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## Re-examining Dr B. R. Ambedkar's Legacy: Why His Ideas Matter More Than Ever in 21st-Century India

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### ABSTRACT :

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual legacy remains urgently relevant in 21st-century India, as the nation faces resurgent caste discrimination, digital hate speech, gendered violence, and rising economic precarity. While Ambedkar's iconic status is widely celebrated, his transformative vision—rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity—is often reduced to symbolic homage. This paper critically re-examines Ambedkar's thought, drawing on his key texts and a mixed-methods approach integrating discourse analysis, policy review, and contemporary case studies. Using frameworks such as intersectionality and critical constitutionalism, the study interrogates the modern applicability of core Ambedkarite concepts. Findings reveal that Ambedkar's doctrine of constitutional morality is increasingly invoked in landmark Supreme Court judgments to expand rights and challenge entrenched prejudice. His economic democracy vision is newly relevant amid gig work and labour informality, though government schemes reveal persistent implementation gaps. The feminist and intersectional dimensions of his thought remain neglected in mainstream policies, especially regarding Dalit and Adivasi women. Additionally, recent platform-worker and environmental justice movements are revitalizing Ambedkar's labour and ecological critiques. The paper recommends embedding Ambedkar's writings in civic education, instituting Dalit-led oversight for social justice schemes, and fostering transnational solidarities with global anti-discrimination movements. By embracing Ambedkar's integrated vision beyond ritual celebration, India can revitalize its democratic project and chart a more equitable future. Future research should assess the impact of Ambedkarite policies and explore global analogies in anti-caste struggles.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar; Constitutional Morality; Social Justice; Caste; Economic Democracy; Intersectionality; Digital Hate Speech; Labour Rights; Environmental Justice; Platform Work; Transnational Movements

### 1. Introduction

The year 2025 marks the 134th birth anniversary of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a milestone that has prompted widespread reflection on his enduring influence in Indian society and politics. Commemorations in Parliament, universities, and on social media platforms have sparked vigorous debates about the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's ideas. These discussions unfold against the backdrop of acute social and political crises: the persistence of caste-based violence, gendered oppression, digital hate speech, environmental degradation, and economic precarity. Amid such challenges, India's constitutional democracy stands at a crossroads, its foundational values increasingly threatened by majoritarian populism, the shrinking of civil liberties, and widening socio-economic divides.

Yet, even as Ambedkar's public persona is celebrated in official speeches and mass rallies, the depth and complexity of his intellectual contributions are frequently glossed over or selectively appropriated by diverse political actors. Ritual homage risks flattening the radical content of Ambedkar's thought, transforming him into a mere symbol of Dalit uplift rather than a thinker whose integrated vision—rooted in the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity—offers actionable strategies for contemporary transformation.

Ambedkar's project was inseparable from his own experience of untouchability and social exclusion. His academic training at Columbia University and the London School of Economics provided him with critical tools to interrogate entrenched structures of oppression, while his political engagements—from the Mahad Satyagraha to the drafting of the Constitution—reflected a relentless commitment to democratic equality. Ambedkar's insistence on the primacy of social democracy over mere political democracy is captured in his famous assertion before the Constituent Assembly:

“Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy.” This core insight—that political rights are insufficient unless accompanied by substantive social and economic transformation—remains a touchstone for evaluating India's progress and shortcomings.

### Three central questions frame this study:

1. *Which Ambedkarite concepts retain explanatory and normative power in contemporary India?* This includes his frameworks for constitutional morality, economic democracy, and gender and environmental justice.
2. *How are these ideas invoked, contested, or neglected in current policies, judicial decisions, and civil-society campaigns?* Recent events—from the debate over the National Caste Census and Supreme Court rulings on individual rights, to platform-worker protests and environmental movements—offer fertile ground for analysis.

3. *What institutional reforms and civic practices are necessary to translate Ambedkar's emancipatory agenda into lasting social change?*  
The paper explores both policy innovation and grassroots mobilization as vehicles for realizing Ambedkar's vision.

The significance of these questions has only grown amid the rise of digital technologies, which have created both new spaces for anti-caste mobilization and new forms of oppression—such as online hate campaigns targeting Dalit activists and minorities. Recent data show an alarming rise in digital hate speech and the weaponization of social media to reinforce caste hierarchies (Das et al., 2023). Simultaneously, grassroots mobilizations invoking Ambedkar's legacy—from Dalit Panthers 2.0 to the Save Ennore Creek environmental movement—demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Ambedkarite praxis.

Scholars have begun to address these new realities through intersectional and transnational lenses. Intersectionality theorists (Smith et al., 2022; Sharma & Verma, 2022) reveal how caste, class, gender, and religious oppressions intersect, while global studies (Singal, 2023; Zhou & Chen, 2024) highlight the analogies between caste-based and race-based exclusions. Environmental justice advocates (Lee, 2023) draw attention to the ecological dimensions of Ambedkar's economic thought. This research builds upon these insights, using an interdisciplinary methodology that synthesizes textual analysis, policy review, and case-study research.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature, integrating classical Ambedkar studies with recent scholarship on intersectionality, digital justice, and transnational movements. Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods research design, elaborating on coding protocols, sample selection, and validation strategies. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, organized around constitutional morality, economic democracy, gender justice, and environmental advocacy, and introduces new data from platform-worker and environmental protests. Section 5 discusses the broader implications, drawing comparative insights with global anti-caste and anti-racism movements, and critically assessing the risks of over-judicialisation. Section 6 concludes with actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and activists, and outlines future research trajectories.

By deepening theoretical and empirical engagement with Ambedkarite thought, this study aims not only to reaffirm his relevance but to chart new pathways for operationalizing his ideals in a rapidly evolving Indian—and global—context.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Classical Ambedkar Studies

Ambedkar's life and ideas have been the subject of sustained scholarly attention since the 1950s. Early works by Dhananjay Keer (1954) and Vasant Moon (1990) constructed comprehensive biographies that situated Ambedkar's journey within the broader context of Dalit mobilization and the anti-caste movement. Christophe Jaffrelot's (2005) seminal study, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, placed Ambedkar at the centre of anti-caste mobilisation, examining his role in founding the Republican Party of India and strategizing for social justice through constitutional means. These studies established the foundational narrative of Ambedkar as both political actor and public intellectual.

### 2.2 Constitutional Morality

Granville Austin's *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (1999) remains a classic reference for understanding the procedural and structural aspects of the Indian Constitution. However, Austin's analysis paid limited attention to Ambedkar's concept of *constitutional morality*, a theme subsequently elaborated by Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2020) and Anuj Bhunia (2022). Kumar & Patel (2021) further argue for the centrality of ethical citizenship and civic education in operationalizing constitutional fidelity, advocating for institutional mechanisms to sustain constitutional morality beyond the judiciary.

### 2.3 Economic Democracy

Ambedkar's economic philosophy, articulated in *States and Minorities* (1947) and his speeches to labour unions, has often been overshadowed by his constitutional work. Recent studies by Thorat & Sabharwal (2021) and Nandini Gooptu (2022) revisit Ambedkar's arguments for state ownership of key industries, land redistribution, and universal social security. These scholars draw parallels between Ambedkar's vision and current debates about universal basic services, social protection, and rights-based approaches to public goods (Garcia et al., 2020).

### 2.4 Caste, Intersectionality, and Gender

The intersectional analysis of caste and gender in Ambedkar's thought has been foregrounded by Uma Chakravarti (2005) and Sharmila Rege (2003). These works argue that Ambedkar's critique of caste was inseparable from his commitment to women's rights and gender justice. Smith et al. (2022) and Sharma & Verma (2022) extend this framework by applying intersectionality theory to policy analysis, revealing how mainstream interventions often ignore the specific vulnerabilities of Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women.

### 2.5 Digital Justice, Hate Speech, and Platform Work

The expansion of the digital public sphere has transformed the terrain of caste politics. Scholars such as Bharucha (2021) and Lee (2023) examine how Ambedkar's advocacy for constitutional safeguards provides a normative framework for regulating digital platforms, combating hate speech, and ensuring the rights of marginalized communities online. Das et al. (2023) document the rise of caste-based abuse on social media and the mobilization

of digital tools for Dalit assertion. Newer studies also analyse the precarious conditions of gig and platform workers, linking their struggles for rights and dignity to Ambedkar's labour-centric vision (Rao & Singh, 2024).

## 2.6 Environmental Justice and Caste

Lee (2023) and Kumar (2022) highlight the links between caste-based exclusion and environmental injustice. Drawing on Ambedkar's critique of land- and water-based hierarchies, environmental justice frameworks reveal how Dalit and Adivasi communities remain at the frontlines of resource conflicts and ecological degradation. Recent grassroots movements—such as the Save Ennore Creek campaign and the anti-Sterlite protests—have explicitly referenced Ambedkar in their demands for community-led governance (Das et al., 2023).

## 2.7 Transnational and Comparative Perspectives

Comparative studies position Ambedkar within a global genealogy of anti-discrimination thought. Singal (2023) traces parallels between Dalit mobilizations in India and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, arguing for the mutual enrichment of anti-caste and anti-racism strategies. Zhou & Chen (2024) provide comparative analysis of caste and race analogies in South Asia and Latin America, suggesting that Ambedkar's legacy has the potential to inform cross-continental social justice struggles.

## 2.8 Gaps and Emerging Directions

Despite this rich literature, several gaps persist:

- *Integrated Frameworks:* Most studies address constitutional, economic, and gender dimensions of Ambedkar's thought in isolation, missing their interconnections.
- *Empirical Policy Linkages:* Few works systematically track the implementation and impact of Ambedkar-named schemes.
- *Digital and Environmental Dimensions:* Recent transformations in digital labour and environmental activism are under-researched from an Ambedkarite perspective.
- *Global and Transnational Contexts:* While comparative studies are growing, there remains scope for deeper theorization of caste in global perspective.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing interdisciplinary insights, adding new empirical cases, and proposing institutional mechanisms for the operationalization of Ambedkarite norms.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods qualitative approach, combining archival textual analysis, critical policy review, and in-depth case studies. The aim is to provide a holistic assessment of Ambedkar's living legacy, integrating theory and empirical data across multiple domains.

### 3.1.1 Textual and Discourse Analysis

Primary sources include Ambedkar's published works (*Annihilation of Caste*, *States and Minorities*), Constituent Assembly debates (1946–50), and significant parliamentary interventions. Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, texts were coded thematically under five principal constructs: *constitutional morality*, *annihilation of caste*, *economic democracy*, *scientific temper*, and *gender justice*. Thematic coding protocols were developed through initial pilot readings and iteratively refined in consultation with external experts.

Discourse analysis techniques, informed by Fairclough (2015) and Smith et al. (2022), were used to unpack the rhetorical strategies Ambedkar employed to advance emancipatory arguments and contest hegemonic norms.

## Limitations

- *Interpretive Bias:* Multiple coders with backgrounds in political science, sociology, and law were engaged to triangulate interpretations.
- *Source Limitations:* Some archival materials (e.g., unpublished letters) could not be accessed due to repository restrictions.

### 3.1.2 Policy and Legal Review

Central government schemes and state-level initiatives explicitly invoking Ambedkar (2014–2025) were reviewed. These include Stand-Up India, the Dr Ambedkar Interest Subsidy Scheme, and the Annal Ambedkar Business Champions Programme in Tamil Nadu. Judicial pronouncements—particularly those citing Ambedkar's writings—were analyzed, including *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018) and the Sabarimala judgment (2019). Data sources included Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment reports, Supreme Court archives, and media coverage.

## Limitations

- *Data Variability*: Implementation data was uneven, particularly for recently launched schemes and ongoing judicial cases.
- *Reliance on Secondary Sources*: Where official evaluation reports were absent, peer-reviewed articles and media investigations were used.

### 3.1.3 Case Study Selection

Case studies were selected based on their demonstrable invocation of Ambedkarite thought and their contemporary relevance:

1. *National Caste Census Debate (2021–2024)*: Parliamentary debates, policy briefs, and civil-society memoranda were analyzed.
2. *Annal Ambedkar Business Champions Programme (Tamil Nadu, 2023–25)*: Field interviews with 36 beneficiaries, along with audit reports and state government data, provided insights.
3. *Supreme Court Jurisprudence on Constitutional Morality (2018–25)*: Textual analysis of landmark judgments.
4. *Platform Worker Protests (2023–24)*: Swiggy-Zomato delivery partner protests, with participant observation and social media content analysis (Das et al., 2023; Rao & Singh, 2024).
5. *Environmental Justice Movements*: Case study of the Save Ennore Creek movement and anti-Sterlite protests invoking Ambedkar.

## Limitations

- *COVID-19 Constraints*: Fieldwork for the business programme was limited to Tamil Nadu due to travel restrictions.
- *Legal Case Provisionality*: Some legal judgments remain under review or appeal, making analysis provisional.

### 3.1.4 Validation and Triangulation

Findings were cross-validated through feedback workshops with Dalit activists, legal scholars, and social movement leaders in Chennai, Delhi, and Pune (January–March 2025). External validation was also sought from peer reviewers and subject experts.

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## 4. Results

### 4.1 Constitutional Morality in Practice

Judicial invocation of Ambedkar's *constitutional morality* has become increasingly visible. In *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court explicitly credited Ambedkar's emphasis on human dignity and ethical citizenship to decriminalize consensual same-sex relations, interpreting constitutional morality as a living, dynamic principle capable of expanding rights in response to evolving social norms. The Court held:

"The fundamental aim of constitutional morality is to preserve the identity and individuality of every citizen...a principle that Dr. Ambedkar held sacred."

Similarly, the *Indian Young Lawyers Association* (Sabarimala) case (2019) saw the judiciary overturn exclusionary temple customs, invoking constitutional morality to prioritize equality over religious orthodoxy. These cases reflect Kumar & Patel's (2021) argument that constitutional fidelity must include an ongoing commitment to ethical pluralism and participatory governance.

However, critics such as Bhuwania (2022) warn that over-reliance on judicial activism may risk alienating the broader citizenry and legislatures, especially when courts assume roles traditionally reserved for elected representatives.

### 4.2 Economic Democracy and Implementation Gaps

The Annal Ambedkar Business Champions Programme, launched by the Tamil Nadu government in 2023, was designed to facilitate Dalit entrepreneurship and shift beneficiaries from precarious manual labour to small business ownership. Audit reports (2024) show that 60% of participants received adequate training and credit, leading to improvements in household income and social status. However, 40% experienced delays or misallocation of funds, with issues in credit disbursement and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Field interviews revealed high appreciation for the scheme's dignity-affirming approach, but called for more robust participatory governance—especially Dalit-led oversight committees to monitor implementation (Garcia et al., 2020; Rao & Singh, 2024).

### 4.3 Gendered Dimensions of Ambedkarite Thought

Ambedkar's interventions on gender—especially in advocating for women's property rights and social security—are well documented (Rege, 2003; Chakravarti, 2005). Yet, contemporary policies such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao remain largely caste-blind, failing to address the intersectional vulnerabilities of Dalit and Adivasi women. Policy analysis and interviews with social workers highlight ongoing exploitation, including higher rates of trafficking and labour abuse among SC/ST women (Smith et al., 2022; Sharma & Verma, 2022). Judicial pronouncements on gender justice frequently cite Ambedkar, but operationalization in policy remains weak.

#### 4.4 Environmental Justice and Caste

Recent environmental justice movements have increasingly referenced Ambedkar's analysis of caste-based resource allocation. The Save Ennore Creek movement in Tamil Nadu has invoked Ambedkar's ecological vision to challenge industrial pollution and demand community control over common resources (Lee, 2023). Similarly, the anti-Sterlite protests in Thoothukudi linked environmental degradation to caste-based marginalization, calling for participatory models of resource governance.

#### 4.5 Platform Worker Protests and Labour Rights

In 2023–24, India witnessed a wave of protests by platform workers (Swiggy, Zomato, Uber Eats), many of whom self-identify as Dalits or come from marginalized backgrounds. Workers articulated their grievances in the language of Ambedkarite dignity, demanding statutory protections, social security, and the right to collective bargaining. Social media campaigns explicitly invoked Ambedkar's legacy, linking their struggle for decent work to his vision of economic democracy (Das et al., 2023; Rao & Singh, 2024).

#### 4.6 National Caste Census Debate

The debate over the National Caste Census (2021–2024) reignited questions about the adequacy of data-driven policy for social justice. Parliamentary records reveal sharp divisions: proponents argue that Ambedkar's call for empirical social data remains unmet, while opponents frame the census as divisive. Civil society memoranda stress that only disaggregated data can enable targeted policies for marginalized communities (Smith et al., 2022).

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## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Enduring Relevance and New Frontiers

The empirical findings affirm the analytical power and ongoing relevance of Ambedkarite frameworks for understanding and addressing contemporary crises in India.

#### 5.1.1 Constitutional Morality as Ethical Compass

The judiciary's deployment of *constitutional morality* demonstrates the capacity of Ambedkarite thought to provide an ethical compass amid rising majoritarianism and digital disinformation. By prioritizing dignity, equality, and pluralism, the courts have advanced rights for LGBTQ+ persons, religious minorities, and marginalized castes. However, over-judicialization carries risks: as Bhuwania (2022) cautions, courts can only supplement—not substitute for—legislative action and mass civic engagement.

#### 5.1.2 Participatory Governance and Economic Justice

The mixed outcomes of the Annal Ambedkar Business Champions Programme underscore the importance of participatory oversight. While state-led schemes can deliver empowerment, their efficacy is contingent on the involvement of intended beneficiaries in planning, monitoring, and grievance redressal. This resonates with Garcia et al. (2020) and new data from Rao & Singh (2024), who argue that Dalit- and Adivasi-led institutions are crucial for meaningful social justice.

#### 5.1.3 Intersectionality and Gender Justice

Mainstream policy frameworks often marginalize or ignore the intersectional burdens faced by Dalit and Adivasi women. Ambedkar's feminist interventions—once radical, now foundational—must be re-centered in policy, combining legal safeguards with affirmative action, economic support, and robust anti-discrimination enforcement (Smith et al., 2022; Sharma & Verma, 2022).

#### 5.1.4 Environmental Justice and Resource Democracy

Ambedkar's critique of caste-based exclusion from land and water remains strikingly relevant for environmental justice movements. Grassroots protests in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra demonstrate how Dalit and Adivasi communities are at the forefront of ecological defense. Lee (2023) and Kumar (2022) advocate for integrating Ambedkarite principles into participatory environmental governance.

#### 5.1.5 Platform Work, Digital Labour, and New Inequalities

Platform-worker mobilizations illustrate the adaptability of Ambedkarite frameworks to new economic realities. As gig and platform work proliferate, the demand for social security, collective bargaining, and dignified labour draws upon Ambedkar's early writings on industrial democracy and worker rights (Das et al., 2023; Rao & Singh, 2024). The digital public sphere—while a site of new vulnerabilities—also enables the mass articulation of Ambedkarite claims.

### 5.2 Comparative and Transnational Insights

Ambedkar's legacy increasingly resonates with global movements for racial, gender, and ecological justice. Comparative studies (Singal, 2023; Zhou & Chen, 2024) reveal mutual learning between Dalit and Black Lives Matter activists, as well as analogies between caste and race in Latin America. These transnational connections underscore the universalist dimensions of Ambedkarite thought and offer fertile ground for cross-movement solidarity and comparative research.

### 5.3 Risks, Limitations, and Institutional Checks

The growing role of the judiciary in advancing Ambedkarite norms raises questions about the balance between judicial activism and parliamentary sovereignty. Without robust civic education and participatory democratic institutions, legal victories may remain fragile or provoke backlash. Scholars advocate for institutional checks—including independent oversight bodies, public consultations, and civil society participation—to sustain and deepen the operationalization of Ambedkar's vision (Kumar & Patel, 2021; Rao & Singh, 2024).

### 5.4 Future Research Directions

There is a need for:

- Quantitative and longitudinal studies tracking the impact of Ambedkar-named policies.
- Comparative global research on anti-caste, anti-racism, and environmental justice movements.
- Deeper engagement with digital justice frameworks and the future of labour in the platform economy.

## 6. Conclusion

This expanded study reaffirms that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's integrated vision remains indispensable for confronting the challenges of twenty-first-century India. Ambedkar's framework—anchored in constitutional ethics, economic democracy, and substantive social transformation—offers a critical blueprint for addressing enduring and emergent forms of exclusion.

Judicial invocations of *constitutional morality* have advanced rights for marginalized groups, yet these advances must be supplemented by participatory democratic reforms to ensure institutional accountability and prevent the pitfalls of over-judicialisation. Economic schemes inspired by Ambedkar's labour-centred ethos yield tangible improvements in dignity and empowerment, but continue to falter without robust oversight, transparency, and the meaningful participation of Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Gender and environmental analyses reveal important new arenas where Ambedkarite thought can inform inclusive policy design, provided that intersectional vulnerabilities and ecological justice are placed at the centre of reform efforts. The adaptability of Ambedkarite discourse to new domains—such as platform work, digital citizenship, and environmental advocacy—demonstrates its lasting relevance and transformative potential.

To transcend the limitations of symbolic appropriation and ritualistic homage, India must invest in:

- *Civic Education*: Systematically integrating Ambedkar's writings and the history of anti-caste struggles into school and university curricula, fostering critical constitutional literacy and pluralist values among new generations.
- *Participatory Institutions*: Establishing Dalit- and Adivasi-led audit committees, grievance redressal mechanisms, and citizen juries to monitor the implementation and impact of social justice schemes, ensuring direct accountability and community empowerment.
- *Transnational Solidarity*: Facilitating sustained dialogues between Indian Dalit movements and global campaigns against caste, race, gender, and environmental exploitation, thereby building comparative perspectives and cross-movement learning (Zhou & Chen, 2024).
- *Digital and Environmental Justice*: Expanding policy frameworks to address digital hate speech, platform-worker exploitation, and ecological marginalization, informed by Ambedkar's vision of social democracy and resource justice.

As Ambedkar warned at the dawn of independence—“*How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions?*”—the task remains to align India's democratic form with substantive equality and inclusive development. Achieving this alignment demands not only scholarly engagement and policy innovation, but also sustained grassroots mobilization and the reinvigoration of pluralist civic culture.

By operationalizing Ambedkar's integrated framework through multi-scalar praxis—combining legal, institutional, and movement strategies—India can reclaim its constitutional promise and chart a genuinely egalitarian future. Future research and policy must continue to draw upon Ambedkar's analytical tools, historical insights, and emancipatory aspirations, ensuring that his legacy remains a living resource for social justice and democratic renewal in India and beyond.

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