pre-modern roots, was significantly altered during the British Raj, incorporating the concepts of varna and jati. Varna, often translated as “social class,” divides society into four groups Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras while jati refers to specific caste identities tied to birth and occupation, often linked to one of the varnas. Post-independence, India introduced caste-based reservation policies to uplift marginalized groups economically and socially. The Indian Constitution, particularly Article 15, prohibits discrimination based on caste, yet violence and discrimination against lower castes persist. The term “Dalit,” derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “to divide” or “to break,” encapsulates the historical marginalization of those considered untouchables or outcasts. Initially used by Jyotiba Phule, the term was later embraced by Ambedkar, who rejected derogatory labels like “Harijans” and proposed “Protestant Hindu” to signify resistance against caste oppression. Dalits, often outside the varna system, faced severe discrimination, relegated to menial and stigmatized occupations like leatherwork and sanitation. Ambedkar viewed religion as a potential solution to caste issues, ultimately embracing Buddhism to foster a casteless society, rejecting Marxism, capitalism, nationalism, and other ideologies as inadequate. His vision was to create a society where dignity and equality prevail, a goal that remains critical yet partially unrealized in modern India.

## THE GENESIS OF UNTOUCHABILITY

The origins of untouchability in India are deeply rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-economic transformations that span millennia, shaped by invasions, religious doctrines, and evolving social hierarchies. This complex phenomenon, which has profoundly impacted Indian society, particularly marginalized groups like the Dalits, can be traced back to the Aryan

invasion of India around 1500 BCE. This period marked a significant turning point in the subcontinent's social structure, laying the groundwork for the caste system and the practice of untouchability.

- **The Aryan Invasion and Its Social Impact**

Around 1500 BCE, the Indo-Aryans, a nomadic group from Central Asia, migrated into the Indian subcontinent, bringing with them distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious practices. These newcomers encountered indigenous populations, often referred to as Dravidians or other pre-Aryan groups, who inhabited the Indus Valley and other regions. The Aryans, perceiving themselves as racially and culturally superior due to their lighter skin and distinct customs, marginalized these native populations. This racial and cultural distinction became a foundational element in the development of social stratification.

The Aryans' dominance led to the subjugation of many indigenous groups. Some native populations managed to escape into forests and remote areas, becoming isolated from the emerging Aryan-dominated society. These groups, later known as Chandalas, were stigmatized and relegated to the fringes of society. The Chandalas were often viewed as racially and culturally inferior, a perception that justified their exclusion and marginalization during the post-Vedic period (circa 600 BCE–200 CE). This period saw the consolidation of Vedic traditions, which further entrenched social hierarchies through religious texts and practices.

- **The Role of Varna and Jati in Social Stratification**

The Vedic period also saw the formalization of the varna system, a four-tiered social structure outlined in ancient texts like the *Rigveda* and later codified in the *Manusmriti*. According to Manu, the four varnas—Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (labourers)—originated from different parts of a divine being, Purusha. Brahmins emerged from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs, and Shudras from the feet, symbolizing a hierarchical order with spiritual and functional significance. This cosmological framework provided a divine sanction for social stratification, placing Brahmins at the apex and Shudras at the base.

While the varna system provided a broad framework, the concept of *jati*—specific caste groups defined by birth, occupation, and regional customs—added further complexity. Jatis were often

linked to one of the four varnas but operated as more localized and rigid social units. Over time, jatis proliferated, and those outside the varna system, such as the Chandalas, were deemed avarna (without varna) and labelled as untouchables due to their perceived impurity. The “Mixed Caste” theory, as articulated in the *Manusmriti*, suggests that many lower castes, including Chandalas, emerged from inter-varna unions, particularly those considered taboo, such as between Brahmin women and Shudra men. These unions were seen as violations of social and ritual purity, resulting in the offspring being relegated to the lowest rungs of society.

- **The Dravidian Hypothesis and Racial Dynamics**

Another prominent theory posits that untouchability arose from the Aryan conquest of Dravidian populations, who were likely the original inhabitants of the Indus Valley civilization. Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that Proto-Dravidian-speaking communities existed in the region before the Aryan migrations. As the Aryans moved southward, they subdued these populations, enslaving some and displacing others. The varna system, and subsequently untouchability, may have evolved as a mechanism to maintain control over these subjugated groups, who were often assigned menial and stigmatized tasks.

According to this hypothesis, Dalits may represent the descendants of early Dravidian tribes who were isolated and marginalized by successive waves of migration. The later Dravidian groups, more advanced in organization, further subordinated these earlier inhabitants, reducing them to manual labourers or outcasts. This theory highlights the interplay of racial and cultural differences, as the Aryans’ emphasis on racial purity reinforced social boundaries. The notion of ritual pollution, central to the concept of untouchability, emerged as a tool to segregate these groups, preventing their integration into Aryan society.

- **Socio-Economic and Religious Factors**

The entrenchment of untouchability was not solely a product of racial or cultural conflicts but also of socio-economic and religious developments. As Aryan society transitioned from nomadic to settled agrarian and urban communities, labor division became critical. Indigenous groups and lower castes were often assigned tasks deemed impure, such as handling leather, cleaning sewage, or disposing of dead bodies. These occupations, considered ritually polluting, further stigmatized the communities performing them, reinforcing their status as untouchables.

Religious doctrines, particularly those in the *Dharmashastras*, played a significant role in codifying these practices. The concept of ritual purity, central to Vedic and later Hindu traditions, dictated strict social boundaries. Untouchables were barred from entering temples, schools, and public spaces to prevent the “defilement” of higher castes. This exclusion was justified through religious texts, which portrayed untouchables as inherently impure due to their birth or occupation. The integration of new sects, tribes, and religious orders into Aryan civilization further complicated the social hierarchy, with some groups being absorbed as lower castes or excluded entirely as outcasts.

- **Evolution of Untouchability Over Time**

While untouchability likely began to take shape during the post-Vedic period, it became more pronounced between 600 BCE and 200 CE, as social and religious structures solidified. The *Manusmriti* and other texts formalized the exclusion of certain groups, prescribing harsh penalties for interactions between castes that violated purity norms. By the early centuries CE, untouchability had become a widespread practice, with Dalits and other marginalized groups facing systemic discrimination, including restrictions on movement, access to resources, and participation in religious life.

The stigmatization of untouchables was not static but evolved through India’s feudal and medieval periods. The consolidation of caste identities during these eras further entrenched untouchability, as local power structures reinforced social hierarchies. The arrival of foreign rulers, such as the Mughals and later the British, did little to dismantle these practices, as they often adapted to existing social structures for governance purposes. However, the British colonial period introduced new dynamics, such as the classification of “Depressed Classes” in 1919, which aimed to replace derogatory terms like “untouchable” but failed to address the root causes of discrimination.

- **Legacy and Contemporary Relevance**

The historical dynamics of untouchability reveal a complex interplay of race, religion, and socio-economic factors. The Aryan invasion, the codification of the varna and jati systems, and the emphasis on ritual purity created a rigid social order that marginalized entire communities. These practices, while rooted in ancient history, continue to influence modern India, where caste-based discrimination persists despite constitutional prohibitions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s

efforts to abolish untouchability through legal and social reforms, including the adoption of Buddhism as a casteless alternative, were direct responses to these historical injustices.

Understanding the genesis of untouchability is crucial for addressing its enduring impact. It highlights the need for comprehensive social change, as advocated by Ambedkar, to dismantle systemic inequalities and foster a society based on equality and dignity. The persistence of caste-based oppression underscores the importance of revisiting these historical roots to inform contemporary efforts toward social justice.

### **AMBEDKAR'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

*"A just society is that society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society."*

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

B.R. Ambedkar's profound philosophy of social justice is fundamentally built upon the three pillars of liberty, equality, and fraternity. His vision was a radical departure from the deeply entrenched hierarchical norms of Indian society, aiming for a system where an individual's worth was determined by their actions and merit, rather than the accident of their birth. He relentlessly pursued the eradication of systemic injustices like untouchability and caste discrimination, seeing them as an affront to human dignity and an impediment to national progress.

For Ambedkar, social justice wasn't merely an abstract ideal; it was both a moral imperative and a legal necessity. He believed that the state had a crucial role in actively ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, particularly for those historically marginalized. His critique of the caste system was scathing; he famously described it as a "monster" that not only stifled individual potential but also actively obstructed meaningful political and economic reforms. The abolition of this discriminatory system was, for him, the bedrock upon which true equality could be built.

Ambedkar's framework of social justice unequivocally rejected all forms of hierarchies based on caste or religion. Instead, he championed the principles of fairness and dignity as universal rights. His commitment to uplifting economically and socially depressed communities was central to his philosophy. He meticulously worked to integrate these principles into the very

fabric of the Indian Constitution, providing a legal and constitutional basis for affirmative action and protective discrimination aimed at leveling the playing field.

However, Ambedkar's vision extended far beyond mere legal reforms. He understood that true social transformation required a profound societal shift in consciousness. He urged a collective effort to dismantle ingrained prejudices and biases that perpetuated inequality. For him, the legal eradication of discrimination was just the first step; the ultimate goal was a complete overhaul of societal attitudes and practices, leading to a truly inclusive and equitable society where every individual could thrive with dignity and respect.

### **RELEVANCE OF AMBEDKAR'S SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

Ambedkar's foresight in advocating for social justice continues to resonate deeply in contemporary India. Despite the constitutional safeguards he painstakingly integrated, caste-based discrimination regrettably persists, highlighting the ongoing struggle to fully realize his vision. His advocacy for reservation policies has undeniably been a transformative force. These affirmative action measures have enabled significant progress for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), providing critical access to education, employment, and political representation. The tangible results are evident: today, individuals from Dalit communities hold positions as academicians, doctors, and legislators across the country, a powerful testament to the impact of Ambedkar's reforms and the opportunities created by the reservation system.

However, the path to full equality remains arduous. Systemic barriers and entrenched societal attitudes continue to hinder progress. Dalits still face discrimination in various spheres, from access to basic public facilities and healthcare in rural areas to subtle biases in urban settings. The "creamy layer" within reserved categories also poses a challenge, as benefits may not always reach the most marginalized within these groups. Moreover, instances of social exclusion, violence, and economic disparities persist, underscoring the gap between constitutional provisions and lived realities.

Beyond caste, Ambedkar's progressive vision extended to women's rights, demonstrating his understanding of the intersectionality of various forms of oppression. He recognized that caste and patriarchy were deeply intertwined, and that the liberation of Dalit women, who faced a "triple burden" of economic hardship, caste discrimination, and gender oppression, was central

to the emancipation of the entire community. He advocated for gender equality alongside caste abolition, pushing for equal access to education, employment, and civil liberties for women. His efforts to empower marginalized groups, both politically and economically, aimed at fostering genuine inclusivity in governance and society at large.

The reservation system, a cornerstone of his legacy, was designed to level the playing field by compensating for historical disadvantages. It aims to ensure a fair representation of marginalized communities in institutions that were once exclusive. However, its implementation faces ongoing challenges, including inadequate enforcement, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and significant social resistance. Debates surrounding "meritocracy" versus "social justice" continue, with critics arguing that reservations compromise quality, while proponents emphasize that true merit cannot exist without equal opportunity.

In essence, Ambedkar's ideas provide a robust framework for understanding and addressing social inequality. While his reforms have brought about substantial change, the continued struggle against caste discrimination, the ongoing challenges in effectively implementing reservation policies, and the persistent need to address the intersectional oppression faced by marginalized women underscore the enduring relevance and unfinished agenda of his philosophy of social justice. His call for a fundamental societal transformation, beyond mere legal reforms, remains as urgent today as it was in his time.

## **CONSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The Indian Constitution stands as a monumental testament to B.R. Ambedkar's unwavering commitment to equality and justice, with his profound influence evident in its very core. He meticulously wove principles of fairness and equity throughout the document, creating a legal framework designed to dismantle historical injustices. Several key articles explicitly prohibit discrimination and promote inclusion. Article 15 directly forbids discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, striking at the heart of caste-based prejudice. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, aiming to prevent discrimination in government jobs. Perhaps most crucially, Article 17 directly abolishes "Untouchability" in all its forms, making its practice a punishable offense and laying the legal groundwork for its eradication. Complementing these, Article 14 serves as a foundational principle, guaranteeing equality before the law and equal protection of the laws to all persons within India.

Beyond these fundamental rights, the Constitution also includes specific provisions for the advancement of historically disadvantaged communities. Articles 330 and 332 (not 333) are vital in this regard, reserving seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and the Legislative Assemblies of the States, respectively. This ensures their political representation and gives them a voice in the legislative process. Furthermore, Article 338 establishes the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (and initially also for Scheduled Tribes, though a separate Article 338A later established the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes), powerful statutory bodies tasked with safeguarding the rights and interests of these communities, investigating grievances, and monitoring the implementation of constitutional safeguards.

Judicial rulings have consistently reinforced and expanded upon these constitutional provisions, demonstrating the judiciary's role as a guardian of Ambedkar's vision. In *Balbir Kaur v. Steel Authority of India (2000)*, the Supreme Court affirmed the expansive scope of social justice, declaring it an integral measure of legal fairness, emphasizing that justice extends beyond mere legal technicalities to encompass substantive equality. Similarly, *Ashok Kumar Gupta v. State of Uttar Pradesh (1994)* was a significant ruling that recognized the right to representation for SCs/STs as a fundamental right, thereby reinforcing the constitutional mandate for affirmative action.

The landmark *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1993)* case, famously known as the "Mandal Commission case," stands as a pivotal moment in the interpretation of reservation policies. The Supreme Court, in this extensive judgment, upheld the 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central government services. Crucially, the ruling not only validated the principle of reservations as a tool for social justice but also clarified its parameters, emphasizing that reservations are a means to uplift marginalized groups and ensure their adequate representation in public life, thereby solidifying the constitutional commitment to affirmative action. These judicial pronouncements collectively underscore the enduring legacy of Ambedkar's work, continually shaping India's pursuit of a more equitable and just society.

## CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Despite the robust constitutional protections meticulously crafted by figures like Ambedkar, the Indian state has undeniably struggled to fully deliver on the promise of social justice. The gap between constitutional ideals and ground realities remains a significant challenge.

The *Consumer Education and Research Centre v. Union of India (1995)* case serves as a poignant reminder of the state's expansive responsibility. The Supreme Court in this instance underscored the state's obligation to ensure essential aspects of welfare, including health, financial stability, and overall well-being for all citizens. However, paradoxically, there has been a noticeable waning of public sector investment in critical areas like education and healthcare. This trend, coupled with the increasing push towards privatization, has alarmingly exacerbated existing inequalities. For the poor, especially the most vulnerable communities like Dalits and Scheduled Tribes, accessing costly private services in health and education becomes an insurmountable barrier, thereby perpetuating their exclusion from opportunities essential for upward mobility and a dignified life.

Ambedkar himself faced immense and consistent resistance from upper-caste elites, both within the legislative bodies like Parliament and from powerful societal groups outside it, for his radical advocacy of fundamental social change. He astutely recognized that legal protections, while crucial, are inherently insufficient without a corresponding shift in societal acceptance and consciousness. His profound insight was that true social justice could only be secured when "social consciousness ultimately safeguards right." In other words, laws can be enacted, but unless there is a genuine change of heart and mind among the populace, particularly the dominant groups, discriminatory practices and attitudes will persist.

The continuing prevalence of issues like caste violence, the complex phenomenon of Naxalism (often rooted in grievances of land and exploitation), and various riots across the country are stark reflections of these ongoing social tensions and the failure to fully integrate marginalized communities. These conflicts often highlight the distressing reality that upper castes, who historically benefited from the very system Ambedkar sought to dismantle, frequently fail to uphold their moral and civic responsibility to ensure justice, equality, and dignity for marginalized groups. The deep-seated prejudices and power dynamics that Ambedkar fought against continue to manifest, underscoring that the battle for social justice in India is an ongoing process that requires not just legal enforcement, but also a profound and sustained transformation of societal attitudes and a commitment from all sections of society to uphold the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

## CONCLUSION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's magnificent vision for an egalitarian society, deeply rooted in the

principles of social democracy, served as the primary blueprint for shaping the Indian Constitution. His tireless efforts to abolish the deeply entrenched evils of untouchability and caste discrimination, through both legal enactments and passionate social reforms, remain the undisputed cornerstone of India's ongoing pursuit of equality and justice. The constitutional safeguards he championed were designed to be robust mechanisms for protecting the marginalized and ensuring their rightful place in society.

However, the journey towards fully realizing Ambedkar's profound vision is an unfinished task, marked by persistent challenges. The lingering presence of inequalities, exacerbated by trends like privatization, which often render essential services inaccessible to the most vulnerable, and the enduring grip of societal prejudice, continue to undermine the spirit of the Constitution. Furthermore, inadequate state action in effectively implementing policies and addressing systemic issues perpetuates the cycle of exclusion.

Despite these hurdles, the judiciary has consistently reaffirmed the constitutional commitment to social justice. The landmark *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala (1973)* case, which established the "basic structure doctrine" of the Constitution, implicitly underscores the paramount importance of social justice by upholding principles like equality and fundamental rights as inviolable. This ruling reinforces that the constitutional vision of a just society cannot be dismantled, even through parliamentary amendments.

Ultimately, to truly eradicate systemic injustices and translate Ambedkar's dream into a tangible reality, a multi-faceted approach is indispensable. This requires not only comprehensive social change, fostering a deep-seated commitment to human dignity and mutual respect across all sections of society, but also an unwavering commitment to human rights at every level of governance and social interaction. It demands continuous introspection, proactive policy implementation, and a collective societal effort to dismantle all forms of discrimination. Only then can India genuinely uphold the legacy of its principal architect and move closer to achieving a truly just, compassionate, and equitable society for all its citizens.

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