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B. R. Ambedkar and the Making of a Postcolonial Human Rights Vision in India

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the human rights ideology of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, shaped by a unique combination of experiences with class oppression, Western education, and political activism in colonial and post-independence India. Using historical and logical methods, the study analyzes how Ambedkar, drawing on his experience of injustice as a member of the "untouchable" caste and his exposure to democratic and liberal values at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, forged a novel perspective on social justice. Ambedkar advocated for social change through constitutional democracy, legal reform, and social activism. This article contributes to human rights scholarship by highlighting two aspects of Ambedkar's legacy: his role as a modern constitutionalist who institutionalized social equality in India and as a global thinker who influenced contemporary human rights movements.

KEYWORDS: Ambedkar; human rights; caste; constitutional democracy; postcolonial political thought; Asia and Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of historical, social, cultural, and philosophical factors is crucial to shaping B. R. Ambedkar's human rights ideology, revealing the multidimensional and profound nature of the intellectual journey he undertook. Although studies on Ambedkar and his contributions to the drafting of the Indian Constitution and to the struggle for the Dalit community are abundant in South Asia, most works remain either biographical or political in nature. Few international works have deeply analyzed how Ambedkar reconciled his personal experience of class with his exposure to Western thought and Buddhist philosophy to construct his human rights doctrine. This gap means that Ambedkar is often seen only as an Indian reformer, rather than being properly recognized as a political thinker of global significance.

This article aims to answer questions:

What social, cultural, and intellectual factors most clearly shaped Ambedkar's human rights ideology?

How can Ambedkar's legacy contribute to current debates on human rights and post-colonialism?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The historical and logical methods are combined to comprehensively study and systematize Ambedkar's human rights ideology. The historical method reconstructs the historical, social, and cultural context in which Ambedkar lived and worked, including British colonial rule, the unjust caste system, and the influence of Western democratic ideas and Buddhism. By analyzing events, historical documents, and Ambedkar's experiences, this method explains the origins of his human rights ideology, particularly his emphasis on equality and justice for oppressed groups. Meanwhile, the logical method is applied rigorously and consistently to analyze, synthesize, and organize the elements of Ambedkar's thought, from breaking down aspects such as class equality and individual freedom to constructing a complete system of thought and assessing the rationality of his arguments. The combination of these two methods not only clarifies Ambedkar's human rights ideology but also helps present it in a scientific, clear, and persuasive manner.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Caste as Structural Domination in Colonial India

Indian society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was structured by a deeply entrenched caste hierarchy that regulated social status, economic opportunity, and political participation. Caste functioned not merely as a cultural or religious classification but as a comprehensive social order that shaped everyday life and institutional access. Rooted in Hindu social organization, this system divided society into hierarchical groups, while simultaneously producing categories of exclusion that fell outside the recognized social order (Thich, 2017) (The Times of India, 2023).

Within this stratified structure, communities later identified as Dalits occupied the most marginalized position. Historically labeled as "untouchables," Dalits were systematically excluded from education, public space, religious institutions, and economic opportunities. Their exclusion was enforced through social practices that regulated physical proximity, access to shared resources such as water, and participation in

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communal life. Such practices were not isolated acts of prejudice but reflected an institutionalized form of inequality sustained through custom, religious authority, and social sanction (Junghare, 1988; Jaffrelot, 2005).

The rigidity of the caste hierarchy reproduced inequality across generations, limiting social mobility regardless of an individual's ability or effort. In this context, discrimination operated not only through explicit acts of exclusion but also through the normalization of hierarchy itself. As Ambedkar later observed, caste functioned as a system that assigned social worth at birth, thereby denying large segments of the population the possibility of equal citizenship (Moon, 1993). This structural nature of caste rendered moral appeals and charitable reform insufficient as strategies for achieving social justice.

Colonial rule did not fundamentally disrupt this social order. Although the British administration introduced modern legal institutions and bureaucratic governance, colonial policies often accommodated existing caste distinctions for administrative and social control purposes. Caste categories were recorded, classified, and, in some cases, reinforced through colonial census practices and legal frameworks. As a result, colonial modernity coexisted with entrenched social hierarchy, producing a paradox in which formal legal equality was proclaimed while everyday inequality persisted (Junghare, 1988; Jaffrelot, 2005).

For marginalized communities, the promise of rights articulated through colonial legal discourse remained largely abstract and unattainable. Legal reforms did not translate into substantive changes in social status, as caste continued to govern access to education, employment, and political participation beyond the reach of formal law. Discrimination was thus embedded within social relations themselves, operating independently of explicit legal exclusion. This disjunction exposed the limitations of rights frameworks that addressed inequality solely at the level of legal recognition without confronting the social structures that sustained domination.

It was within this context of structural inequality that Ambedkar's critique of caste took shape. Drawing on his lived experience as a member of a marginalized community, Ambedkar conceptualized caste as a form of internal domination that operated alongside and sometimes independently of colonial rule. He rejected the view that caste discrimination could be overcome through moral reform or social harmony alone, arguing instead that it required fundamental institutional transformation (Moon, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2005).

By framing caste as a structural obstacle to equality, Ambedkar laid the groundwork for his distinctive engagement with human rights. The social realities of colonial India led him to believe that abstract declarations of equality were insufficient without enforceable legal safeguards and state accountability. This understanding of caste as a system of domination rather than a cultural anomaly provides the essential background for examining how Ambedkar reimagined human rights as instruments of constitutional and social transformation.

3.2. Ambedkar's early childhood experiences

His early experiences of caste-based exclusion profoundly shaped Ambedkar's engagement with human rights. Born into a Dalit family in western India, he faced discrimination not as an abstract social issue but as a pervasive reality woven into daily life. Since childhood, caste has shaped his access to education, public spaces, and social interactions, exposing him to segregation and humiliation that left a lasting impression on his political awareness (Thich, 2017). Ambedkar was made aware of the complexity and tenacity of the caste system by these early experiences with exclusion. Social avoidance, symbolic degradation, and the denial of essential services were examples of acts of discrimination that were part of a larger system controlling social interactions, rather than isolated incidents. These experiences supported the idea that inequality was socially normalized and structurally produced, as evidenced by caste functioning as a mechanism of collective exclusion rather than individual prejudice (Junghare, 1988).

At first, it seemed that Ambedkar used education to break free from caste. His admission to educational institutions traditionally dominated by higher castes represented an exceptional achievement, yet it did not shield him from discrimination. Even within academic spaces, caste continued to shape social interactions, reminding him that individual merit alone could not overcome entrenched hierarchy. This struggle between formal access and substantive exclusion made him more aware of the limits of social mobility in a caste-bound society (Thich, 2017).

Through these formative experiences, Ambedkar developed a critical understanding of inequality that extended beyond moral condemnation. He came to view caste not simply as a social injustice but as a system that denied full personhood and citizenship to entire communities. As he later wrote, caste assigned social worth at birth, fixed individual destinies, and fragmented society into hierarchical units incapable of genuine social solidarity (Moon, 1993). This insight marked a decisive shift from perceiving discrimination as a moral failing to recognizing it as a political and structural problem.

Ambedkar's early life also fostered a skepticism toward reformist approaches that emphasized social harmony or charitable uplift. Witnessing the persistence of caste discrimination despite gestures of benevolence convinced him that moral appeals were insufficient to challenge deeply rooted systems of domination. Instead, these experiences led him to conclude that meaningful change required institutional mechanisms capable of enforcing equality and protecting the rights of marginalized groups (Jaffrelot, 2005).

This formative period thus laid the intellectual foundations for Ambedkar's later engagement with human rights and constitutionalism. His understanding of rights emerged not from abstract philosophical speculation but from the lived reality of exclusion and the recognition that social hierarchy could not be dismantled without legal and political intervention. The experience of caste-based marginalization transformed human rights, in Ambedkar's thought, from moral ideals into practical instruments of social transformation. It is this experiential grounding that distinguishes his approach to rights from both liberal universalism and purely ethical models of reform.

3.3. Ambedkar's Engagement with Western Thought

Ambedkar's encounter with Western political thought during his education in the United States and Britain constituted a decisive phase in the formation of his ideas on rights, equality, and democracy. Studying at Columbia University and later at the London School of Economics, he was exposed to liberal constitutionalism, democratic theory, and debates on individual liberty that were largely absent from the intellectual life of colonial India. These encounters, however, did not result in the uncritical adoption of Western ideas. Instead, Ambedkar engaged with them selectively and critically, interpreting their promises and limitations through the lens of caste-based exclusion in India (Columbia University, 2023) (Columbia Global Centers, 2023).

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At Columbia University, Ambedkar studied a wide range of disciplines, including economics, political science, history, sociology, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary training introduced him to liberal democratic principles emphasizing equality before the law, individual rights, and representative government. Influenced by progressive intellectual currents in early twentieth-century American academia, Ambedkar encountered arguments that framed democracy as a system grounded in social equality rather than merely procedural governance. These ideas resonated with his own experiences of marginalization, yet they also exposed a critical tension between liberal ideals and social realities (Columbia Global Centers, 2023).

A growing awareness of its limitations marked Ambedkar's engagement with Western liberalism. While liberal theory emphasized formal equality and individual rights, it often failed to account for deeply entrenched social hierarchies that, in practice, restricted access to these rights. Observing American and European societies, Ambedkar recognized that racial, class-based, and colonial inequalities persisted alongside constitutional guarantees of freedom and equality. This recognition reinforced his skepticism toward abstract universalism and strengthened his conviction that rights required institutional enforcement to be meaningful (Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 2011).

His subsequent studies in Britain further refined this perspective. At the London School of Economics, Ambedkar was immersed in debates on political economy, constitutional governance, and the state's role in regulating social relations. British constitutional traditions, including the emphasis on the rule of law and legal safeguards against arbitrary power, provided him with a framework for thinking about rights as institutionalized protections rather than moral aspirations. However, Ambedkar remained acutely aware that such traditions had historically coexisted with imperial domination and social inequality, both within Britain and across its colonies (Kumar, 2014). Instead of viewing Western constitutionalism as a model to be replicated, Ambedkar approached it as a set of tools that needed to be adapted to local conditions. Liberal notions of equality appeared inadequate in societies where social status was determined by birth and reinforced through religious and cultural norms. As a result, Ambedkar began to articulate a conception of rights that combined constitutional principles with substantive measures to correct historical injustice. This synthesis distinguished his approach from both classical liberalism and moral-reformist traditions, emphasizing the necessity of state intervention to achieve social equality (Moon, 1993).

Ambedkar's academic work during this period further illustrates his critical engagement with Western thought. His early research in economics and public finance reflected a concern with institutional design and state responsibility, rather than relying solely on abstract theory. These studies informed his later political vision, in which democracy was inseparable from social and economic justice. Rights, in this framework, were not natural entitlements guaranteed by moral consensus but political achievements secured through legal structures and public policy (Kumar, 2014). Importantly, Ambedkar's time abroad also reinforced his awareness of the global dimensions of inequality. Exposure to Western societies allowed him to situate caste within a broader comparative perspective, recognizing parallels between caste oppression, racial discrimination, and colonial subjugation. This comparative insight strengthened his resolve to challenge caste not merely as an Indian social problem but as a form of structural domination incompatible with democratic principles (Jaffrelot, 2005).

By the time Ambedkar returned to India, his engagement with Western thought had crystallized into a distinctive intellectual position. He neither rejected liberal constitutionalism nor accepted it uncritically. Instead, he reworked its principles to address the specific realities of caste society, emphasizing enforceable rights, constitutional safeguards, and the state's responsibility for social transformation. This critical synthesis laid the foundation for his later role as a constitutional thinker and human rights advocate, marking a transition from intellectual formation to political intervention.

3.4. Reconstructing human rights through the lens of caste and constitutional social justice

Ambedkar's conception of human rights reached its most systematic expression through his engagement with constitutional politics and legal reform in late colonial and early postcolonial India. For Ambedkar, the persistence of caste hierarchy demonstrated that rights could not be secured through moral appeals or social goodwill alone. Instead, he argued that human rights required institutionalization through constitutional mechanisms capable of confronting structural inequality. This conviction placed constitutional democracy at the center of his political thought, distinguishing his approach from reformist traditions that emphasized ethical persuasion over legal enforcement (Moon, 1993; Jaffrelot, 2005).

Ambedkar viewed the state as a crucial agent in achieving social justice. While liberal political theory often treats the state as a neutral guarantor of individual freedoms, Ambedkar understood that neutrality in a profoundly unequal society risked perpetuating existing hierarchies. In the Indian context, where caste structured access to resources and opportunities, the state had to assume an active role in dismantling inherited privilege. Human rights, therefore, were inseparable from state responsibility and public policy aimed at correcting historical injustice (Kumar, 2014).

This structural understanding of rights shaped Ambedkar's contributions to the drafting of the Indian Constitution. As chair of the Drafting Committee, he sought to embed principles of equality, non-discrimination, and social justice within the constitutional framework. Legal equality before the law was complemented by provisions that ensured substantive equality for historically marginalized communities. Measures such as political representation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes reflected Ambedkar's belief that formal rights, without institutional support, would remain ineffective in addressing entrenched inequality (Chau & Tran, 2022).

Ambedkar's advocacy for affirmative measures was grounded in his critique of caste as a system that denied equal citizenship at birth. He rejected the argument that such measures violated liberal principles of equality, contending instead that they were necessary to realize the very promise of democratic citizenship. In a society marked by structural exclusion, equal treatment under unequal conditions would merely reproduce injustice. From this perspective, human rights required differential interventions to produce genuinely equal outcomes (Moon, 1993). Beyond constitutional design, Ambedkar's understanding of human rights extended to labor rights and socio-economic justice. During his tenure as Minister of Labour, he introduced reforms to improve working conditions and protect workers from exploitation, including reducing working hours and promoting labor welfare policies. These initiatives reflected his conviction that civil and political rights could not be separated from economic and social rights, notably for communities historically denied access to material security (Kumar, 2014). Ambedkar's approach also entailed a fundamental critique of religious and cultural justifications for inequality. He argued that caste hierarchy was sustained not only through

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social practice but also through normative frameworks that legitimized domination. By challenging these foundations, Ambedkar sought to reframe human rights as a secular and rational basis for social organization. His rejection of caste-based hierarchy was thus inseparable from a broader effort to reconstruct Indian society on principles of equality and dignity (Jaffrelot, 2005). Central to Ambedkar's reconstruction of human rights was his insistence that democracy must extend beyond political representation to encompass social and economic dimensions. Political democracy, he warned, would remain fragile if it were not supported by social democracy grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity. This triadic vision underscored his belief that rights were not merely legal entitlements but social conditions that had to be actively produced and sustained through institutional arrangements (Moon, 1993).

Through this synthesis of caste critique, constitutionalism, and social justice, Ambedkar articulated a vision of human rights that departed significantly from abstract universalism. Rights, in his framework, were historically situated and socially grounded, designed to confront specific forms of domination instead of to assert timeless moral principles. This reconstruction positioned human rights as instruments of transformation, capable of reshaping social relations and enabling marginalized communities to claim full citizenship. Ambedkar's constitutional project thus represents a distinctive contribution to human rights thought from the Global South, by integrating legal equality with substantive social justice.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of Ambedkar's human rights ideology was profoundly influenced by his personal experiences of injustice, Western education, and the political struggle in India. However, his legacy extends beyond the national sphere, offering universal value to humanity. Ambedkar's ideas show that struggles against class oppression can create universal values for humanity. By combining the constitution, the rule of law, and Buddhist philosophy, Ambedkar transformed human rights from an abstract principle into a concrete tool for social reform. This legacy is not only significant for India, but also offers insights for many post-colonial countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America in their search for models of social justice. Therefore, engaging with Ambedkar in current human rights research is not only a return to the past but also a dialogue with the challenges of the 21st century.

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