

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW  
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES  
[ISSN 2581-5369]

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Volume 8 | Issue 3  
2025

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# Struggle for Dalit's Social Justice in India: A study of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

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## ABSTRACT

*Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891- 1956) was an Indian jurist, economist, social reformer and a leader of depressed classes people. He advocated social justice as a means to create an ideal or just society based on equity, liberty, and fraternity in India. He mobilized Dalit with the motto "educate, agitate and unite" and inculcate in their minds the values of self-respect, dignity, and an urge to fight for their rights. To free the depressed classes from the bondage of caste hierarchy he sought them an ideal religion. For envisioning a just society, his drafting of the Indian Constitution was a remarkable for the social justice of Dalit. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar stands as one of the most significant architects of modern India's socio-political landscape. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, his life's work was dedicated to the upliftment of the Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and other marginalized communities. This paper explores the concept of social justice for Dalits in India through the lens of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's activism, ideology, and institutional contributions.*

**Keywords:** Social-discrimination, Equality, Liberty, Fraternity, Democracy, Dalit, Classless society, social justice, human equality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word Dalit is a Marathi word which means "ground or broken to pieces". The concept Dalit comes from Sanskrit (Ancient Indian language) term Dal which "means to crack or to split". the term Dalit in public speech is of relatively new origin, it is supposed to have been used first by Jotirao Phule (1827-1890), leading social reformer of Maharashtra, in his attempt to champion the cause of upliftment of the status of marginalised or downtrodden people of society. While Ambedkar also popularize the term Dalit, his philosophy has remained a key source of inspiration for Dalit emancipation. Dr. B.R Ambedkar was the first Dalit leader who demanded political empowerment of the Dalits people in 1930s. Marathi literary figures and neo-Buddhists began to use the word in their writings and contributed to the literary initiatives in replacing Harijan (Gandhi's term for them, means children of God) and achchuta (Vedic

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term for them, means untouchable) with Dalit in the 1970s. This term was highly popularized by Dalit Panthers in 1970s in Maharashtra, to refer to the scheduled caste (constitutional term for them) population. However there are some who assign a broad meaning to the term to denote to any depressed classes of people. Now the term has become synonymous with the scheduled caste people. This section of Indian society is called Dalit because they are placed at the lowest section of social structure and suffers from various issues of society like social, economic, cultural and political (Zeffrelot, 2005).

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar stands as one of the most significant architects of modern India's socio-political landscape. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, his life's work was dedicated to the upliftment of the Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and other marginalized communities. This essay explores the concept of social justice for Dalits in India through the lens of Dr. Ambedkar's activism, ideology, and institutional contributions (Gail, 2004).

The people of Dalits is one of the most oppressed and discriminated group of people in Indian society. According to B R Ambedkar, the Dalits communities are those which are discriminated by the dominant castes. In general, the lower caste people are referred to as Dalits as per the Varna system of traditional Hindu society but in the common political understanding, the Scheduled Caste people are designated as the Dalits. The term Scheduled Caste was first used by the British colonial Government through the Government of India Act 1935. The Dalits are sometimes referred to by such names as 'depressed classes', 'exterior castes', outcaste 'Scheduled Caste', 'Harijans', untouchables, etc. Ambedkar defines Dalithood as "a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes 'Brahminical ideology'"<sup>2</sup>. They belong to the lowest group of the Varna system of traditional Hindu society, mainly referred as untouchables. Ambedkar was critical of the idea of caste system and its related attributes like occupation and hierarchy. He did not consider caste and class as a natural division but rather a category of social discrimination. He holds the view that the Dalits are the most marginalized section of people in Indian society where they are socially, economically and politically backward. They were considered as polluted as well as downtrodden sections of the society where their touch and even their shadow might pollute the upper castes. Ambedkar introduced One of the most important idea related to the caste system in India was the idea of 'graded inequality'. He differentiates between inequality and graded inequality. Inequality can be seen in various forms like caste, class, income, skin colour, racial and occupational or work differences but graded inequality

is a unique form of inequality which characterises especially Indian society, in terms of Hindu social order where the ascribed status of caste is the basis of differences and inequality. The traditional Hindu caste system is a graded hierarchical system into four Varnas, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The Untouchables are outside the caste system. They are the people graded as the lowest in the caste system. They are not only different from others but also unequal by birth, and accordingly their social and economic status is determined (Garima, 2022).

Ambedkar is critical of the working of the caste system and the process of social exclusion and discrimination of the lower caste people especially of the Dalits. He was very critical Gandhiji's idea of 'Varna and religious institutions having nothing to do with caste. The law of Varna teaches how to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling and it defines not our rights but our duties' (Shah, 2002). The caste is a hierarchy in which the division of labour is graded one above the other. In no other country the division of labour is accompanied by the gradation of labour. Thus, the graded inequality is the soul of the caste system in India and most importantly all the castes have internalised such divisions.

Thus, Ambedkar becomes the central figure in anti-caste movement in India. He formed Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha to register the protest against the atrocities on the dalits by the upper castes. The motto of the Sabha was to educate, organise and agitate. The self-awakening is one of the best ways to eliminate the social evils like caste based untouchability etc. He traced the origin of caste system and its ideology of discrimination and said that the sacred Hindu manuscripts like Manusmriti and other such writings have legitimised the caste oppression. Like this writing the base for social discrimination based on one's birth. Hence, he advocated destroying such texts. On 25th December of 1927 Manusmriti was burned by Ambedkar as a step towards a great struggle (Maha Sangharsha) and make Satyagraha to negate the mythological basis of caste hierarchy and untouchability.

### **A brief historical Context of Caste and Dalit Oppression:**

- a) **Caste System in Ancient India:** The Varna system in Hinduism evolved into a rigid caste hierarchy where Dalits were relegated to the lowest status, outside the four-fold Varna system.
- b) **Untouchability and Discrimination:** Dalits were subjected to inhumane practices, denied access to education, temples, public resources, and basic human dignity.
- c) **Colonial Rule and Caste:** British colonization codified many caste distinctions while also opening some educational and administrative spaces for lower castes.

## **II. DR. B.R AMBEDKAR: A SHORT LIFE-SKETCH**

Dr. Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar was born in a Mahar family on 14 April, 1891 in Maharashtra. He himself has experience the life of an untouchable. So, it has become mission of his life to establish a new social order based on justice, liberty and equality. He spent his entire life fighting against the various discrimination in society and popularly known as 'Babasaheb'. He has written on various social and political justices in society. In this context, he offered a model of 'just society' or 'an ideal society'. Ambedkar said, casteless and classless society is must for the success of democracy in any country. So, he wanted to established liberty, equality and fraternity in Indian society y. Dr. Ambedkar from his early childhood was influenced by Buddha, Mahatma Phule, Kabir, etc. Through his idea of education, he tried to improve the position of downtrodden or untouchables in society. He struggle for the downtrodden or marginalised to acquire new skills and start new professions to get equal status in society. He formed political organizations to establish democracy and attacked on caste system and discrimination. Among all his works, it is impossible to find which one is not indicating justice and equality ('just society'). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the champion of human rights and emancipation of the untouchables or downtrodden class of society (Choudhari, 2018).

B.R. Ambedkar was one of the most dominant political thinkers of India who critically looked at the caste system in India and its rigidity. He took up the issues of Dalits and Adivasi people in India. He studied the impact of caste discrimination upon the lower caste section and was best analysed by him. Being born in a lower caste family, Ambedkar devoted his entire life to fight against the caste system which discriminated and marginalized the Dalit people. After being educated in foreign country, he came back to India and started practicing law. He was not only critic's issues of the caste system as well as also instrumental in the movement for eradication of caste discrimination. He also helped the Dalits people to claim equal status and equal opportunities with other castes.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar wrote on the Dalit issues related major writings are:

- 1) The Untouchables, Who are they?
- 2) Emancipation of the Untouchables
- 3) States and Minorities
- 4) Who were Sudras?
- 5) Annihilation of Caste.

Ambedkar dedicated his entire life to the annihilation of caste and the promotion of untouchables in society. From 1924 to the end of his life; he was the most dominant leader of the untouchable movement. He understood that the nation's progress could not be realised without untouchability was removed first. He worked tirelessly for the removing of caste system and fight for the established of social justice in our society till end of his life (Rodrigues (ed),2002).

### **III. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY OF DALIT EMANCIPATION**

Dalit emancipation may be defined as a process of improvement by Dalit as a community over self, ideology and knowledge resources, which determine power of relationship in a society. As a political process, Dalit's emancipation challenges the prevailing power structure of marginalised, downtrodden and involves three crucial elements- access to information, opportunity for participation in political system and organizing capacity to influence and gain power in society. The process of emancipation of Dalit's people includes four successive steps like, awareness, mobilization, organization and Control.

In his quest for social equality or justice in India, Ambedkar mainly used agitation as a main tool. He edited and deployed newspapers as a medium of communication with his followers. Through ever agitation was to open a water tank for public, which was reserved only for the upper caste newspapers such as Mook Nayak (1920) and Bahishkrit Bharath (1927), he managed to reach a substantial number of audiences and garner their support. He used his education and skill to reclaim the rights of the depressed or downtrodden people of society. One of his notable works was to carve out a separate electorate for the depressed section of people in a predominantly upper-caste political landscape (Ashraf, 2015).

### **IV. STRUGGLE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Ambedkar was aware of the social justice of the dalits because of historical oppression. The liberation of the dalits will not come by merely removing external oppression. Removal of external oppression is of primary importance. But building up the dalits from within is equally important. Ambedkar himself achieved great heights in learning by his hard work. He wants to same needs to be achieved by other dalits. So he established four building for the marginalized, downtrodden or depressed class students in Bombay presidency during 1925-30. This is a good example for his positive work and emancipation of depressed society mainly dalits people. He established institutions such as Samaj "Sangh" in 1931. These institutions gave greatest importance for well development programmes. Inter-caste marriage was given the top priority by Dr. Ambedkar. He was not satisfied with a few inter-caste

marriages, but he wanted to make it a people's movement. Even he encouraged inert-dinning with traditional upper caste Hindu society. Inert-dinning denotes the social revolutions which respects inequality on the basis of food and develop social justice in society (Ranjithkumar, 2011).

In response to the highly discriminatory caste-ridden social system that utterly devalued human dignity of Sudras and untouchables, Ambedkar understood determined to eradicate social, educational, and cultural disparities of the lower castes section. He mobilized them with the motto: "educate, agitate and unite". He inculcated in their minds the values of self-respect, dignity, and motivated to fight for their rights and justice. Hinduism, the predominant religion in India, never taught the virtues of liberty, equality and fraternity and, consequently, it could never unite the entire Hindu society. Ambedkar's first agitation for public struggle led him to drinking water from a public tank named, Choudar-Talab, which was out of bounds for the Dalit's people. This was a very effective agitation for Dalit's people because dalits had to suffer as they were not allowed to drink water even from a public tank which reserved for the traditional upper castes people.

#### ***Against the structures of economic injustice:***

The traditional caste-based economic structure of Indian society contained no provision for investing money to earn more value based on the means of production available.

Hereditary division of labour on which Indian castiesm rests proved to be an impediment to economic justice for the depressed class of society. Such a social order created a stagnant economic state devoid of any mobility, either horizontal or vertical. For Ambedkar, economic equality must be sought in tandem with social equality and this could be achieved only with constitutional safeguard (Ambedkar,1936).

#### ***Social Mobilization and Struggle:***

Dr. Ambedkar started various strategy achieving for his goal improving the status of marginalised, depressed or downtrodden section of people in society specially dalits for his emancipation and their rights and established social justice in society. He started newspapers like the Mooknayak, Bahiskrit Bharat and Janata to raise their voice or awareness and propagate his views. He was exhorted dalits to leave their traditional and demeaning occupation, move away from villages as they were sinking of localism, den of ignorance, narrow mindedness and communalism.

Similarly for the improving of Dalit's people, he organized many social struggle like Mahad Tank Satyagraha in 1926 and temple entry movement in 1930 named, Kalaram Temple in

Nasik. This movement aimed to allow lower caste people to enter temples and challenge the oppressive caste norms in society during the time. Especially dalits people were not entering in to the temples, Ambedkar wanted to regain self-respect, dignity for dalits in society. He struggle one of the basic rights for their equal access to public place.

He also established some others social organizations like Bahiskrit Hikarini Sabha and the All India Depressed Classes Association in 1930 with the same objective for the propagation of the improving condition of dalits people. Dr. Ambedkar all these efforts eventually resulted in social mobilization and emancipation of dalits people and strengthened the agenda of social justice.

### ***Political history of Dalits:***

He emerged as the leading authority on the affairs of the depressed section of society. He was invited for all the three Round Table Conference as a representative of the depressed classes. The issue of separate electorates for the dalits became a burning issue. Ambedkar, very clearly stood for the emancipation of the depressed or downtrodden section of people. Ambedkar stand for separate electorate for the depressed classes and his final acceptance to have reserved constituencies. Ambedkar became a member of the Governor General Executive Committee Assembly from July 1942 to March 1946. He used this position to work for the welfare of the depressed classes. The peak of his legal achievement is his elevation as the Chairman of the constitutional Assembly. He became the chief architect of Indian Constitution (Teltumbde, 2010). Ambedkar's concept of centralization, the policy of reservation and legal protection to the depressed sections all found a place in the Indian constitution.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar considered as the first political Dalit leader, he first introduced political rights for dalits. After that Gandhiji's fast unto death and the Poona Pact agreement recognize Ambedkar as a new political leader in Indian society. In 1936, Ambedkar's announcement of leaving Hinduism and writing a succinct article like annihilation of caste brought uproar in Indian politics. With this, Ambedkar established many political and social organizations. This important organisations are, Republic Party, Independent Labor Party, schedule caste federation organization was created in 1937. After that he was made the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. He is known as the constitution maker in our country. Some analysts also call him the modern Manu. Broadly, he opened the doors for the emancipation of marginalised or downtrodden people in Indian society, specially the Dalit's people. B.R. Ambedkars whole life was always inspiring for the Dalit society. After



independence, the dalit leaders of the organization in India considered Ambedkar as their leader. The literature written by Ambedkar plays an important role in improving and emancipation the Dalit society (Ambedkar, 1936).

After independence, Dr. Ambedkar came as a new way for the Dalit struggle and their emancipation. He provided an opportunity to the Dalit's society to convert to a new religion. Due to this changing scenario the Dalit struggle also got a new direction. During the Mahar Conference in Bombay Presidency in 1936, Ambedkar steadily believed that there was no other path to emancipation of Dalit's society than through conversion. He firmly realized that the established of Hinduism was the caste system, as long as Dalit's remained Hindus they will continue to fight for their basic human rights. So, finally he left Hinduism on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1956 and accepted the path of Buddhism with millions of his followers. Because he firmly believed that unless Hinduism itself is destroyed Varna system and Caste hierarchy cannot be destroying and his strong views challenged the established Hindu hierarchy. By accepting Buddhism, he tried to develop a separate identity and power base for the Dalit's (Zelliot,2004).

He was the main architect who laid the foundation of this movement. Like Ambedkar considered Marxist ideology suitable for the exploited class for a nation that was not falling under its influence, he laid a solid foundation for the Dalit's struggle. In this sequence, after independence the Dalit Panther Movement played an important role in this struggle in India (Thorat, Sukhadeo & Neuman,2007). The Dalit Panther Movement was a new social movement. This movement was influenced by the Black Panther movement of the 1970s by American Negroes regarding apartheid. Its founder, Namdev Dhasal, along with famous Marathi litterateur J.V. Pawar founded the Dalit Panthers in 1972. Dalit Panthers was a movement of radical and revolutionary ideas mainly of young Dalit revolutionaries. His followers mainly propounded the ideas of Phule Ambedkar and Karl Marx. The Dalit agitation in independent India got its vocal voice due to this Dalit Panther (Shah,2002). Dalit Panthers movement was towards more extremism as compared to the earlier Dalit movements. However, with the speed with which the agitaion emerged, it also calmed down at the similar pace.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar was the first to advocate social, economic and political rights for the Dalit's people in India. But the one Dalit leader who has played the role of bringing a big change in Indian politics and Dalit society by taking forward his ideology is Kashiram. Badrinarayan, who wrote the biography of Kashi Ram, says that the ideology of Kanshi Ram is a form of Ambedkar's ideology, he further says that the political system and its operation in

the Hindi region. Dalit political leader and social activist Kanshi Ram had felt her very deeply and found a way to change various issues Dalit society. The way forward was by occupying the power of the state, to develop the people and through it to bring about social change. Therefore popular Dalit leader Kanshi Ram established a political party 'Bahujan Samaj Party' in 1984. Kashi Ram created Bahujanism. He made for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes was a new experiment for Indian politics. Kashiram was successful to a great extent in establishing the dalits to power through the dalit struggle and organizations and their emancipation (Dhankhar, 2022).

The BSP, founded by Kasi Ram and now led by Kumari Mayawati was able to gain political power in Uttar Pradesh, along with substantial presence in some other parts of the country. The origins of all these facets of the continuing emancipation of Dalit's people in India are found in the ideas and practice of Ambedkar.

Ambedkar finally left Hinduism and joined Buddhism on 14th October 1956. He firmly believed that unless Hinduism itself is destroyed Varna and Caste system cannot be destroy and his strong views challenged the established Hindu hierarchy. By joining Buddhism he tried to develop a separate identity and power base for the Dalit.(Zelliot,2001)

## **V. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEGACY**

- National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC): Monitors implementation of safeguards for Dalits.
- Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989): Laws aimed at protecting Dalits from discrimination and violence.
- Reservation System: A direct legacy of Ambedkar's constitutional vision, though often debated, remains a crucial social justice tool. (Gail, 2004)

## **VI. CHALLENGES TO DALIT SOCIAL JUSTICE TODAY**

- a) Caste-Based Violence and Atrocities: Incidents like Khairlanji (2006), Hathras (2020), and others highlight ongoing violence.
- b) Economic Disparities: Despite affirmative action, Dalits still lag behind in wealth, land ownership, and business representation.
- c) Discrimination in Education and Employment: Subtle and overt casteism persists in elite institutions and workplaces.
- d) Political Marginalization: While Dalits form a significant voter base, their leadership is

often co-opted or suppressed. (Human Rights Watch, 2001)

## VII. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Ambedkar's idea of Dalit emancipation through social justice which based on equal rights and human dignity through legal framework. As the result of his idea, Indian constitution grantees equal right and dignity to all. He was the first political leader in India to demand separate electorates and reservation in favour of Dalit society in round table conference hence three round table conferences failed. Ambedkar realized that affirmative action is only way to improvement of Dalit societies which protect through legal framework. Ambedkar did not encourage the aspiration of caste hierarchy in our society and this hierarchy generates inhuman practice among the all communities. Ambedkar firmly believed that economically Dalit communities are very low which they are lack of access to political, social and economic rights and power. His ideas are supported on sustainable development of Dalit communities in in our society through legal and constitutional safeguards and also by organizing them for fighting for fundamental rights. (Jefferlot,2005)

Dr B.R. Ambedkar was not the first social reformer to initiate the process of Dalit emancipation in India, nor was he the last social reformer to ensure its completion of Dalit emancipation as well as empowerment. But he was the leading leader of all marginalised, downtrodden and oppressed section of people their emancipation and mainly Dalit emancipation. However, his Dalit mission has two characteristics, not shared by other champions of social justice in contemporary India. First, his restless contribution in this field was to advance and lead the course of Dalit emancipation and to impart to it an independent political character, which is the core of the very notion of Dalit emancipation (Gail, 2004). Without this contribution, the notion of Dalit emancipation will not be real substance and spirit. Second, unlike other Dalit social reformers before and after his times, he advanced his mission with a sound and viable ideological framework coupled with equally strong action framework. He was not only an eminent theoretician in India but also restless social as well as political activist of Dalit issues. In this respect he stands apart and much ahead from others. His entire life and mission was a perfect and unique blend of theory and action. Ambedkar thought are leading light and sustain the on-going process of development all downtrodden section of society, specially the Dalit emancipation in India. Without his ideological foundation, the edifice of the contemporary Dalit emancipation in India will go bankrupt and lose its identity, direction and spirit.

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