

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Constitutional Feminism in India: Caste, Gender, and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to women's rights has frequently been overshadowed by his widely acknowledged role as a critic of caste and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution. This paper argues that B. R. Ambedkar developed a distinctive and theoretically sophisticated model of constitutional feminism grounded in the intersection of caste, gender, class, labour, and religion. Moving beyond reformist and nationalist approaches that framed women's issues within moral, cultural, or paternalistic paradigms, Ambedkar sought to institutionalise gender justice through constitutional guarantees, legislative reform, and active state intervention. His feminist vision located women's oppression within broader structures of social hierarchy and emphasised that democracy could not survive without substantive equality for women.

The study critically analyses Ambedkar's writings, speeches, parliamentary interventions, and legislative initiatives—particularly his engagement with the Hindu Code Bill—to examine his critique of patriarchy, caste endogamy, Brahmanical social order, and religious authority. It further explores his sustained emphasis on women's education, labour rights, maternity benefits, equal wages, and economic independence as indispensable foundations of social democracy. Ambedkar's insistence that women's rights must be constitutionally guaranteed and legally enforceable represented a decisive shift from symbolic reform to structural transformation. His interventions challenged not only social customs but also the institutional mechanisms through which caste and patriarchy reproduced inequality.

By situating Ambedkar within contemporary debates on intersectional and Dalit feminism, the paper demonstrates the continuing relevance of his thought in addressing gender inequality in neoliberal India. It argues that Ambedkar anticipated many key concerns of contemporary feminist theory by foregrounding the interconnected nature of caste, gender, class, and labour exploitation. The paper also contends that his concept of constitutional morality provides a powerful normative framework for reconciling legal equality with substantive social justice in a society marked by persistent structural inequalities. The paper concludes that Ambedkar must be recognised not merely as a social reformer or constitutional architect but as a foundational feminist thinker whose integrated vision of equality, dignity, democratic citizenship, and social justice remains indispensable for achieving transformative gender justice in contemporary India.

Keywords: B. R. Ambedkar; Constitutional Feminism; Intersectionality; Caste–Gender Nexus; Social Democracy; Gender Justice; Dalit Feminism; Constitutional Morality; Labour Rights; Women's Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual and political project was fundamentally concerned with transforming a deeply unequal society structured by caste hierarchy, patriarchy, religious orthodoxy, and economic exploitation. His

lived experience of caste discrimination informed a critical understanding of social injustice as systemic rather than incidental. Ambedkar argued that inequality is reproduced through interconnected mechanisms of law, religion, custom, economy, and ideology and therefore requires structural transformation rather than piecemeal reform (Ambedkar, Writings 312). Unlike many social reformers who treated caste and gender as separate domains, Ambedkar recognised their mutually reinforcing character and examined how social hierarchies are reproduced through institutional and cultural practices.

Although Ambedkar is widely recognised as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and one of the foremost anti-caste thinkers of modern India, his contribution to feminist thought has often remained marginal within mainstream academic discourse. Nationalist and reformist movements in colonial India frequently approached women's issues through moralistic and symbolic frameworks that idealised women as embodiments of sacrifice, domestic virtue, and cultural purity. Such approaches often failed to challenge the structural basis of women's oppression. In contrast, Ambedkar located women's subordination within broader systems of caste hierarchy, labour exploitation, economic dependency, and institutional power. His feminist perspective therefore moved beyond cultural reform to advocate structural and constitutional transformation.

Central to Ambedkar's feminist philosophy is the conviction that democracy must be evaluated through the condition and status of women. He famously declared, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" (Ambedkar, Writings 289). This statement encapsulates his belief that gender equality is not peripheral to democracy but foundational to it. For Ambedkar, the emancipation of women was essential not only for social reform but also for the survival of democratic society itself. Similarly, he warned that political democracy could not endure without social and economic democracy, arguing that "political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" (Ambedkar, Annihilation 263). This emphasis on social democracy underscores his understanding that legal equality alone cannot dismantle deeply entrenched hierarchies unless accompanied by broader social and economic transformation.

Ambedkar's approach marked a decisive departure from earlier reformist traditions. Rather than relying solely on moral persuasion, spiritual reinterpretation, or appeals to tradition, he insisted that women's rights must be constitutionally guaranteed, legally enforceable, and institutionally protected. His interventions in the Constituent Assembly debates and his sustained efforts to reform Hindu personal law through the Hindu Code Bill demonstrate a profound commitment to embedding gender equality within the constitutional framework of the Indian state. He believed that constitutional morality—grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity—must take precedence over oppressive customs and religious orthodoxy. As Ambedkar argued, "Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated" (Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly Debates).

Ambedkar's feminist framework was also deeply connected to labour rights and economic justice. He recognised that women's economic dependence reinforced patriarchal domination and therefore advocated equal wages, maternity benefits, labour protections, and access to education as essential conditions for women's emancipation. His role as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council enabled him to introduce progressive labour reforms that significantly improved the condition of women workers. In contemporary India, where women remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and precarious labour sectors, Ambedkar's emphasis on economic justice continues to retain enormous relevance. Recent reports from the Periodic Labour Force Survey indicate that despite rising female labour force participation, a large proportion of women continue to work in insecure and low-paid employment, reflecting persistent structural inequalities.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's critique of caste patriarchy anticipated many of the concerns later articulated within intersectional feminist theory. Although the term "intersectionality" was coined decades later by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ambedkar's writings clearly demonstrate that caste, gender, class, and religion cannot be understood as isolated categories of oppression. His work therefore provides an important intellectual foundation for contemporary Dalit feminist scholarship. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Shailaja Paik have highlighted how Ambedkarite thought offers a critical corrective to caste-blind feminist discourse by foregrounding the experiences of Dalit and marginalised women.

This paper argues that Ambedkar developed a sophisticated and historically grounded model of constitutional feminism integrating caste, gender, class, labour, and state responsibility. It examines his feminist framework, critique of religious authority, constitutional interventions, labour policies, educational philosophy, and continuing relevance in contemporary India. By situating Ambedkar within broader feminist and constitutional discourse, the study seeks to reposition him as a foundational thinker in constitutional and intersectional feminism whose ideas remain indispensable for understanding and addressing structural inequality in modern India.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary research methodology grounded in close textual and contextual analysis. The primary sources include the speeches, essays, parliamentary interventions, constitutional debates, and legislative writings of B. R. Ambedkar, particularly those compiled in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. The research also draws upon records of the Constituent Assembly debates, documents relating to the Hindu Code Bill, and constitutional provisions concerning equality, labour rights, and social justice. These primary materials are analysed to identify the conceptual foundations of Ambedkar's understanding of gender justice, constitutional morality, and democratic citizenship.

The study further engages with secondary scholarship in feminist theory, Dalit studies, constitutional law, political philosophy, labour history, and social theory. Scholarly contributions by Sharmila Rege, Shailaja Paik, Uma Chakravarti, Gopal Guru, and Sukhdeo Thorat are utilised to contextualise Ambedkar's feminist framework within contemporary academic discourse. These scholars provide critical insights into the relationship between caste, patriarchy, labour, and social exclusion, enabling a more nuanced understanding of Ambedkarite feminism.

The paper employs an intersectional analytical framework to examine how caste, gender, class, labour, and religion interact simultaneously in shaping women's oppression. Although the term "intersectionality" was formally articulated later by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ambedkar's work anticipates this theoretical approach by demonstrating that social hierarchies operate through interconnected systems of power. His writings reveal that gender inequality in India cannot be understood independently of caste and economic structures. This framework is particularly useful for analysing the condition of Dalit women, whose experiences are shaped by multiple and overlapping forms of marginalisation.

In addition, the study adopts a critical-comparative approach by situating Ambedkar's ideas alongside reformist traditions and contemporary feminist debates. The paper compares Ambedkar's constitutional and structural approach with nationalist and liberal reformist models that often relied on moral persuasion or cultural reinterpretation. This comparative perspective highlights Ambedkar's distinctive emphasis on constitutional guarantees, legal enforceability, and state responsibility as mechanisms for achieving substantive equality.

The methodology also incorporates contextual analysis to evaluate the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's thought in contemporary India. Recent developments relating to labour precarity, gender violence, caste discrimination, and neoliberal economic restructuring are examined in light of Ambedkar's theoretical insights. Reports from institutions such as the National Crime Records Bureau and the Periodic Labour Force Survey provide empirical context for understanding the persistence of structural inequality despite constitutional guarantees. By combining textual analysis, feminist theory, constitutional studies, and socio-political critique, the study seeks to reassess Ambedkar not merely as a social reformer or constitutional architect but as a foundational theorist of constitutional and intersectional feminism.

Ambedkar's Feminist Framework

B. R. Ambedkar's feminist framework is grounded in his understanding of Indian society as a deeply hierarchical social order structured by the mutually reinforcing systems of caste and patriarchy. Unlike reformist approaches that treated women's oppression primarily as a moral or cultural issue, Ambedkar analysed it as a structural and institutional phenomenon embedded within social, economic, religious, and political arrangements. He argued that caste and patriarchy do not function independently but sustain one another through a complex network of

customs, social practices, ideological beliefs, and institutional controls. At the centre of this relationship lies the regulation of marriage, particularly endogamy, which Ambedkar identified as the principal mechanism through which caste reproduces itself across generations (Ambedkar, *Annihilation* 47).

Ambedkar's formulation that "caste is endogamy and endogamy is caste" (Ambedkar, *Annihilation* 47) remains one of the most significant theoretical interventions in understanding the relationship between caste and gender in India. According to him, caste survives not merely through occupational division or ritual hierarchy but through strict control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacities. By regulating women's marriage choices and limiting their autonomy, caste society ensures the continuity of social hierarchy and preserves notions of caste purity. Marriage therefore becomes not simply a personal or familial institution but a mechanism of social discipline, political control, and caste preservation.

Practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, prohibition of widow remarriage, restrictions on women's mobility, and social surveillance must consequently be understood not as isolated customs but as structural features of caste society. These practices collectively ensure the maintenance of caste boundaries by controlling women's bodies and reproductive roles. Women become the symbolic carriers of caste identity, and their sexuality becomes a site of intense regulation and discipline. In this framework, patriarchal control is inseparable from the preservation of caste hierarchy.

Ambedkar also foregrounded the economic dimensions of women's oppression. He argued that denial of property rights, exclusion from education, economic dependency, unequal access to labour opportunities, and limited participation in public life reinforced patriarchal domination. Women's economic dependence on patriarchal family structures restricted their autonomy and reproduced relations of subordination within both domestic and public spheres. Ambedkar therefore insisted that women's emancipation required not only legal equality but also access to education, employment, property, and social security. His advocacy of equal wages, labour protections, and maternity benefits demonstrates his understanding that economic justice forms an essential component of gender equality.

Religious ideology, according to Ambedkar, further legitimised and naturalised these inequalities by presenting them as sacred or divinely sanctioned. Brahmanical texts and customary laws transformed patriarchal domination into a moral and religious obligation, thereby making resistance to oppression appear socially illegitimate. Ambedkar challenged these ideological foundations by exposing the historical and social construction of caste patriarchy. He rejected the claim that social hierarchies are natural or eternal and instead argued that they are historically produced systems designed to preserve privilege and domination.

Importantly, Ambedkar's work demonstrates that gender inequality cannot be examined independently of caste, class, labour, and religion. In this sense, his framework anticipates contemporary intersectional feminist theory. Although the term "intersectionality" was introduced much later by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ambedkar had already demonstrated that multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape women's experiences differently depending on their social location. His analysis therefore provides an early and powerful articulation of intersectional thinking within the Indian context.

As Sharmila Rege argues, Ambedkar's thought offers a crucial corrective to caste-blind feminist discourse by foregrounding the experiences of Dalit and marginalised women (Rege 45). Mainstream feminist frameworks that universalise women's experiences often fail to recognise how caste intensifies gender oppression through social exclusion, labour exploitation, and violence. Ambedkar's analysis expands feminist theory beyond universalist assumptions and situates women's oppression within broader systems of structural inequality and social exclusion.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's feminist framework was not limited to critique alone; it also proposed transformative solutions grounded in constitutional morality, social democracy, and state responsibility. He believed that genuine democracy could emerge only when social institutions such as caste and patriarchy were dismantled through legal reform, educational empowerment, and economic redistribution. His vision of gender justice was therefore inseparable from his larger project of annihilating caste and establishing a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

In contemporary India, Ambedkar's feminist framework remains profoundly relevant. The persistence of caste-based violence, honour killings, workplace discrimination, and gendered economic inequality demonstrates the continuing operation of caste patriarchy. Recent reports from the National Crime Records Bureau continue to reveal high levels of violence against women, particularly those belonging to Dalit and marginalised communities. Ambedkar's analysis thus continues to provide a powerful analytical and political framework for understanding and challenging structural inequality in modern India.

Patriarchy and Caste as Interlocking Systems

One of B. R. Ambedkar's most original and enduring contributions to feminist theory lies in his demonstration that patriarchy in India cannot be analysed independently of caste. Unlike universalist models of feminism that often treat gender oppression as a singular or homogeneous experience, Ambedkar argued that women's subordination in India is historically shaped by the specific structures of caste hierarchy. He insisted that caste domination fundamentally depends upon the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, reproductive labour, and social mobility.

Ambedkar identified endogamy as the central mechanism through which caste reproduces itself across generations. By ensuring marriage within caste boundaries, endogamy preserves caste purity and maintains the continuity of social hierarchy. The enforcement of caste purity therefore requires systematic control over women's choices, bodies, and social interactions. In this context, women become the primary instruments through which caste discipline is maintained.

Practices such as child marriage, restrictions on inter-caste relationships, prohibition of widow remarriage, enforced widowhood, honour-based violence, and social surveillance are thus not merely cultural traditions or moral practices. Rather, they are structural mechanisms designed to preserve caste hierarchy by regulating women's sexuality and reproductive capacities. Ambedkar demonstrated that patriarchal practices acquire specific social significance within caste society because they serve the political purpose of maintaining social boundaries and protecting inherited privilege.

Women's bodies consequently acquire immense political and symbolic significance within caste society. Their sexuality becomes the site through which notions of caste honour, purity, and legitimacy are constructed and defended. Any challenge to caste boundaries—particularly through inter-caste marriage—therefore threatens the stability of the caste system itself. This insight explains why violence against women, especially Dalit women, frequently functions as a means of reinforcing caste dominance and social control.

Ambedkar's analysis anticipates the central insights of contemporary intersectional feminist theory by demonstrating that systems of oppression are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. His work reveals that caste, patriarchy, labour exploitation, and economic inequality cannot be separated analytically because they operate simultaneously within everyday social life. Gender justice in India, according to Ambedkar, is therefore inseparable from the annihilation of caste itself.

This insight remains deeply relevant in contemporary India. Incidents of caste-based violence, honour killings, sexual violence against Dalit women, and discrimination in educational and labour institutions continue to expose the persistence of caste patriarchy. Reports published by the National Crime Records Bureau consistently indicate disproportionate violence against women from marginalised communities, revealing how caste and gender oppression remain structurally intertwined.

Ambedkar's framework also provides an important critique of caste-blind feminist discourse. Mainstream feminist approaches that focus exclusively on patriarchy without addressing caste risk reproducing upper-caste assumptions and marginalising the experiences of Dalit, Adivasi, and lower-caste women. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have therefore argued that Ambedkarite feminism offers a more inclusive and socially grounded framework for understanding inequality in India.

By foregrounding the relationship between caste and patriarchy, Ambedkar fundamentally transformed feminist analysis in the Indian context. His work demonstrates that women's liberation cannot be achieved solely through

legal reform or symbolic representation unless the broader structures of caste domination are simultaneously dismantled. This integrated framework remains one of the most significant contributions to contemporary feminist and anti-caste thought.

Critique of Religious Canon and Patriarchal Law

B. R. Ambedkar extended his feminist critique beyond social customs and institutional arrangements to include a rigorous examination of religious authority and patriarchal law. He subjected Hindu religious texts—particularly the Manusmriti—to sustained criticism for legitimising caste hierarchy and women’s subordination. According to Ambedkar, these texts denied women access to education, autonomy, inheritance, and legal personhood while simultaneously sanctifying patriarchal domination as a religious duty (Kumar 213). In his analysis, Brahmanical scripture did not merely reflect social inequality; it actively produced and institutionalised it.

Ambedkar argued that religious doctrines transformed social hierarchies into sacred truths, thereby making oppression appear natural, eternal, and morally justified. Patriarchal laws governing marriage, inheritance, sexuality, and family life were therefore embedded within religious ideology and protected from critical scrutiny. Women were expected to conform to rigid notions of obedience, chastity, and domesticity, while their autonomy and individuality were systematically suppressed.

The public burning of the Manusmriti in 1927 symbolised Ambedkar’s rejection of scriptural authority as the basis of social law. This event was not merely a symbolic protest but a radical political intervention aimed at dismantling the ideological foundations of caste patriarchy. By publicly repudiating a text considered sacred within orthodox Hindu tradition, Ambedkar challenged the legitimacy of religious authority itself. The act represented a powerful assertion that ethical principles, human dignity, and constitutional morality must take precedence over oppressive customs and scriptural injunctions.

Ambedkar’s statement that “religion must be judged by social ethics and not social ethics by religion” (Ambedkar, Writings 318) encapsulates his commitment to rationalism, secularism, and social justice. This formulation reverses the traditional hierarchy in which religion determines morality and instead insists that religious practices must be evaluated according to ethical standards grounded in equality and human dignity. Such a position was revolutionary in a social context where religion was frequently invoked to justify women’s subordination and caste exclusion.

Importantly, Ambedkar’s feminist critique was not confined exclusively to Hinduism. His observations regarding purdah, restrictions on women’s education, unequal marital relations, and gender inequality within Muslim communities demonstrate a broader and more universal commitment to gender justice (Yadav 36). He insisted that no religious tradition should be immune from criticism where it violates the principles of equality, liberty, and human dignity. This universalist orientation distinguishes Ambedkar from reformers who sought merely to reinterpret religious tradition without fundamentally questioning its authority.

Ambedkar therefore replaced scriptural authority with constitutional morality as the foundation of social and political life. Constitutional morality, for him, represented a democratic ethic grounded in liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice. It required citizens and institutions to uphold constitutional principles even when they conflict with entrenched customs or religious practices. In this sense, Ambedkar transformed feminist discourse from cultural reformism to rights-based constitutional justice.

His critique also remains profoundly relevant in contemporary India, where debates surrounding personal law, gender equality, and religious freedom continue to shape public discourse. Conflicts over issues such as women’s entry into religious institutions, marital rights, inheritance laws, and gender-based discrimination reveal the continuing tension between constitutional principles and patriarchal interpretations of religion. Ambedkar’s insistence that constitutional morality must prevail over oppressive social customs continues to offer a powerful framework for advancing gender justice in democratic society.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's rational and secular approach anticipated many contemporary feminist critiques of religious patriarchy. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti have shown how Brahmanical patriarchy institutionalised women's subordination through the combined operation of caste ideology and religious control. Ambedkar's work therefore remains foundational not only for Dalit feminism but also for broader feminist critiques of institutionalised patriarchy and religious orthodoxy in India.

Historical Recovery and Counter-Narratives

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar critically challenged the widely accepted belief that women's subordination is an eternal, natural, or essential feature of Indian civilisation. Rejecting conservative narratives that portrayed patriarchy as divinely sanctioned and culturally immutable, Ambedkar undertook a systematic historical re-examination of ancient Indian society to demonstrate that women's oppression emerged through specific socio-historical processes rather than through inherent cultural destiny. His historical method therefore served not merely as an academic exercise but as a political intervention aimed at dismantling the ideological foundations of gender inequality.

Drawing upon Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, Ambedkar highlighted the intellectual and social participation of women such as Gargi and Maitreyi, who engaged actively in philosophical debates and spiritual discourse (Jatava 112). Their presence in early Indian intellectual traditions reveals that women once possessed forms of agency, educational access, and public recognition that later diminished with the consolidation of Brahmanical patriarchy. By foregrounding these examples, Ambedkar sought to demonstrate that women's exclusion from education and public life was historically produced rather than culturally inevitable.

Importantly, Ambedkar's historical recovery was not an attempt to romanticise or glorify the ancient past. Unlike revivalist thinkers who selectively invoked history to construct narratives of civilisational pride, Ambedkar approached history critically and analytically. His objective was to expose the instability and constructed nature of patriarchal norms. If women had once occupied positions of dignity and intellectual authority, then contemporary gender inequality could not be justified as natural or permanent. This argument directly challenged conservative claims that invoked "tradition" or "Indian culture" to resist social reform and women's emancipation.

Ambedkar argued that the decline in women's status coincided with the consolidation of caste hierarchy and Brahmanical social order. As caste became increasingly rigid, the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, and inheritance assumed central importance. Control over women became essential for preserving caste purity and maintaining endogamous boundaries. In this context, practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, prohibition of widow remarriage, and restrictions on women's education and mobility emerged as mechanisms for protecting caste interests rather than as isolated religious customs (Ambedkar, *Annihilation* 49).

Through this analysis, Ambedkar established a crucial relationship between caste and patriarchy. Women's oppression was not merely a question of gender relations within the family but part of a broader social system designed to preserve hierarchy and privilege. Patriarchy therefore functioned as an institutional and ideological mechanism that supported caste reproduction across generations. This insight remains one of Ambedkar's most important contributions to feminist thought because it reveals how gender inequality operates structurally rather than individually.

Ambedkar's interpretation of history also fundamentally reframed the concept of tradition. Rather than treating tradition as sacred, timeless, and authoritative, he viewed it as a contested domain shaped by social power and historical change. Conservative appeals to "Indian culture" were therefore exposed as ideological strategies used to legitimise inequality and resist democratic transformation. As Sukhdeo Thorat and Narendra Kumar observe, Ambedkar's critique reveals how social norms often function to preserve systems of exclusion under the guise of cultural continuity (Thorat and Kumar 67).

Moreover, Ambedkar combined historical inquiry with ethical and political critique. He did not merely reinterpret the past; he used history to legitimise demands for reform and social transformation. By demonstrating that patriarchy was historically constructed, he established that it could also be historically

dismantled. This argument provided an intellectual foundation for his later emphasis on constitutionalism, legal reform, and institutional intervention as mechanisms for achieving gender justice.

In many ways, Ambedkar's method anticipates later feminist historiography and subaltern scholarship, which similarly seek to recover marginalised voices and challenge dominant narratives. His historical analysis disrupts elite and patriarchal understandings of Indian civilisation by foregrounding the experiences of oppressed communities and women. As Sharmila Rege argues, Ambedkar's work compels feminist scholarship to engage critically with caste and history simultaneously, thereby expanding the scope of feminist discourse in India (Rege 52).

Ambedkar's historical counter-narrative also carries significant contemporary relevance. In modern political discourse, appeals to culture and tradition continue to be mobilised against women's rights, inter-caste marriages, and gender equality. By exposing the historical construction of patriarchal norms, Ambedkar provides a powerful intellectual framework for resisting such conservative appropriations of culture. His work demonstrates that democratic societies must be guided not by unquestioned tradition but by principles of equality, justice, and constitutional morality.

Ultimately, Ambedkar's engagement with history functions as a form of feminist resistance. It challenges dominant narratives, dismantles the myth of timeless patriarchy, and reclaims history as a site of democratic possibility. By connecting historical critique with constitutional transformation, Ambedkar creates a powerful framework through which gender justice can be pursued as part of a broader struggle for social equality and human dignity.

Constitutional Feminism

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's most enduring contribution to women's rights lies in his transformation of gender equality from a moral aspiration into a constitutional and legal obligation of the state. Unlike many earlier reformers who depended upon persuasion, religious reinterpretation, or gradual social reform, Ambedkar insisted that women's rights must be institutionalised through constitutional guarantees, legislative mechanisms, and enforceable legal protections. For him, democracy was meaningful only when it ensured substantive equality for all citizens, particularly those historically subjected to exclusion and discrimination.

Ambedkar's understanding of constitutional feminism emerged from his broader theory of social democracy. He argued that political democracy could not survive in a society marked by deep social and economic inequalities. Merely granting political rights without dismantling structural oppression would create contradictions that could eventually destabilise democracy itself. As he warned in the Constituent Assembly:

"We are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality, but in social and economic life we will have inequality" (Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly Debates 979).

This statement reflects Ambedkar's recognition that formal political equality alone cannot secure justice unless accompanied by social and economic transformation. His constitutional vision therefore sought to bridge the gap between legal rights and lived realities.

At the centre of Ambedkar's constitutional feminism are the equality provisions of the Indian Constitution. Articles 14, 15, and 16 establish equality before the law, prohibit discrimination, and guarantee equality of opportunity in public employment. These provisions collectively form the constitutional foundation for gender justice in India. However, Ambedkar recognised that historically marginalised groups cannot achieve equality merely through identical treatment under the law. Consequently, Article 15(3), which permits the state to make special provisions for women and children, assumes particular significance within his constitutional framework.

Article 15(3) reflects Ambedkar's advanced understanding of substantive equality. He recognised that structural inequalities rooted in caste, patriarchy, and economic dependency cannot be overcome through abstract legal neutrality alone. Women require institutional support, protective legislation, and affirmative measures to access rights meaningfully. In this sense, Ambedkar anticipated later feminist critiques of formal equality, which argue that identical treatment often reproduces existing inequalities rather than eliminating them.

Ambedkar's constitutional vision also extended decisively into the sphere of economic justice. He believed that women's dependence on patriarchal family structures was sustained through economic inequality, denial of property rights, unequal wages, and exclusion from labour protections. For this reason, he incorporated principles of economic justice into the Directive Principles of State Policy. Article 39(d), which advocates equal pay for equal work, and Article 42, which provides for maternity relief and humane working conditions, reflect his commitment to ensuring women's economic dignity and labour rights.

Importantly, Ambedkar viewed maternity benefits not as acts of charity but as matters of social justice and state responsibility. He understood reproductive labour as socially valuable work that must be institutionally recognised and protected. This approach was highly progressive for its time because it challenged the patriarchal assumption that childcare and reproductive responsibilities are purely private concerns outside the domain of public policy.

Ambedkar's constitutional feminism also emphasised the relationship between citizenship and dignity. He argued that democracy requires constitutional morality—a collective commitment to the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity embedded within the Constitution. Constitutional morality, for Ambedkar, demanded that social practices and institutions conform to democratic ethics rather than inherited traditions or religious orthodoxy. This concept remains central to feminist struggles in India because it provides a normative framework for challenging discriminatory customs, patriarchal norms, and caste-based exclusion.

The contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's constitutional vision is particularly evident in the context of neoliberal economic transformation. Despite constitutional guarantees, women continue to face systemic inequalities in employment, wages, education, and social security. According to recent Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, women's labour force participation has improved in recent years; however, a significant proportion of women remain concentrated in informal and precarious sectors characterised by low wages, absence of social protection, and insecure working conditions. Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women remain disproportionately vulnerable within these labour structures.

Similarly, gender-based violence, workplace harassment, unequal access to resources, and caste discrimination continue to reveal the persistent gap between constitutional ideals and social realities. The continued prevalence of honour killings, caste-based violence against women, and discrimination in education and employment demonstrates that legal equality alone is insufficient without broader structural transformation.

In this context, Ambedkar's constitutional feminism remains profoundly relevant. His framework insists that the state must play an active role in dismantling structural inequalities rather than merely guaranteeing abstract rights. By linking constitutional law with social democracy, labour justice, and human dignity, Ambedkar developed a transformative model of feminism that moves beyond symbolic representation toward substantive equality.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's approach offers an important corrective to contemporary debates that attempt to separate gender justice from questions of caste, labour, and economic redistribution. His work demonstrates that constitutional rights must be accompanied by material conditions that enable individuals to exercise those rights meaningfully. Without social and economic justice, formal equality remains incomplete.

Ultimately, Ambedkar's constitutional feminism represents one of the most sophisticated frameworks for

gender justice in modern India. By embedding equality within constitutional structures and linking democracy to social transformation, he established a model of feminist politics grounded in dignity, justice, and institutional accountability. His vision continues to provide critical intellectual and ethical resources for contemporary struggles against patriarchy, caste oppression, and structural inequality.

The Hindu Code Bill

The Hindu Code Bill represents one of the most ambitious and transformative efforts to reform patriarchal social relations in modern India. Conceived and championed under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Bill

sought to fundamentally restructure Hindu personal law by introducing principles of equality, individual rights, and constitutional justice into the institution of the family. More than a legal reform, the Hindu Code Bill constituted a radical attempt to democratise social relations and redefine women as autonomous legal subjects rather than dependents within patriarchal family structures.

Ambedkar recognised that inequality is not sustained solely through political or economic institutions but is reproduced within the family itself. The traditional Hindu joint family system, governed largely by patriarchal customs and Brahmanical legal principles, denied women equal status in matters of marriage, inheritance, adoption, guardianship, and property ownership. Women were treated as subordinate members of the household with limited legal identity and restricted economic rights. Ambedkar therefore understood that meaningful democracy could not be achieved without transforming family relations and dismantling patriarchal authority within the domestic sphere.

The Hindu Code Bill attempted to address these inequalities through a comprehensive restructuring of personal law. One of its most significant provisions was the introduction of monogamy, which legally prohibited polygamy among Hindus and established marriage as a relationship grounded in mutual rights and responsibilities rather than male privilege. The Bill also introduced provisions for divorce, granting women the legal right to dissolve oppressive or exploitative marriages—an extraordinary departure from traditional Hindu law, which treated marriage as an indissoluble sacrament.

Equally important were the Bill's provisions relating to inheritance and property rights. Under traditional patriarchal systems, women had severely limited rights to ancestral property and economic resources. The Hindu Code Bill sought to grant women equal inheritance rights and recognise them as independent legal claimants within the family structure. Ambedkar viewed economic independence as essential for women's dignity and freedom, arguing that legal equality without material security would remain incomplete.

The Bill also addressed adoption and guardianship, seeking to expand women's legal agency within family relations. By recognising women as individuals with legal rights rather than merely as wives or daughters within male-controlled households, the legislation challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal assumptions about authority, dependency, and citizenship.

Ambedkar's advocacy of the Hindu Code Bill reflected his broader philosophy of constitutional morality. He believed that personal laws and social customs must conform to democratic principles of equality and justice rather than remain protected under the authority of tradition or religion. In this sense, the Bill represented an attempt to bring the private sphere of family life within the ambit of constitutional ethics. It marked a decisive shift from customary and religious regulation toward a modern rights-based legal framework.

However, the Bill encountered intense opposition from conservative political leaders, orthodox Hindu organisations, and sections of the public who argued that it threatened Hindu tradition, religious autonomy, and the sanctity of the family. Critics portrayed the reforms as an attack on Indian culture and accused Ambedkar of undermining religious values. This resistance revealed the extent to which patriarchal power was embedded within both social institutions and nationalist politics.

The debates surrounding the Hindu Code Bill also exposed the contradictions within postcolonial Indian democracy. While the newly independent Indian state publicly committed itself to equality and constitutional justice, many political leaders hesitated to support reforms that challenged entrenched patriarchal and caste-based interests. The fierce resistance to the Bill demonstrated that social democracy could not be achieved merely through political independence; it required confrontation with deeply rooted structures of social power.

Due to sustained opposition and political compromise, the original Hindu Code Bill was eventually diluted and fragmented into separate legislative acts, including the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act (1956). Although these laws introduced important reforms, they fell short of Ambedkar's original transformative vision.

Ambedkar's frustration with the repeated delays and weakening of the Bill ultimately led to his resignation from the Cabinet in 1951. His resignation was not merely a political act but a profound ethical statement reflecting his disappointment with the Indian government's reluctance to pursue substantive gender justice. In his resignation speech, Ambedkar expressed deep concern that social reform was being sacrificed for political convenience. His decision underscored the seriousness with which he regarded women's rights and constitutional reform.

Despite its dilution, the Hindu Code Bill remains a landmark in the history of legal reform and feminist politics in India. It established the foundational principle that constitutional values of equality and justice must supersede patriarchal customs and discriminatory personal laws. The Bill transformed legal discourse by asserting that family relations are not exempt from democratic scrutiny and those women possess equal rights as citizens within both public and private spheres.

The continuing relevance of the Hindu Code Bill is evident in contemporary debates surrounding personal law reform, gender justice, inheritance rights, and the relationship between religion and constitutional principles. Questions concerning uniform civil laws, marital rights, domestic violence, and women's autonomy continue to reflect tensions between tradition and constitutional equality. Ambedkar's intervention therefore remains central to ongoing struggles for gender justice in India.

From a feminist perspective, the Hindu Code Bill represents one of the earliest and most significant attempts to institutionalise women's rights through constitutional mechanisms. It demonstrates Ambedkar understands that legal reform is indispensable for social transformation and that democracy must extend into the intimate domains of family and everyday life. His efforts reveal a vision of feminism grounded not merely in symbolic representation but in structural and institutional change aimed at securing substantive equality for women.

Labour and Economic Independence

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar consistently maintained that economic independence is fundamental to women's emancipation and social equality. For Ambedkar, political rights and legal protections could not achieve meaningful transformation unless women possessed access to economic resources, dignified employment, fair wages, and social security. He recognised that economic dependency reinforces patriarchal domination by limiting women's autonomy and making them vulnerable to exploitation within both family and workplace structures. Consequently, Ambedkar viewed labour rights as an essential dimension of democratic citizenship and gender justice.

Ambedkar rejected the patriarchal assumption that women's primary role was confined to the domestic sphere. Instead, he argued that women must participate fully in economic and public life in order to attain dignity, self-respect, and independence. His understanding of women's labour extended beyond narrow economic productivity and acknowledged the broader relationship between work, citizenship, and social empowerment. In this regard, Ambedkar's labour philosophy was remarkably modern and anticipated many concerns later articulated within feminist political economy.

One of Ambedkar's most significant contributions was his advocacy of the principle of "equal pay for equal work," later incorporated into Article 39(d) of the Indian Constitution. He recognised that wage inequality is not merely an economic issue but a structural mechanism through which patriarchal society devalues women's labour and perpetuates dependence. Unequal wages deny women economic autonomy and reinforce broader systems of social inequality.

Ambedkar also played a crucial role in improving labour protections during his tenure as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council between 1942 and 1946. During this period, he introduced several progressive labour measures relating to working hours, leave benefits, industrial welfare, and social protections for workers. His interventions reflected a broader commitment to social justice and state responsibility in regulating labour conditions.

Particularly significant was Ambedkar's emphasis on maternity benefits and workplace protections for women workers. He argued that maternity relief should not be viewed as charity or benevolence but as a matter of social justice and state obligation. This understanding was later reflected in Article 42 of the Constitution, which directs the state to ensure humane working conditions and maternity relief.

Ambedkar's recognition of maternity benefits reveals a sophisticated understanding of reproductive labour. He understood that women's reproductive responsibilities contribute fundamentally to society and therefore require institutional support rather than private sacrifice. By advocating maternity protections, Ambedkar challenged the patriarchal assumption that childcare and caregiving are purely personal or domestic matters outside the sphere of public policy.

His labour philosophy also reflected a deep concern for the condition of working-class and marginalised women. Ambedkar recognised that caste, class, and gender intersect within labour structures, producing compounded forms of exploitation. Dalit and lower-caste women often occupied the most precarious forms of labour characterised by poor wages, social stigma, and absence of legal protection. Consequently, Ambedkar's economic vision linked labour justice directly with anti-caste struggle and social democracy.

Importantly, Ambedkar understood that economic dependence restricts women's ability to exercise legal and political rights meaningfully. A woman denied financial autonomy may remain trapped within oppressive domestic arrangements despite formal legal protections. Economic empowerment therefore became central to his broader feminist framework. He believed that access to education, employment, and property rights would enable women to participate actively in public life and challenge structures of domination.

The contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's labour philosophy remains profound, particularly in the context of neoliberal economic restructuring and labour precarity in India. Although women's labour force participation has shown improvement in recent years, structural inequalities continue to shape women's experiences within the economy. According to recent labour surveys, a significant proportion of women workers remain concentrated in informal and unorganised sectors characterised by low wages, insecure employment, absence of social security, and exploitative working conditions.

Women employed in domestic labour, agricultural work, construction, textile production, and other informal sectors frequently experience wage discrimination and lack access to maternity protections, healthcare, pensions, and workplace safety mechanisms. Dalit, Adivasi, and economically marginalised women remain disproportionately represented within these vulnerable labour categories. Their experiences reveal the continuing intersection of caste, class, and gender inequality within contemporary labour structures.

Moreover, neoliberal economic policies have intensified forms of labour insecurity by encouraging contractualisation, privatisation, and informalisation of work. These developments disproportionately affect women workers, who are often employed in low-paid and precarious occupations without institutional protections. Ambedkar's insistence on state responsibility and labour welfare therefore provides a critical alternative to purely market-driven models of development that neglect social justice.

Ambedkar's framework also remains relevant in contemporary feminist debates surrounding unpaid care work and reproductive labour. Feminist scholars have increasingly argued that domestic labour and caregiving sustain economic systems while remaining socially invisible and economically undervalued. Ambedkar's recognition of maternity relief and women's labour rights anticipated these concerns by emphasising that women's contributions to society extend beyond formal wage labour and require collective institutional recognition.

Furthermore, Ambedkar's labour philosophy challenges narrow understandings of empowerment based solely on symbolic representation or individual success. For him, women's emancipation required structural transformation of economic relations, labour institutions, and social hierarchies. His approach linked workplace equality with broader struggles for social democracy, dignity, and human rights.

Ultimately, Ambedkar's ideas on labour and economic independence constitute a vital component of his constitutional feminism. By connecting women's emancipation to economic justice, labour rights, and state

responsibility, he developed a comprehensive framework that remains highly relevant for addressing contemporary inequalities. His vision continues to provide intellectual and ethical guidance for struggles against wage discrimination, labour exploitation, informalisation, and gendered economic exclusion in modern India.

Education and Social Reform

Ambedkar regarded education as the most powerful instrument of social transformation and human emancipation. For him, education was not confined to literacy or vocational training; it was fundamentally linked to the development of critical consciousness, rational inquiry, dignity, and self-respect. He believed that oppressed communities could challenge systems of domination only through intellectual awakening and access to knowledge. Ambedkar famously declared, “Cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence” (Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches 285). This statement encapsulates his conviction that education is central to freedom, equality, and democratic citizenship.

Ambedkar’s emphasis on women’s education emerged from his broader understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. He argued that the denial of education to women was not accidental but a deliberate mechanism of social control designed to maintain caste hierarchy and patriarchy. Exclusion from education limited women’s participation in public life, reinforced economic dependence, and restricted their ability to question oppressive customs. Consequently, Ambedkar viewed women’s education as indispensable to both individual emancipation and collective social transformation.

Unlike many reformers who treated women’s education primarily as a means of producing better wives and mothers, Ambedkar advocated education as a pathway to autonomy, intellectual independence, and citizenship. He believed that an educated woman could transform not only her own life but also the social environment around her. As scholars such as Shailaja Paik observe, Ambedkar consistently encouraged Dalit women to pursue education as a form of resistance against caste oppression and social exclusion (Paik 73). His educational philosophy therefore combined feminist and anti-caste principles within a broader democratic framework.

Ambedkar also connected education with political consciousness and social participation. He encouraged women to organise collectively, engage in public debate, and challenge systems of inequality. His famous slogan, “Educate, Agitate, Organise,” reflected his belief that education must lead to social action rather than passive adaptation. In Ambedkarite movements, women’s participation in meetings, conferences, and social campaigns demonstrated how education could foster confidence, leadership, and collective empowerment.

Importantly, Ambedkar recognised that social reform and educational reform were inseparable. Practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, purdah, and restrictions on women’s mobility prevented women from accessing education and participating in public life. He therefore strongly opposed these practices, arguing that they perpetuated women’s dependence and reinforced patriarchal authority. Rather than treating such customs as isolated social problems, Ambedkar analysed them structurally in relation to caste hierarchy, economic inequality, and religious ideology.

His critique of patriarchy extended into the institution of marriage itself. Ambedkar rejected traditional models of marriage based on hierarchy, obedience, and gendered subordination. Instead, he advocated a concept of companionate marriage grounded in equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. In this framework, marriage becomes a partnership between equals rather than a mechanism of control. Such views were remarkably progressive for their time and challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal norms within Indian society.

Ambedkar’s educational philosophy also reflected his commitment to constitutional morality and democratic ethics. He argued that democracy requires informed and critical citizens capable of resisting authoritarianism, superstition, and social prejudice. Women’s education was therefore essential not merely for personal advancement but for strengthening democracy itself. A society that denies education to women, according to Ambedkar, cannot achieve genuine equality or social progress.

The contemporary relevance of Ambedkar’s educational vision remains profound. Although female literacy rates and women’s participation in higher education have improved significantly in India, structural inequalities

continue to shape educational access and outcomes. According to recent educational data, women from Dalit, Adivasi, and economically marginalised communities continue to face barriers such as poverty, social discrimination, digital exclusion, and early marriage. Rural–urban disparities and unequal access to technological resources further intensify educational inequality.

Moreover, gender-based violence, caste discrimination in educational institutions, and unequal access to professional opportunities reveal that formal access to education alone is insufficient. Ambedkar's emphasis on dignity, critical consciousness, and institutional equality therefore remains crucial for contemporary educational reform. His vision encourages a broader understanding of education as a transformative process that challenges structures of oppression rather than merely producing skilled labour for the economy.

Ambedkar's philosophy of education represents a foundational dimension of his constitutional feminism. By linking education with dignity, autonomy, democratic participation, and social reform, he transformed it into a powerful instrument of emancipation and social transformation. His insistence that women's empowerment requires intellectual freedom, critical consciousness, and structural change continues to provide a compelling framework for addressing contemporary inequalities in education, gender relations, and society at large.

Women in Ambedkarite Movements

Women's participation in Ambedkarite movements represents one of the most significant yet historically underappreciated dimensions of anti-caste and feminist politics in modern India. Unlike many contemporary nationalist and reform movements that often confined women to symbolic, supportive, or domestic roles, Ambedkar actively encouraged women's direct involvement in political mobilisation, public protest, and organisational leadership. He believed that the struggle against caste oppression could not succeed without the active participation and emancipation of women.

Ambedkar consistently urged women to move beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal society and participate in public life as conscious political actors. His speeches addressed women not merely as dependents or beneficiaries of reform but as agents of social transformation. He encouraged them to pursue education, cultivate self-respect, challenge oppressive customs, and participate in collective struggles for equality. This approach marked a radical departure from paternalistic reform movements that viewed women primarily through the lens of protection or morality.

Women played a visible and active role in major Ambedkarite movements such as the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 and various temple-entry campaigns. The Mahad movement, which challenged caste restrictions on access to public water resources, symbolised a broader struggle for human dignity and civil rights. Women's participation in these protests demonstrated their willingness to confront both caste oppression and patriarchal restrictions simultaneously. Their public presence challenged dominant social norms that confined women to domestic spaces and denied them political visibility.

Participation itself became a form of resistance and empowerment. By speaking in meetings, joining demonstrations, and engaging in collective action, women asserted their agency in a society that systematically excluded them from public life. As Shailaja Paik observes, Ambedkarite mobilisation created spaces where Dalit women could articulate experiences of humiliation, labour exploitation, and social exclusion while developing political consciousness and solidarity (Paik 81). These movements therefore functioned not only as anti-caste struggles but also as sites of feminist awakening.

Ambedkar also recognised the importance of independent women's organisations and conferences in building collective awareness and leadership. Women's conferences associated with Ambedkarite movements discussed issues such as education, hygiene, marriage reform, widowhood, labour rights, and political participation. These gatherings enabled women to share experiences, articulate grievances, and develop strategies for social change. Importantly, they fostered a sense of collective identity among marginalised women whose voices were often excluded from mainstream political discourse.

Ambedkar repeatedly emphasised that women must reject practices that perpetuated their oppression. He urged them to challenge child marriage, excessive domestic burden, caste restrictions, and social customs that reinforced dependence and humiliation. He also encouraged women to cultivate self-respect and economic independence as essential foundations of freedom. Such interventions reveal that Ambedkar viewed women's emancipation not as a secondary issue but as central to the broader project of social democracy.

The participation of women in Ambedkarite movements also anticipated key principles later articulated within Dalit feminist thought. These movements recognised that women experience oppression through multiple and interconnected structures including caste, gender, labour, and class. Dalit women were not oppressed solely as women but also as members of historically marginalised communities subjected to caste violence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Ambedkar's framework therefore challenged universalist feminist approaches that ignored caste differences and treated women as a homogeneous category.

Scholars such as Sharmila Rege have argued that Ambedkarite politics provides a critical foundation for Dalit feminism because it foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalised women and situates gender oppression within caste hierarchy (Rege 52). Dalit feminism draws heavily upon Ambedkar's insistence that caste annihilation and women's liberation are inseparable processes. His ideas continue to inspire movements that challenge both Brahmanical patriarchy and caste-blind feminist discourse.

The contemporary relevance of women's participation in Ambedkarite movements remains profound. Dalit women today continue to confront systemic discrimination in education, employment, political representation, and access to justice. Incidents of caste-based sexual violence and labour exploitation reveal the persistence of structural inequality despite constitutional guarantees. In this context, Ambedkar's emphasis on dignity, education, organisation, and collective resistance continues to provide a powerful framework for feminist and anti-caste activism. Moreover, contemporary Dalit feminist organisations and grassroots movements frequently invoke Ambedkar's ideas to challenge intersecting forms of oppression. His slogan "Educate, Agitate, Organise" remains a guiding principle for movements seeking social justice, democratic participation, and gender equality. By linking women's liberation with broader struggles against caste and economic exploitation, Ambedkarite feminism offers a transformative vision of social change grounded in equality, dignity, and collective empowerment.

Women's participation in Ambedkarite movements represents a foundational chapter in the history of Indian feminism and anti-caste politics. These movements expanded the scope of democratic participation by enabling marginalised women to emerge as political actors and agents of resistance. Ambedkar's emphasis on women's leadership, education, dignity, and collective mobilisation anticipated many principles associated with contemporary intersectional feminism and continues to shape ongoing struggles for social justice, democratic equality, and anti-caste resistance in modern India.

Contemporary Relevance

Ambedkar's ideas remain profoundly relevant in contemporary India, particularly in the context of neoliberal economic restructuring, widening social inequality, caste violence, religious polarisation, and evolving feminist debates. His integrated framework linking caste, gender, class, labour, and constitutional morality continues to provide one of the most comprehensive approaches for understanding structural injustice in Indian society. At a time when formal legal equality often coexists with deep social and economic disparities, Ambedkar's thought offers both a critical analytical framework and a transformative political vision.

Recent scholarship by scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Shailaja Paik has demonstrated how caste continues to shape women's experiences in ways frequently overlooked by mainstream feminist discourse. Rege argues that caste-blind feminism risks universalising upper-caste women's experiences while marginalising the voices of Dalit and working-class women (Rege 49). Similarly, Paik's work on Dalit women's education and labour reveals how caste and patriarchy operate simultaneously to restrict social mobility and access to dignity (Paik 92). These scholarly interventions reaffirm Ambedkar's central insight that gender oppression in India cannot be analysed independently of caste hierarchy.

The persistence of caste-based violence and gender discrimination further underscores the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's analysis. Recent National Crime Records Bureau data continue to report alarming levels of crimes against women, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, honour killings, and caste atrocities against Dalit women. These incidents reveal the continuing gap between constitutional guarantees and lived realities. Dalit women, in particular, often experience violence at the intersection of caste and gender, making them especially vulnerable to social exclusion and institutional injustice. Such realities reinforce Ambedkar's argument that legal equality alone is insufficient without broader structural transformation.

Ambedkar's concept of constitutional morality is especially significant in this context. He argued that democracy cannot survive merely through constitutional provisions or electoral processes; it requires a social and ethical commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity. Constitutional morality, for Ambedkar, demands that social practices and institutional behaviour align with democratic values rather than caste prejudice or religious orthodoxy. As he warned in the Constituent Assembly, political democracy without social democracy would produce deep contradictions within Indian society (Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly Debates 979).

This warning remains remarkably relevant in neoliberal India, where economic growth has not eliminated structural inequality. Women, particularly those from Dalit, Adivasi, and economically marginalised communities, remain concentrated in informal and precarious labour sectors characterised by wage disparity, unsafe working conditions, and lack of social protection. Contract labour, platform-based employment, unpaid care work, and economic insecurity continue to affect women disproportionately. Ambedkar's emphasis on labour rights, economic redistribution, and state responsibility therefore remains highly relevant in debates on gender justice and economic policy.

Furthermore, contemporary forms of digital inequality reveal new dimensions of exclusion that resonate with Ambedkar's concerns regarding access to knowledge and resources. Unequal access to digital education, technological infrastructure, and online employment opportunities has intensified existing caste and gender disparities. Women from rural and marginalised communities frequently face barriers to digital participation, reinforcing social exclusion in new technological forms. Ambedkar's insistence that democracy requires equal access to education, resources, and institutional support provides a powerful framework for addressing these emerging inequalities.

Ambedkar's feminist thought also offers important insights into contemporary identity-based violence and cultural politics. In recent years, debates surrounding inter-caste marriage, religious identity, women's autonomy, and minority rights have intensified across India. Honour killings, social boycotts, and violence against women who challenge caste or religious norms demonstrate the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's critique of endogamy and patriarchal control. His analysis of caste as a system maintained through the regulation of marriage and women's sexuality remains strikingly applicable to present social realities.

Importantly, Ambedkar's framework provides a model for inclusive and transformative feminism. Rather than treating gender as an isolated category, he connected women's liberation with caste annihilation, labour justice, educational access, and democratic restructuring. His approach challenges both caste-blind feminism and purely symbolic models of empowerment by emphasising structural transformation and substantive equality. In this sense, Ambedkarite feminism remains deeply relevant for contemporary social movements seeking justice across intersecting forms of oppression.

The growing influence of Dalit feminist movements, student activism, labour struggles, and anti-discrimination campaigns reflects the continuing vitality of Ambedkar's ideas. Contemporary activists and scholars continue to invoke his principles of dignity, equality, education, and collective resistance in confronting social injustice. His famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organise" continues to inspire democratic struggles against caste oppression, patriarchy, and economic exclusion.

Ambedkar's feminist thought remains one of the most comprehensive and intellectually rigorous frameworks for understanding contemporary inequality in India. His integration of constitutional morality, social democracy, labour rights, and intersectional justice offers enduring insights into the relationship between democracy and social transformation. In an era marked by economic insecurity, digital exclusion, identity-based violence, and persistent caste hierarchy, Ambedkar's vision continues to provide both a powerful critique of structural injustice and a transformative framework for advancing substantive equality, social democracy, and inclusive justice.

CONCLUSION

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar developed one of the most comprehensive and intellectually sophisticated frameworks for understanding gender justice in modern India. By linking caste, gender, class, labour, religion, and constitutionalism within a unified analytical framework, he transformed feminist discourse from a limited project of moral reform into a broader programme of structural and institutional transformation. His thought challenged the social foundations of inequality and redefined democracy as a system that must guarantee dignity, equality, and substantive justice for all citizens.

Ambedkar recognised that women's oppression could not be understood in isolation from caste hierarchy and economic exploitation. His analysis demonstrated that patriarchy in India is deeply embedded within systems of caste regulation, religious authority, and material inequality. By foregrounding the relationship between caste and gender, he anticipated many principles now associated with intersectional feminism, particularly the understanding that systems of oppression are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Long before the emergence of contemporary intersectional theory, Ambedkar revealed how women's experiences are shaped simultaneously by caste status, labour relations, economic dependency, and social exclusion.

One of Ambedkar's most enduring contributions lies in his insistence that democracy cannot survive without social and economic equality. He repeatedly warned that political democracy without social democracy would remain fragile and contradictory. His interventions in constitutional debates, labour reforms, educational policy, and family law reveal a deeply integrated vision of justice that extends beyond formal legal equality. For Ambedkar, rights were meaningful only when supported by institutional safeguards, economic redistribution, educational access, and social transformation.

His efforts to reform Hindu personal law through the Hindu Code Bill represented a historic attempt to restructure patriarchal family relations and establish women as equal legal subjects. Similarly, his advocacy for equal wages, maternity benefits, labour protections, and women's education reflected a far-reaching understanding of emancipation grounded in both legal rights and material conditions. Ambedkar understood that without economic independence and access to education, women's freedom would remain incomplete and vulnerable to social control.

Ambedkar's concept of constitutional morality remains particularly relevant in contemporary India. He argued that constitutional values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity must shape not only legal institutions but also social conduct and public ethics. Constitutional morality requires citizens and institutions to reject caste prejudice, gender discrimination, and social exclusion in favour of democratic principles and human dignity. This idea continues to provide a powerful normative framework for addressing structural injustice in modern society.

In contemporary India, marked by persistent caste hierarchy, gender violence, labour precarity, digital inequality, and widening economic disparities, Ambedkar's thought remains radically relevant. Incidents of caste atrocities, honour killings, workplace discrimination, and violence against women reveal the continuing gap between constitutional promises and lived realities. At the same time, neoliberal economic restructuring has intensified forms of insecurity that disproportionately affect women and marginalised communities. Ambedkar's emphasis on state responsibility, social democracy, and substantive equality therefore offers critical insights for contemporary policy and feminist discourse.

Furthermore, the growing influence of Dalit feminism and intersectional social movements has reaffirmed the enduring significance of Ambedkar's ideas. Contemporary scholars and activists continue to draw upon his

framework to critique caste-blind feminism, challenge structural inequalities, and advocate inclusive models of justice. His slogan “Educate, Agitate, Organise” continues to inspire democratic struggles for equality, dignity, and collective empowerment across India.

Ambedkar must therefore be recognised not merely as the architect of the Indian Constitution or as a pioneering critic of caste, but also as a foundational feminist thinker whose contributions fundamentally reshaped the discourse on gender justice in India. His integrated vision of democracy, constitutional morality, labour rights, education, and social transformation remains indispensable for understanding and confronting contemporary forms of inequality.

Ultimately, Ambedkar’s feminist philosophy offers more than a critique of oppression; it presents a transformative vision of society grounded in justice, dignity, and human equality. His work continues to challenge India to move beyond symbolic democracy toward a genuinely inclusive social order where constitutional rights are realised in everyday life. In this sense, Ambedkar’s intellectual and political legacy remains central to the ongoing pursuit of substantive gender justice and democratic transformation in contemporary India.

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