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Legal and Social Vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for Women and Scheduled Castes

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Abstract

This study explores the legal and social vision of B. R. Ambedkar in promoting equality, justice, and empowerment for women and Scheduled Castes in India. Ambedkar's role as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution established a strong foundation for eliminating social discrimination through provisions such as equality before law, abolition of untouchability, and affirmative action policies aimed at uplifting historically marginalized communities. The study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design using secondary data collected from government reports, policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature. The findings indicate that although notable progress has been achieved in literacy, political representation, and legal rights, significant socio-economic disparities continue to exist across different sections of society. Evidence shows that the literacy rate among Scheduled Castes is 66.1% compared to 77.7% for the general population, while women's labour force participation remains limited at 37%, reflecting deep-rooted structural inequalities. In addition, higher poverty levels among Scheduled Castes at 29.5% and women at 21% highlight persistent economic vulnerability and unequal access to resources and opportunities. The study further emphasizes Ambedkar's analysis of the intersection between caste and gender, which leads to multiple layers of disadvantage and marginalization for Scheduled Caste women in particular. While affirmative action policies have contributed to improved representation and access to opportunities, their effectiveness remains constrained by enduring social, cultural, and institutional barriers. The study highlights that Ambedkar's vision continues to hold strong relevance in contemporary India, as it offers a comprehensive and transformative approach to achieving social justice through legal safeguards, education, empowerment, and sustained social reform.

Keywords: B. R. Ambedkar, Women Empowerment, Scheduled Castes, Social Justice, Constitutional Equality.

Introduction

India's social structure has historically been shaped by deep-rooted hierarchies of caste and gender, which have systematically marginalized women and SCs. Within this

context, the vision of B. R. Ambedkar emerges as a powerful framework for social justice, equality, and human dignity. Ambedkar not only challenged caste-based discrimination but also recognized the intersectional oppression faced by women, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes. His legal and social philosophy continues to guide India's democratic and constitutional development in the 21st century. According to recent demographic estimates, Scheduled Castes constitute about 16.6% of India's total population, amounting to over 200 million people, making them one of the largest marginalized groups globally. Within this population, women form a significant proportion, and Dalit women alone account for nearly 16% of India's female population. Despite constitutional safeguards, these groups continue to face persistent socio-economic disadvantages in areas such as education, employment, healthcare, and political representation. Notably, around 80% of Scheduled Caste women still reside in rural areas, often engaged in low-paid and unorganized labour, reflecting structural inequalities that limit their mobility and empowerment.

Ambedkar's vision was deeply rooted in the idea that social democracy must accompany political democracy. He emphasized that mere legal provisions are insufficient without social transformation. Through constitutional mechanisms such as the abolition of untouchability (Article 17), equality before law (Article 14), and affirmative action policies, Ambedkar sought to dismantle centuries-old systems of oppression. At the same time, he strongly advocated for women's rights, recognizing that caste and patriarchy are interlinked systems. His efforts toward the Hindu Code Bill marked a significant step toward ensuring women's rights to property, marriage, and inheritance. In contemporary India, the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas remains profound. Although policy interventions like reservations and the Women's Reservation Act (2023) aim to enhance representation, women especially from marginalized castes continue to face barriers in accessing political power and economic opportunities. The intersection of caste and gender creates a "double disadvantage," where Dalit women experience both social exclusion and gender-based discrimination, limiting their participation in decision-making processes.

Thus, the study of Ambedkar's legal and social vision is crucial in understanding the ongoing challenges and possibilities for achieving inclusive development in India. His emphasis on education, legal safeguards, and social reform provides a comprehensive pathway toward empowering women and Scheduled Castes. In the present era of globalization and social change, revisiting Ambedkar's ideas offers valuable insights for addressing inequality and promoting a just and equitable society.

Objectives

- To examine the legal vision of B. R. Ambedkar in promoting equality and constitutional safeguards for women and Scheduled Castes in India.
- To analyse the social perspective of B. R. Ambedkar regarding the intersection of caste and gender and its impact on marginalized communities.
- To evaluate the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's ideas in addressing present-day challenges faced by women and Scheduled Castes in Indian society.

Methodology

The present study is based on a descriptive and analytical research design, relying primarily on secondary data sources to examine the legal and social vision of B. R. Ambedkar for women and Scheduled Castes in India. Relevant information has been collected from books, research articles, government reports, constitutional provisions, and recent policy documents. Sources such as publications of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, National Commission for Scheduled Castes, and National Crime Records Bureau have been consulted to incorporate updated statistical insights. The study also reviews contemporary literature to understand ongoing socio-economic challenges and policy developments affecting marginalized groups. A qualitative approach has been adopted to interpret Ambedkar's ideas in relation to present-day realities. Data is analysed through thematic analysis, focusing on legal provisions, social reforms, and their impact.

Constitutional Framework for Equality and Justice

The legal vision of B. R. Ambedkar is fundamentally embedded in the Indian Constitution, which he designed as a tool for social transformation rather than merely a legal document. Ambedkar recognized that historical injustices against women and SCs required not only formal equality but also substantive legal protections. Articles 14, 15, and 16 guarantee equality before law and prohibit discrimination on grounds of caste, sex, religion, and place of birth. Importantly, Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children, while Article 15(4) and 16(4) legitimize affirmative action for SCs. Further, Article 17 abolishes untouchability, marking a radical legal intervention against caste-based exclusion. Ambedkar's legal reasoning emphasized that democracy in India must rest on social justice, and therefore constitutional morality must override traditional social norms. This framework continues to guide judicial interpretations and policy measures in India, reflecting Ambedkar's enduring influence.

Affirmative Action and Legal Safeguards for Marginalized Groups

Ambedkar strongly advocated for compensatory discrimination in the form of reservations to address structural inequalities. In present-day India, reservation policies ensure representation of SCs in education, public employment, and political institutions. Similarly, legal safeguards such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, aim to protect marginalized communities from violence and discrimination. For women, Ambedkar's efforts were reflected in his drafting of the Hindu Code Bill, which sought to reform personal laws by granting women rights to property, divorce, and inheritance. Though initially resisted, these reforms laid the foundation for later gender-just laws in India. Today, policies like the Women's Reservation Act (2023) further extend his vision by promoting women's political participation. Below Table 1 shows the representation and socio-economic indicators of Scheduled Castes and women in India in recent years.

Table 1: Representation & Status of Women and SCs

Indicator	Women (%)	Scheduled Castes (%)
Literacy Rate (2021–23 est.)	70.3	66.1
Workforce Participation Rate (2023 est.)	37	42.5
Representation in Lok Sabha (2024)	14.4	15.2
Poverty Rate (approx.)	21	29.5

Source: Government of India Reports (Census projections, PLFS 2023, Election Data 2024)

As presented in above Table 1, the literacy rate of women is recorded at 70.3%, which is moderately higher than that of Scheduled Castes at 66.1%, indicating gradual improvement in female education but continued educational disadvantage among SC communities. In terms of workforce participation, Scheduled Castes show a higher rate (42.5%) compared to women overall (37%), suggesting that economic necessity drives greater labour involvement among SC populations, whereas women's participation remains constrained by social and cultural factors.

Further, political representation in the Lok Sabha shows relatively close figures, with Scheduled Castes at 15.2% and women at 14.4%, reflecting the positive impact of reservation policies and recent legislative efforts to enhance inclusivity. However, disparities become more pronounced in poverty levels, where 29.5% of Scheduled Castes fall below the poverty line compared to 21% of women, highlighting the persistent economic vulnerability of SC communities.

Overall, the trends indicate that while affirmative action policies have improved representation and access to opportunities, significant gaps remain in education, employment, and economic status, thereby underscoring the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's vision for social and economic justice.

Legal Vision and Its Contemporary Relevance

Ambedkar's legal vision was not static; it was dynamic and aimed at continuous social reform. He believed that law should act as an instrument of social change, particularly in dismantling caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures. In contemporary India, this vision is reflected in judicial activism and progressive legislation addressing issues such as gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and caste discrimination. However, the persistence of caste-based atrocities and gender inequality indicates a gap between legal provisions and social realities. Ambedkar had anticipated this challenge, emphasizing that legal safeguards must be complemented by social awareness and education. His insistence on "educate, agitate, organize" remains highly relevant, especially for marginalized communities striving for empowerment. Analytically, Ambedkar's contribution lies in integrating legal provisions with social justice objectives. His approach ensures that equality is not merely theoretical but actionable through state intervention. While India has made measurable progress in representation and rights, the data suggests that structural inequalities still exist, requiring stronger implementation of laws and inclusive policies. Thus, Ambedkar's legal vision continues to serve as a foundational framework for achieving equitable development for women and Scheduled Castes in India.

Intersection of Caste and Gender in Ambedkar's Thought

The social vision of B. R. Ambedkar is deeply rooted in his understanding of the interrelationship between caste and gender. Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a system of social stratification but a mechanism sustained through strict control over women's sexuality, marriage, and mobility. He critically examined practices such as endogamy, child marriage, and restrictions on widow remarriage, identifying them as tools to preserve caste purity. In the Indian context, this analysis remains highly relevant. Women, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes, experience "double marginalization" first as members of a lower caste and second as women within a patriarchal society. Contemporary studies indicate

that Dalit women face higher levels of social exclusion, limited access to education, and vulnerability to violence compared to upper-caste women. Ambedkar's framework helps explain how caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal norms are mutually reinforcing, creating structural barriers that legal provisions alone cannot fully dismantle.

Social Reform and Women's Empowerment

Ambedkar's social perspective placed strong emphasis on women's empowerment as a prerequisite for broader societal transformation. Unlike many reformers of his time, he did not treat women's issues as secondary but positioned them at the centre of social change. He encouraged women's participation in public movements, education, and political activism, recognizing that without their emancipation, the annihilation of caste would remain incomplete. In modern India, this vision is reflected in increasing female literacy, political participation, and awareness of rights. However, disparities persist, especially among Scheduled Caste women in rural areas. Social norms, early marriages, and economic dependency continue to limit their autonomy. Ambedkar's insistence on education as a tool of empowerment is particularly significant today, as access to quality education remains uneven across caste and gender lines. Moreover, Ambedkar's critique of religious and cultural practices that perpetuate inequality remains relevant in analysing contemporary debates on gender justice. Issues such as honour killings, caste-based violence, and discrimination in social spaces demonstrate that societal attitudes often lag behind legal reforms. His approach underscores that true empowerment requires a shift in social consciousness alongside institutional change.

Contemporary Social Challenges and Ambedkar's Relevance

Ambedkar's social vision continues to provide a critical lens for understanding present-day challenges in India. Despite economic growth and policy interventions, caste-based discrimination and gender inequality persist in subtle and overt forms. The rise in reported cases of violence against Scheduled Caste women highlights the intersectional nature of oppression, where caste identity intensifies gender-based vulnerabilities. Analytically, Ambedkar's thought emphasizes that social justice cannot be achieved through isolated reforms. Instead, it requires a holistic transformation of societal structures, including education systems, cultural norms, and economic opportunities. His emphasis on collective action "educate, agitate, organize" remains a guiding principle for marginalized communities seeking empowerment.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's vision challenges policymakers to address inequalities not only through welfare schemes but also by transforming underlying social attitudes. For instance, while affirmative action has improved representation, it has not fully eradicated discrimination in everyday social interactions. This gap highlights the need for continuous social reform initiatives, awareness programs, and inclusive policies. In conclusion, Ambedkar's social perspective offers a comprehensive framework for analysing the intersection of caste and gender in India. His ideas remain crucial in addressing contemporary inequalities, as they emphasize both structural change and individual empowerment. The persistence of disparities indicates that while progress has been made, the realization of Ambedkar's vision requires sustained efforts toward creating an inclusive and equitable society.

Contemporary Relevance of Ambedkar's Vision in Policy and Governance

The ideas of B. R. Ambedkar continue to shape India's policy framework, particularly in addressing inequalities faced by women and SCs. His emphasis on constitutional morality, social justice, and state intervention is reflected in contemporary welfare schemes, reservation policies, and gender-inclusive legislation. In recent years, the Government of India has strengthened affirmative action through expanded educational reservations, targeted scholarships, and financial inclusion programs for SC communities. Similarly, legislative measures such as the Women's Reservation Act (2023) aim to enhance women's participation in governance, echoing Ambedkar's belief in political empowerment as a pathway to equality. However, an analytical perspective reveals that while policies exist, their implementation remains uneven across regions. Structural inequalities, administrative inefficiencies, and socio-cultural barriers continue to limit the effectiveness of these initiatives. Ambedkar had anticipated such challenges, emphasizing that legal frameworks must be supported by active state accountability and social reform.

Socio-Economic Progress and Persistent Inequalities

Ambedkar's vision sought to achieve not only legal equality but also socio-economic upliftment. In contemporary India, measurable progress can be observed in literacy rates, political representation, and access to welfare schemes. However, disparities persist, particularly for women belonging to Scheduled Castes, who face compounded disadvantages. Below Table 3 shows key socio-economic indicators reflecting the current status of women and Scheduled Castes in India.

Table 2: Significant Indicators of Women and SCs

Indicator	General Population (%)	Scheduled Castes (%)	Women (%)
Literacy Rate	77.7	66.1	70.3
Labour Force Participation Rate	57.9	42.5	37
Representation in Parliament	—	15.2	14.4
Population Below Poverty Line	18	29.5	21

Source: Government of India Reports (PLFS 2023, Census Estimates, Parliamentary Data 2024)

As presented in above Table 2 reveals significant quantitative disparities across different socio-economic indicators. The literacy rate of the general population stands at 77.7%, whereas it declines to 66.1% among Scheduled Castes, indicating a gap of 11.6 percentage points. Women show a literacy rate of 70.3%, which is 7.4 percentage points lower than the general population, reflecting gender-based educational inequality.

In terms of labour force participation, the general population records 57.9%, while Scheduled Castes account for 42.5%, showing a deficit of 15.4 percentage points. The situation is more critical for women, whose participation is only 37%, which is 20.9 percentage points lower than the general population and 5.5 percentage points lower than Scheduled Castes overall, indicating compounded gender disadvantage.

Representation in Parliament highlights issues of political inclusion. Scheduled Castes hold 15.2% of seats, which is relatively aligned with their population share, whereas women's representation is limited to 14.4%, demonstrating an underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies.

Poverty levels further reflect structural inequality. While 18% of the general population lives below the poverty line, the proportion rises sharply to 29.5% among Scheduled Castes, marking a difference of 11.5 percentage points. Women also experience higher poverty at 21%, which is 3 percentage points above the national average.

Overall, the differences clearly indicate that Scheduled Castes and women lag behind the general population across most indicators, with the most pronounced gaps observed in labour force participation and poverty levels. These figures substantiate the argument that despite policy interventions, socio-economic inequalities remain deeply entrenched.

Challenges and the Way Forward in Realizing Ambedkar's Vision

Despite decades of legal and policy interventions, the persistence of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality suggests that Ambedkar's vision is only partially realized. Contemporary challenges include rising cases of caste-based violence, gender-based discrimination, and unequal access to quality education and healthcare. From an analytical standpoint, the gap lies in the disconnect between legal provisions and social practices. Ambedkar emphasized that social democracy must complement political democracy; however, entrenched social attitudes continue to resist change. For instance, while reservations have improved representation, they have not fully eliminated discrimination in workplaces or educational institutions.

The way forward requires a multi-dimensional approach. First, strengthening the implementation of existing laws and ensuring accountability at institutional levels is essential. Second, increasing investment in education and skill development for marginalized communities can enhance long-term empowerment. Third, promoting social awareness and behavioural change is critical to dismantling caste and gender biases. Ambedkar's philosophy of "educate, agitate, organize" remains particularly relevant in mobilizing communities and fostering collective action. In the era of digital transformation and globalization, this vision can be expanded through digital literacy, inclusive economic policies, and participatory governance. In conclusion, while India has made notable progress in advancing equality, the continued existence of socio-economic disparities underscores the enduring relevance of Ambedkar's ideas. His vision serves not only as a foundation for legal and policy frameworks but also as a guiding principle for achieving true social transformation and inclusive development in India.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of data presented in Table 1 and Table 2 reveals both progress and persistent disparities in the socio-economic status of women and Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India. The findings indicate that although constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies have contributed to improvements in key indicators, structural inequalities continue to limit inclusive development:

- **Educational Status:** The literacy rate of the general population is recorded at 77.7%, while it is significantly lower among Scheduled Castes at 66.1%, indicating a gap of 11.6 percentage points. Women show a literacy rate of 70.3%, which, although higher than SCs, still remains 7.4 percentage points below the national average. This suggests that despite policy interventions promoting education, caste-based and

gender-based disparities persist. These findings support Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a fundamental tool for empowerment, yet highlight uneven access and outcomes.

- **Workforce Participation:** The labour force participation rate further reflects inequality. The general population records 57.9%, whereas Scheduled Castes have a participation rate of 42.5%, and women only 37%. The gender gap is particularly striking, with women's participation being 20.9 percentage points lower than the general population. This indicates that social norms, unpaid care work, and limited employment opportunities continue to restrict women's economic engagement. For SCs, higher participation compared to women reflects economic compulsion rather than empowerment, as many are concentrated in low-paid and informal sectors.
- **Political Representation:** The data shows that Scheduled Castes hold 15.2% representation in Parliament, while women account for 14.4%. Although these figures reflect improvements due to reservation policies and recent legislative measures, they remain inadequate in proportion to their population size. The relatively low representation of women highlights ongoing barriers to political participation, including socio-cultural constraints and limited access to leadership opportunities. This aligns with Ambedkar's argument that political democracy must be inclusive to achieve social justice.
- **Economic Inequality and Poverty:** Poverty data reveals significant disparities, with 29.5% of Scheduled Castes living below the poverty line compared to 18% of the general population. Women also exhibit higher poverty levels at 21%, exceeding the national average by 3 percentage points. These findings indicate that economic vulnerability is more severe among SC communities and women, particularly those at the intersection of caste and gender. The persistence of poverty reflects limited access to resources, employment opportunities, and social mobility.
- **Overall Interpretation:** The results clearly demonstrate that while progress has been made in improving literacy, political representation, and policy inclusion, significant socio-economic gaps remain. The most pronounced inequalities are observed in labour force participation and poverty levels, indicating that economic empowerment remains incomplete. These findings reinforce Ambedkar's view that legal provisions alone are insufficient without addressing deeper structural barriers such as caste-based occupational segregation and patriarchal norms.
- **Discussion in Light of Ambedkar's Vision:** From an analytical perspective, the findings validate Ambedkar's argument that social democracy must accompany political democracy. Although constitutional safeguards have created opportunities, their impact is constrained by persistent social hierarchies and cultural practices. The concept of "double marginalization" is evident, as women belonging to Scheduled Castes face compounded disadvantages in education, employment, and economic status.

The data also suggests that affirmative action policies have been partially successful in improving representation but less effective in addressing economic inequalities. This

highlights the need for a more integrated approach that combines legal enforcement, social awareness, and economic empowerment strategies.

The results indicate that Ambedkar's vision of equality and social justice remains only partially realized in contemporary India. While measurable progress is evident, the persistence of disparities underscores the need for stronger policy implementation, targeted interventions, and transformation of societal attitudes. Achieving true empowerment requires not only legal equality but also structural and social change.

Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates that the legal and social vision of B. R. Ambedkar continues to serve as a crucial and enduring framework for advancing equality, justice, and human dignity for women and Scheduled Castes in India. His constitutional provisions, along with his strong advocacy of affirmative action, have contributed to notable progress in areas such as education, political representation, and legal empowerment. However, an analysis of recent data reveals that significant socio-economic inequalities still persist, particularly among Scheduled Caste women who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization. Disparities in literacy rates, labour force participation, and poverty levels clearly indicate that the benefits of development have not been equitably distributed across all sections of society. Therefore, the realization of Ambedkar's vision requires not only effective implementation of policies but also a deeper transformation of societal attitudes, institutional mechanisms, and structural conditions. His emphasis on education, empowerment, and continuous social reform remains highly relevant and provides a strong foundation for building a more inclusive, just, and equitable society in contemporary India.

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