
**DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL
JUSTICE IN COLONIAL INDIA: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE
ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENT (1920–1956)**

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.7553>**ABSTRACT**

The abstract will introduce Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a social reformer, intellectual, political leader, and the central figure in the anti-caste movement in twentieth-century India. The paper will examine how Ambedkar transformed the struggle against caste oppression from a social reform issue into a movement based on rights, dignity, representation, and equality. The study will analyse major movements, political interventions, writings, and the historical transition from colonial caste structures to constitutional guarantees of social justice. The period 1920–1956 covers Ambedkar's emergence as a leader of the Depressed Classes, major movements such as Mahad Satyagraha, political negotiations such as the Poona Pact, and his conversion to Buddhism. The Poona Pact of 1932 was a major turning point in debates over political representation of the Depressed Classes. The Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 represented Ambedkar's attempt to challenge caste-based exclusion from public resources and assert human dignity.

KEYWORDS: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Anti-Caste Movement, Social Justice, Dalit Empowerment and Colonial India.

1. INTRODUCTION**1.1 Background of the Study**

The caste system has been one of the most enduring social structures in Indian history, shaping social relations, economic opportunities, and access to public resources. During the colonial period, caste-based discrimination continued to influence the lives of millions of

people belonging to historically disadvantaged communities. Untouchability created barriers in education, employment, religious participation, and social mobility. Although colonial administration introduced certain legal and administrative reforms, these measures did not fundamentally transform the social inequalities created by caste hierarchy.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several social reform movements emerged against caste discrimination. However, many reform initiatives focused primarily on improving the conditions of oppressed communities without directly challenging the structural foundations of caste. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced a new approach by arguing that caste was not merely a social practice but a system of graded inequality that required complete transformation. His movement connected social equality with political representation, economic rights, and constitutional safeguards.

1.2 Emergence of Ambedkar as a Social Justice Leader

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's early experiences of caste discrimination played an important role in shaping his social and political philosophy. Despite facing social exclusion, Ambedkar pursued higher education at institutions such as Columbia University and the London School of Economics, where he developed a deeper understanding of democracy, economics, law, and social theory.

After returning to India, Ambedkar began organising the oppressed communities and creating awareness regarding their rights. Unlike approaches that viewed lower castes as subjects requiring reform, Ambedkar emphasised self-respect, collective action, and political empowerment. His leadership transformed the Depressed Classes from a socially marginalised population into an organised political community demanding equality and justice.

2. Historical Background: Caste, Colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Caste Consciousness

2.1 Caste Structure in Colonial India

Colonial India inherited a deeply hierarchical social system in which caste determined social status, occupation, and community relations. The practice of untouchability resulted in severe restrictions on certain communities, including denial of access to public wells, educational institutions, temples, and social spaces. Economic disadvantages further strengthened social inequality because many oppressed communities remained dependent on traditional occupations with limited opportunities for advancement.

The British colonial administration introduced modern education, legal reforms, and administrative institutions, but these changes did not eliminate caste discrimination. In many

cases, colonial policies recognised caste categories for administrative purposes, which influenced the development of modern caste identities and political mobilisation.

2.2 Early Anti-Caste Movements and Their Influence on Ambedkar

Before Ambedkar's emergence, several reformers challenged caste inequality. Jyotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj criticised social hierarchy and promoted education among lower-caste communities. Similarly, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur introduced progressive policies to promote education and representation for backward communities.

These movements created an intellectual foundation for later anti-caste struggles. However, Ambedkar expanded this approach by arguing that social equality required political power and legal protection. He transformed the anti-caste movement from a reform-oriented struggle into a movement demanding structural change.

3. Formation of Ambedkar's Anti-Caste Movement (1920–1935)

3.1 Establishment of Organisations and Political Awareness

During the 1920s, Ambedkar focused on building collective consciousness among the Depressed Classes. Through organisations such as the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha established in 1924, he worked towards improving education, social awareness, and political participation among oppressed communities.

Ambedkar also used newspapers such as *Mooknayak* (1920) and *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927) as instruments of social transformation. These publications provided a platform for discussing caste discrimination and encouraged marginalised communities to demand their rights.

3.2 Mahad Satyagraha (1927): Struggle for Human Dignity

The Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 was one of the most important events in the history of the anti-caste movement. The movement was organised to assert the right of the Depressed Classes to access the Chavdar Tank, a public water resource from which they had been socially excluded.

The importance of Mahad Satyagraha extended beyond access to water. It represented a broader struggle against social exclusion and established the principle that public resources should be equally accessible to all citizens. Through this movement, Ambedkar demonstrated that social equality required active resistance against discriminatory practices.

3.3 Manusmriti Dahan (1927): Intellectual Challenge to Caste Hierarchy

The burning of Manusmriti during the Mahad movement symbolised Ambedkar's ideological opposition to religious and social ideas that justified caste inequality. He argued that caste

discrimination was supported by social beliefs and traditions, and therefore eliminating caste required challenging its ideological foundations.

This event marked an important stage in Ambedkar's movement because it moved beyond demanding social rights and questioned the historical and cultural foundations of caste hierarchy.

3.4 Kalaram Temple Entry Movement (1930)

The Kalaram Temple Entry Movement in Nashik represented Ambedkar's demand for equal religious and social rights. The movement challenged the exclusion of lower castes from Hindu religious spaces and questioned the denial of equal status within society.

Although the movement did not immediately achieve its objective, it played an important role in creating awareness about social discrimination and demonstrated that access to religious spaces was connected with the broader question of social dignity and citizenship.

4. Ambedkar and Political Representation of the Depressed Classes (1930–1947)

4.1 Round Table Conferences and the Demand for Political Rights

Ambedkar participated in the Round Table Conferences held in London during 1930–1932, where he represented the interests of the Depressed Classes. He argued that political safeguards were necessary because social equality could not be achieved without ensuring adequate representation in political institutions.

Ambedkar believed that oppressed communities needed independent political representation to protect their interests. His arguments introduced a significant debate regarding the relationship between democracy, minority rights, and social justice in colonial India.

4.2 Poona Pact (1932) and the Question of Representation

The Poona Pact of 1932 became a major turning point in the history of Dalit political representation. The agreement modified the provision of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes proposed under the Communal Award and provided reserved seats within joint electorates.

The Pact reflected the complex debate between national unity and the political safeguards required for historically oppressed communities. While it increased representation through reserved seats, Ambedkar continued to emphasise the importance of independent political power for social transformation.

5. Ambedkar's Contribution to Constitutional Social Justice and Nation Building (1947–1956)

5.1 Ambedkar and the Making of the Constitution of India

The period after independence marked a significant transition in Ambedkar's political journey from a leader of the anti-caste movement to a principal architect of India's constitutional framework. In 1947, Ambedkar was appointed as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. His responsibility was not only to prepare a legal document for governance but also to create a constitutional structure capable of addressing historical inequalities existing in Indian society.

Ambedkar believed that political democracy could not survive without social democracy. According to him, the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity were essential foundations of a democratic society. Therefore, the Constitution was designed not merely as an instrument of political administration but as a mechanism for social transformation. Through constitutional provisions, Ambedkar attempted to ensure that historically marginalised communities received protection, representation, and opportunities for advancement.

5.2 Equality and Fundamental Rights as Instruments of Social Transformation

One of Ambedkar's major contributions was the constitutional emphasis on equality before law and equal protection of laws. The Fundamental Rights incorporated into the Constitution reflected his belief that citizenship should not be determined by caste, religion, or social status.

Articles 14, 15, and 16 established principles of equality and non-discrimination, while allowing special provisions for socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. Ambedkar recognised that formal equality alone could not remove centuries of social disadvantage. Therefore, constitutional safeguards were necessary to create conditions for substantive equality.

The inclusion of these provisions represented a historical shift from a society based on inherited hierarchy towards a constitutional order based on individual rights and equal citizenship.

5.3 Abolition of Untouchability and Article 17

The abolition of untouchability through Article 17 of the Indian Constitution was one of the most significant achievements connected with Ambedkar's vision of social justice. For centuries, untouchability had excluded certain communities from social participation and denied them basic human dignity.

Ambedkar considered untouchability not merely a social problem but a violation of human rights and democratic principles. Article 17 legally abolished untouchability and prohibited its practice in any form. This constitutional measure transformed the struggle against caste discrimination from a social movement into a legally enforceable commitment of the Indian state.

However, Ambedkar understood that legal reform alone could not immediately eliminate social prejudice. He emphasised that constitutional morality and social awareness were equally necessary for achieving genuine equality.

5.4 Ambedkar's Concept of Social Democracy

For Ambedkar, democracy was not limited to political institutions such as elections and legislatures. He viewed democracy as a way of life based on equality, respect, and social cooperation. A society where political rights existed alongside social inequality could not be considered a true democracy.

His concept of social democracy was based on three principles:

- Liberty – freedom of thought and action.
- Equality – removal of social and economic barriers.
- Fraternity – recognition of common humanity among citizens.

Ambedkar argued that caste was fundamentally opposed to democracy because it divided society into unequal groups. Therefore, destroying caste hierarchy was necessary for building a democratic nation.

6. Ambedkar's Economic and Labour Vision as Part of Social Justice

6.1 Ambedkar's Economic Ideas and Social Equality

Although Ambedkar is primarily remembered as a social reformer and constitutional thinker, he was also an important economist. He believed that social justice required economic empowerment because political rights alone could not improve the lives of disadvantaged communities.

In his economic writings, Ambedkar examined issues such as land distribution, agricultural problems, industrial development, and the role of the state in economic planning. He argued that poverty and social discrimination were interconnected and required comprehensive economic reforms.

His economic approach focused on creating opportunities for employment, education, and economic independence for marginalised sections of society.

6.2 Ambedkar's Contribution to Labour Welfare

During his tenure as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946), Ambedkar contributed significantly to labour welfare policies in colonial India. He worked on issues related to working hours, industrial welfare, labour rights, and social security.

His labour policies reflected his broader understanding that workers required legal protection against exploitation. Ambedkar's contribution to labour legislation demonstrated that his idea of social justice extended beyond caste equality to include economic rights and dignity of labour.

7. Ambedkar's Final Phase: Buddhism and the Search for Social Liberation (1956)

7.1 Reasons Behind Ambedkar's Conversion to Buddhism

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 was the culmination of his long struggle against caste-based inequality. Throughout his political career, he argued that caste was deeply connected with social and religious structures that denied equality to certain communities.

After years of attempting to achieve reform within Hindu society, Ambedkar concluded that a complete social transformation required adopting an alternative ethical and social framework. Buddhism attracted him because he viewed it as a religion based on equality, rationality, compassion, and human dignity.

7.2 The Neo-Buddhist Movement and Its Historical Significance

Ambedkar's conversion initiated the Neo-Buddhist movement among millions of followers. The movement was not only a religious transformation but also a social and cultural assertion of dignity and identity.

By adopting Buddhism, Ambedkar provided an alternative framework for communities seeking liberation from caste-based discrimination. The movement contributed to the development of a new social identity based on equality and self-respect.

Historically, the Buddhist conversion movement represented the final stage of Ambedkar's lifelong struggle to achieve social justice and human dignity.

8. Critical Historical Assessment of Ambedkar's Anti-Caste Movement

8.1 Transformation of the Anti-Caste Struggle

Ambedkar fundamentally changed the nature of the anti-caste movement in India. Earlier reform movements often focused on improving social conditions, but Ambedkar transformed the struggle into a demand for rights, representation, and structural change.

He gave oppressed communities political awareness and encouraged them to become active participants in shaping their own future. His movement created a new understanding of social justice in which equality was connected with citizenship and constitutional protection.

8.2 Challenges and Limitations of the Movement

Despite significant achievements, caste inequalities continued to exist after independence. Constitutional provisions provided legal protection, but social attitudes and traditional practices proved difficult to change completely.

The implementation of social justice policies faced challenges due to continued discrimination, economic inequality, and unequal access to resources. Therefore, Ambedkar's vision remained an ongoing historical project rather than a completed transformation.

9. CONCLUSION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's anti-caste movement represents one of the most important chapters in the social history of modern India. Between 1920 and 1956, he transformed the struggle of oppressed communities from a demand for social reform into a broader movement for equality, dignity, political representation, and constitutional justice.

Through mass movements, political negotiations, intellectual writings, and constitutional contributions, Ambedkar challenged the foundations of caste hierarchy and introduced a new framework of social democracy. His historical significance lies not only in fighting caste discrimination but also in creating institutional mechanisms to protect equality and human rights in independent India.

Ambedkar's legacy continues to influence discussions on social justice, democracy, equality, and the rights of marginalised communities in contemporary India. His movement remains a significant example of how historical struggles can reshape social and political structures.

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