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The Framework of Dr BR Ambedkar for an Egalitarian Society: Challenging Inequality and Promoting Social Justice

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Abstract

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a preeminent figure in the socio-political history of India, is widely regarded as the architect of the Indian Constitution and a relentless advocate for social justice. His philosophy was a powerful blend of personal experience, academic rigor, and a deep commitment to social justice. His vision for a just society was grounded in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity which he conceptualized as essential for fostering harmony and progress in a deeply stratified and hierarchical society. Throughout his life, Dr Ambedkar pursued a transformative agenda aimed at dismantling the oppressive structures of caste, ensuring equal rights for women, and uplifting marginalized communities. His vision remains a beacon for efforts to build an inclusive and equitable India. In a world still grappling with issues of inequality and injustice, his vision offers valuable insights and inspiration. His life and work remind us of the power of resilience, education, and collective action in the pursuit of a just and harmonious society.

Keywords: Caste, Discrimination, Dharma, Constitution, Education.

The Making of Dr Ambedkar: A Blend of Personal Experience and Academic

Excellence: Dr. BR Ambedkar, one of the most influential figures in Indian history, developed a philosophy deeply rooted in his lived experiences and unparalleled academic journey. Born into a family of the Mahar caste, one of the most oppressed groups in India, Ambedkar experienced first-hand the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination. These personal struggles profoundly shaped his worldview and fuelled his lifelong mission to eradicate the injustices of the caste system. Coupled with his academic pursuits at prestigious institutions such as Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Ambedkar cultivated a nuanced understanding of social, economic, and political inequalities, equipping him with the intellectual tools to challenge and reform Indian society.

The early life of Dr Ambedkar was marked by the relentless discrimination and humiliation that came with being a Dalit in a deeply hierarchical society. Despite his father's role as a Subedar in the British Indian Army and his family's emphasis on education, Ambedkar faced systemic exclusion from basic rights and opportunities. As a child, Ambedkar was segregated from other students in school. He was forbidden from sitting with his peers, denied access to drinking water from shared resources, and constantly reminded of his 'untouchable' status. These formative experiences left an indelible mark on his psyche, instilling in him a deep sense of injustice and a burning desire for change. His personal struggles fuelled his belief in the transformative power of education. Despite the societal barriers, he excelled academically, becoming one of the first Dalits to complete higher education. His perseverance and success stood as a testament to the potential that lay dormant in marginalized communities, shackled by the oppressive caste system.

The academic journey of Dr Ambedkar took him to some of the most prestigious institutions of the globe, where he studied subjects such as law, economics, and political science. These disciplines provided him with a comprehensive understanding of the structural inequalities embedded in society and the mechanisms necessary to dismantle them. At Columbia University, Ambedkar was exposed to the liberal ideals of justice, democracy, and individual rights. The teachings of John Dewey, one of his professors, profoundly influenced his thinking. Dewey's emphasis on education as a tool for social change resonated deeply with Ambedkar, who came to view education as a means of empowering the oppressed and breaking the chains of caste. His studies at the London School of Economics honed his understanding of economic structures and their role in perpetuating social inequalities. He came to see economic exploitation as inseparable from caste oppression. His academic work on public finance and labour economics informed his later advocacy for policies aimed at economic redistribution and affirmative action. His legal education enabled him to critically examine the laws and institutions that upheld the caste system. He understood that true justice required not just social and economic reforms but also a robust legal framework to protect individual rights and ensure equality.

Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity: Pillars of Social Justice: His vision was centred on three interrelated and foundational principles: liberty (the cornerstone of individual freedom), equality (the foundation of social justice), and fraternity (the bond of unity). These principles formed the core of his philosophy for a just and inclusive India, where every individual, regardless of caste, gender, religion, or socio-economic status, could thrive. Let us explore each of these principles in greater depth to understand how they formed the blueprint for his transformative vision.

For Dr Ambedkar, liberty was not merely a political ideal but an essential condition for human dignity and self-realization. He believed that every individual must enjoy the freedom to think, express, and act without fear of oppression. This concept of liberty transcended conventional political freedoms and extended to social, economic, and cultural domains. In a deeply stratified society like India, liberty was often denied to marginalized

groups, particularly Dalits, women, and the economically disadvantaged. His understanding of liberty was deeply shaped by his own experiences of caste discrimination. He viewed the caste system as the most significant barrier to liberty in India. By enforcing rigid social hierarchies, caste deprived individuals of their basic rights to choose their occupation, marry freely, or access public spaces. His campaigns for the eradication of untouchability, access to public resources like water tanks, and entry into temples were all efforts to restore social liberty to Dalits and other oppressed communities. He argued that social liberty was a prerequisite for any other form of liberty. In his words, 'Caste is a negation of liberty.' Therefore, a society bound by the shackles of caste could never claim to be free. Ambedkar recognized that true liberty required economic empowerment. He was acutely aware of how poverty and economic dependence curtailed individual freedoms. He argued for the redistribution of resources, labour rights, and access to education as measures to dismantle economic exploitation. His emphasis on land reforms and his critique of the capitalist system aimed at ensuring economic liberty for all, especially the working classes and marginalized communities. Political liberty was another cornerstone of his vision. He believed that every individual should have an equal voice in governance, free from intimidation or coercion. He championed universal adult suffrage in the Indian Constitution to ensure that even the most marginalized had a say in the political process. However, he cautioned that political liberty could not be sustained without addressing social and economic inequalities. 'A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society,' he asserted.

Equality, for Ambedkar, was not just a lofty ideal but a non-negotiable principle for the creation of a just society. He argued that political democracy would remain hollow unless it was built on the foundation of social and economic equality. His sharp critique of the caste system stemmed from his unwavering commitment to equality. The caste system, with its rigid hierarchies and systemic discrimination, was the antithesis of equality. Ambedkar argued that unless caste-based inequalities were eradicated, true equality could never be achieved. Through his speeches, writings, and activism, he sought to dismantle the caste system and create a society where all individuals were treated with dignity and respect. He also emphasized gender equality, advocating for women rights in education, employment, and property ownership. As the principal architect of the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar sought to grant women equal rights in inheritance and divorce, challenging deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. His vision of equality extended to the economic realm. He recognized that economic disparities perpetuated cycles of poverty and deprivation among marginalized communities. To address this, he proposed measures such as state control over key industries, land redistribution, and minimum wages for laborers. His idea of equality was not limited to formal legal guarantees but encompassed substantive measures to level the playing field for disadvantaged groups. Ambedkar was a strong advocate for affirmative action as a means of bridging historical inequalities. He believed that reservations in education, employment, and legislatures were essential to empower marginalized communities and ensure their participation in public life. Affirmative action, in his view,

was not about privilege but about correcting systemic injustices that had denied opportunities to certain sections of society for centuries. He argued that legal safeguards alone were insufficient without proactive measures to uplift marginalized communities. His advocacy for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reservations in the Constitution was a ground-breaking step towards institutionalizing equality in independent India.

While liberty and equality addressed individual rights and systemic injustices, Ambedkar saw fraternity as the moral glue that held society together. Fraternity, for him, was the sense of brotherhood and mutual respect that transcended divisions of caste, religion, and class. He considered it the most essential yet often overlooked pillar of a just society. Indian society, fragmented along caste and religious lines, lacked a sense of collective solidarity. Ambedkar believed that without fraternity, even liberty and equality would fail to create a harmonious society. Fraternity, he argued, required individuals to see each other as equals and to act in the spirit of mutual respect and compassion. In his speeches, Ambedkar often emphasized the need to foster a sense of shared humanity. He warned against the dangers of communalism and caste-based antagonisms, which threatened the unity of the nation. His commitment to fraternity found expression in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, which declares fraternity as one of its guiding principles. He viewed the Constitution not just as a legal document but as a moral framework to instill a sense of unity and solidarity among citizens. Fraternity, in his view, was the moral foundation of democracy. A society divided by hatred and prejudice could never sustain democratic institutions. He believed that fraternity could be nurtured through education, social reforms, and the eradication of discriminatory practices. For Ambedkar, fostering fraternity was not merely about tolerance but about genuine empathy and understanding.

The vision of Dr Ambedkar for the establishment of a just society rested on the interdependence of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He argued that these principles were mutually reinforcing and could not exist in isolation. Liberty without equality could lead to the dominance of the powerful; equality without liberty could become oppressive; and both liberty and equality would be unsustainable without fraternity.

In his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar wrote, 'I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.' This statement underscores his belief in the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the need for a holistic approach to justice.

Critique of Caste System: The critique of Dr Ambedkar on the caste system is among the most radical and transformative aspects of his vision for an equitable society. His analysis of caste went far beyond surface-level observations, delving into the historical, ideological, and socio-economic dimensions of this deeply entrenched institution. Ambedkar condemned caste as a hierarchical and oppressive system that perpetuated inequality, social exclusion, and economic exploitation, especially for Dalits and other marginalized communities. Through his ground-breaking works, *Annihilation of Caste* and *Who Were the*

Shudras?, he systematically deconstructed the foundations of caste and made an impassioned plea for its complete abolition.

The caste system, as Ambedkar described, is not merely a division of labour but a division of laborers into fixed, hereditary categories. Rooted in Hindu religious orthodoxy, it assigns individuals a place in society based on their birth, determining their occupation, social status, and even personal relationships. Ambedkar critiqued the caste system as a rigid hierarchy that serves to preserve the privileges of a few while subjecting the majority to subjugation and servitude. Ambedkar argued that the caste system functioned as a tool to deny social mobility and perpetuate inequality. Unlike modern meritocratic systems, where individuals can rise through education and effort, caste predetermined a social and economic destiny at birth of a person. Dalits, relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, were confined to menial and degrading occupations, denied opportunities for education or self-improvement, and excluded from participating in mainstream society.

Ambedkar highlighted the inhumane treatment of Dalits, who were historically labelled as 'untouchables'. They were barred from entering temples, using public wells, or sharing social spaces with higher castes. This exclusion was not merely social but psychological, as it fostered a sense of inferiority and hopelessness among Dalits. Ambedkar described this systemic discrimination as a form of 'graded inequality,' where every caste oppressed those below it while aspiring to emulate those above.

Beyond social oppression, Ambedkar emphasized how caste facilitated economic exploitation. The caste system ensured that Dalits were trapped in hereditary occupations, often involving hard labour and low wages. Land ownership, a critical factor in economic empowerment, was largely monopolized by upper castes, leaving Dalits landless and economically dependent. Ambedkar saw caste as a means of consolidating economic power in the hands of a few while depriving the majority of basic rights and resources.

His works, particularly *Who Were the Shudras?*, delved into the historical origins of the caste system and its ideological justifications. He argued that caste was not a natural or divine order, as claimed by orthodox Hindu texts, but a man-made institution designed to maintain the dominance of certain groups. Ambedkar traced the origins of caste to the division of society into varnas (categories) based on occupation. Over time, these divisions became rigid and hereditary, leading to the birth of the caste system. He challenged the notion that caste was a purely religious institution, asserting that it was deeply intertwined with socio-economic and political factors. In *Who Were the Shudras?*, Ambedkar argued that the Shudras, initially a community of warriors, were relegated to the lowest varna due to conflicts with the Brahmins. This historical analysis served to debunk the religious sanctity of caste and expose its political motivations.

Ambedkar was a fierce critic of the Hindu scriptures, particularly the *Manusmriti*, which he viewed as the ideological foundation of caste. He condemned the *Manusmriti* for codifying the subjugation of Dalits and Shudras, legitimizing untouchability, and perpetuating gender inequality. In a symbolic act of defiance, Ambedkar publicly burned

the *Manusmriti* in 1927, declaring it a text that violated human dignity and justice. He also critiqued the notion of karma and rebirth, often invoked to justify caste inequalities. Ambedkar argued that these religious doctrines were tools to pacify the oppressed and perpetuate the status quo.

In his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, is both a scathing critique of Hindu orthodoxy and a revolutionary manifesto for social reform. Originally written as a speech for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, a Hindu reformist organization, the text was deemed too radical and was never delivered. However, it remains one of the most powerful indictments of the caste system. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar rejected the idea that the caste system could be reformed within the framework of Hinduism. He argued that the caste system was so deeply ingrained in Hindu religious practices and beliefs that any meaningful reform would require a complete rejection of its ideological foundations. Ambedkar famously stated, 'Hindu society must be reorganized on a basis of equality... The religion which discriminates between two followers is partial and untrue.' His call for the annihilation of caste was not limited to dismantling its visible manifestations. He envisioned a society where individuals were judged by their merit and character rather than their birth. He advocated for inter-caste marriages and dining as practical steps to break caste barriers. More broadly, he called for the reconstruction of Indian society on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

At the heart of Ambedkar's critique was a plea for human dignity. He believed that the caste system dehumanized not only the oppressed but also the oppressors, who became complicit in perpetuating injustice. His fight against caste was, therefore, a fight for the restoration of humanity and moral values. His critique of the caste system has had a profound and lasting impact on Indian society and politics. His ideas laid the foundation for the inclusion of provisions against caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution. As the chairman of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar ensured that untouchability was abolished (Article 17) and that provisions for affirmative action were incorporated to uplift Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. His advocacy for reservations in education, employment, and legislatures was a direct response to the historical injustices perpetuated by caste. These measures have enabled millions of marginalized individuals to access opportunities that were previously denied to them.

Education as a Tool for Social Transformation: Dr. Ambedkar believed that education was the key to empowering marginalized communities and creating a just society. He advocated for universal access to education, emphasizing its transformative potential in breaking the cycle of poverty and ignorance. His own journey-from being a victim of caste-based discrimination to becoming one of the most educated leaders of his time-exemplified the power of education as a tool for self-empowerment and societal change.

He viewed education as a means of fostering critical thinking and self-respect among oppressed communities. His efforts to promote education included establishing institutions, advocating for scholarships, and encouraging the participation of women in education. He

believed that education should be inclusive and aimed at developing the intellectual and moral faculties of individuals, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society.

Advocacy for Women's Rights: The vision of Dr Ambedkar for the establishment of a just society extended to gender equality. He was acutely aware of the double discrimination faced by women, particularly those from marginalized communities. He advocated for women's rights in education, employment, and property, emphasizing their role as equal partners in nation-building.

As the chairperson of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar ensured the inclusion of provisions that guaranteed gender equality. Articles 14, 15, and 39 of the Constitution reflect his commitment to eliminating gender-based discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for women.

Ambedkar also introduced progressive legislation such as the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to reform Hindu personal laws and grant women equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Although the bill faced significant opposition and was not passed during his lifetime, it laid the foundation for future legal reforms in favour of women's rights.

Legal and Constitutional Framework: The role of Dr Ambedkar, as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, was pivotal in institutionalizing his vision of a just society. The Constitution he helped draft is a testament to his commitment to democracy, social justice, and human rights. It enshrines principles of equality before the law, non-discrimination, and protection of marginalized groups through affirmative action.

Key provisions reflecting the vision of Dr Ambedkar include:

- a) Fundamental Rights (Articles 14-18): These provisions guarantee equality, prohibit discrimination, and abolish practices such as untouchability.
- b) Directive Principles of State Policy (Articles 36-51): These guidelines direct the state to promote social and economic justice, reduce inequalities, and improve living conditions for all citizens.
- c) Reservations and Affirmative Action (Articles 15(4) and 16(4)): These provisions allow for special measures to uplift historically disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.

Economic Justice and Labour Rights: His vision of a just society included economic justice and the protection of labor rights. As a trained economist, he recognized the importance of addressing economic disparities to achieve social justice. He advocated for policies that promoted equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. As the Labour Minister in the Executive Council of the Viceroy, Ambedkar introduced several progressive measures, including: Minimum wage laws, equal pay for equal work, irrespective of gender, maternity benefits for women workers, and social security measures for industrial workers. His emphasis on economic justice was also evident in his proposals for land reforms and state ownership of key industries. He believed that economic democracy was essential for sustaining political democracy and ensuring the well-being of all citizens.

Embracing Buddhism: A Spiritual Foundation for Social Justice: In his quest for a just society, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism, a philosophy he believed aligned with the values of equality, compassion, and rationality. In 1956, he publicly embraced Buddhism along with hundreds of thousands of his followers, marking a significant moment in the Dalit movement.

His reinterpretation of Buddhism emphasized its potential as a moral and spiritual framework for social transformation. By adopting Buddhism, he sought to provide an alternative to the hierarchical and oppressive structures of Hinduism, offering his followers a path to dignity and self-respect.

Conclusion: The vision Dr Ambedkar for a just society continues to inspire movements for social justice in India and beyond. His idea for a just society was revolutionary in its scope and profound in its impact. Grounded in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, his ideas challenged entrenched systems of oppression and provided a roadmap for social transformation. Through his relentless advocacy for the rights of marginalized communities, his contributions to the Indian Constitution, and his efforts to promote education and gender equality, Ambedkar laid the foundation for a more equitable and inclusive India.

His ideas resonate in contemporary struggles against caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and economic exploitation. The principles he championed are reflected in ongoing efforts to ensure affirmative action, promote inclusive education, and protect the rights of marginalized communities. His emphasis on constitutionalism and the rule of law underscores the importance of democratic institutions in upholding justice and equality. His vision remains a guiding light for those striving to build a society that values human dignity and fosters collective well-being.

His vision for a just society was both profound and practical. Grounded in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, it offered a comprehensive framework for addressing the entrenched injustices of Indian society. His ideas continue to inspire generations of activists, scholars, and policymakers striving to build a more equitable and inclusive world. As India navigates the complexities of the 21st century, His vision serves as a timeless guide to creating a society where every individual can live with dignity, freedom, and equality.

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