

The Political Philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar: Caste, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of the Indian State

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Abstract

This article explores B. R. Ambedkar's political philosophy through his critique of caste, democracy, and the constitutional state. It contends that his political thought can be understood in terms of two related concerns: the diagnosis of caste as a structure of graded inequality and the reconstruction of political institutions that can respond to that inequality. The first section examines Ambedkar's critique of caste, his challenge to political theories that abstract away from existing social hierarchies, and his distinction between political and social democracy. The second section analyses his idea of the state, constitutional morality, liberty, equality and fraternity, religious self-determination, minority safeguards and constitutional practice. The paper argues that these themes are related by a concern with the conditions under which formally equal citizens can participate in democratic life as socially equals. Ambedkar's political philosophy connects constitutional democracy to the ongoing transformations of the social relations that construct citizenship.

Keywords: Ambedkar, caste, democracy, constitutional morality, social justice, Indian political thought

Introduction

Ambedkar's political philosophy begins with the problem that formal political equality cannot resolve by itself. A constitution may recognise citizens as equals, while the social relations through which those citizens live continue to position them unequally. Ambedkar's analysis of caste makes this tension central to political thought. Caste is not only a social hierarchy in parallel to politics. It determines the access to power, dignity, work, education and representation. The question then is not simply how political institutions should allocate rights, but whether those institutions can function democratically in a society that remains profoundly hierarchical.

Ambedkar is generally read as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. This description is important, but it can obscure the intellectual development that preceded his constitutional work. His writings on caste, representation, political power, minority safeguards, democracy and religion had already raised questions about the conditions under which political equality

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could become meaningful. His constitutional interventions should be seen in the light of these earlier arguments, rather than as a separate phase of his thought (Rodrigues, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2005).

The central concern of this paper is to reconstruct that relationship. It reads Ambedkar's political philosophy through two connected questions: first, what makes democratic equality impossible within a caste-structured society; and second, what institutional and normative conditions are required if democracy is to overcome that structure. The paper argues that Ambedkar's response cannot be reduced either to constitutional liberalism or to a programme of economic redistribution. His position rests on a broader conception of democratic reconstruction in which political institutions must respond to the social relations that prevent citizens from standing as equals.

The argument proceeds from Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a system of graded inequality. This analysis raises a problem for political theories that begin by assuming relations of basic equality among citizens. Ambedkar's response is to connect political democracy with social democracy and to treat constitutional institutions as part of a continuing process of social transformation. The paper treats his arguments about caste, constitutional morality, liberty, equality, fraternity, minority safeguards, and the state as connected responses to the same political problem. The purpose is not to claim that Ambedkar developed a systematic theory in the manner of Rawls or Kant, but to show the conceptual relations that hold his political arguments together.

Statement of the Problem

The primary objective of this paper is to reconstruct the main aspects of Ambedkar's political philosophy through his analysis of caste, democracy, and the constitutional state. It specifically examines how his critique of caste creates a division between political and social democracy, and how that division influences his understanding of constitutionalism, the state, political representation, and the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The paper also considers the relationship between these arguments and Ambedkar's engagement with religious and economic questions.

Methodology

The paper is qualitative and interpretive in approach. It is based on a close reading of Ambedkar's writings and speeches. Special attention is given to *Annihilation of Caste*, *States and Minorities*, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and his speeches in the Constituent Assembly. Ambedkar's political thought is reconstructed through engagement with primary texts in connection with relevant secondary scholarship. Thus, the method is not comparative in the sense of systematically comparing Ambedkar with another philosopher. It is an interpretive reconstruction of the philosophical relations of caste, equality, democracy, and constitutional government in his work.

The Diagnosis: Caste, Contract, and the Limits of Political Democracy

Caste provides the starting point for Ambedkar's account of political inequality. In *Annihilation of Caste*, the 1936 address prepared for the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal, he rejects the common

defence of caste as a functional division of labour necessary to any complex society. He argues that caste does something quite different from organising work:

“The Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers... in no civilized society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments” (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 41).

This distinction between labour and labourers is the centre of his whole critique. Ambedkar distinguishes a division of labour from a division of labourers. The first can be associated with specialisation and aptitude. Caste, however, assigns occupations by birth and restricts the possibility of moving beyond that assignment. Occupational differences are then linked to a hierarchy of purity and pollution.

For Ambedkar, caste therefore has consequences beyond the organisation of work. It distributes status and social standing, and its persistence is connected to religious sanction (Omvedt, 1994). The philosophical significance of this distinction lies in the connection between occupation and status. Caste does not simply restrict a person’s available choices; it predetermines a person’s worth before that person can choose. Birth thus becomes a principle of distribution of work and standing (Ambedkar, 2021). Ambedkar’s objection therefore pertains not only to an inequality that is the result of a particular political decision. It relates to an inequality that is reproduced through a social order, through institutions, customs and beliefs.

This analysis gains political significance when we understand caste as a relation of power. Caste is therefore also a problem of political power, even when it seems to be a matter of custom. To accept it as a private or cultural matter is to concede the argument to the people who gain advantage from it. He is clear about where responsibility lies, stating that religious texts that sanctify inequality cannot be seen as a morally neutral inheritance. The society organised on the principle of graded inequality is, by definition, in contradiction with democratic citizenship (Ambedkar, 2021). This claim anticipates a distinction that he would elaborate in his later constitutional writings between formal political equality and substantive social equality. This difference is important because it shows that Ambedkar was concerned with social equality even before the constitutional debates.

Ambedkar’s analysis of caste also poses a challenge for contractarian theories of political social order. Contract theorists usually begin their normative argument by abstracting from existing social positions and asking what principles free and equal persons could embrace. But on the other hand, Ambedkar’s writings raise a different question: what if the persons who are supposed to enter into political relations are already embedded in an inherited hierarchy? In such a context, the formal agreement does not eliminate the unequal social conditions under which political claims are made. The problem is therefore before the contract itself. A political theory that begins from formally equal individuals may fail to identify the social institutions that determine who can actually exercise that equality.

This does not amount to a rejection of Western political philosophy as such. Ambedkar’s concern is more specific. His writings challenge the adequacy of political theories that treat social hierarchy as external to the problem of political legitimacy. Caste makes that separation

difficult to maintain because social status directly affects political voice, access to institutions, and the ability to exercise their rights (Ambedkar, 2021).

This tension was most eloquently expressed by Ambedkar in his concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949. In that speech, he warned that the Constitution would create political equality in a society that was socially and economically unequal:

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.

The contradiction Ambedkar underlines is the disparity between political equality and pervasive social and economic inequality. The constitution ensures that all citizens have an equal vote irrespective of caste; even so, caste still influences access to land, education, work, and social worth, resulting in a coexistence of nominal electoral equality and a societal structure rooted in hierarchical inequality. Ambedkar asserts that political democracy should not be considered completely sufficient on its own. He tells the Assembly that “we must make our political democracy a social democracy as well,” defining social democracy as “a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life.” He also warns that “those who continue to suffer from inequality may eventually reject the political structure that leaves that inequality intact” (Ambedkar, 1949). The distinction between political and social democracy therefore becomes central to Ambedkar’s justification of measures intended to address entrenched social inequality (Ambedkar, 1949; Rodrigues, 2002).

Ambedkar therefore understands democracy in broader terms than a system of procedures for selecting governments. He had already made this point before entering the Assembly:

“Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen” (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 56).

This understanding of democracy also reflects the influence of John Dewey, whom Ambedkar studied at Columbia University. Dewey similarly understood democracy not merely as a form of government but as a mode of associated living grounded in communication and shared experience (Dewey, 2008). Ambedkar, nonetheless, situated this notion within the particular circumstances of caste society, where inherent stratification obstructs the social interactions essential for democratic existence (Mukherjee, 2009; Stroud, 2017). If democracy requires such relations of association and mutual recognition, then political equality cannot be secured merely by extending equal political rights to people who remain socially unequal. For Ambedkar, democracy therefore required changes in the social conditions through which citizens relate to one another.

Reconstruction: Constitutional Morality, Rights, and the Practice of Justice

The distinction between political and social democracy has consequences for Ambedkar’s understanding of the state. His response was not to abandon constitutionalism but to broaden its function. For Ambedkar, constitutional government could not be confined to protecting

rights within an existing social order. It also had to address the conditions that made those rights ineffective for subordinated groups. This is evident in *States and Minorities*, where Ambedkar combines political safeguards with proposals for state ownership, agricultural reorganisation, and social insurance (Ambedkar, 1947).

The idea of constitutional morality adds another dimension to Ambedkar's understanding of constitutional government. Introducing the Draft Constitution to the Assembly on 4 November 1948, Ambedkar anticipated the objection that the document contained too much administrative detail for a constitution properly so called, and defended this choice by invoking the historian George Grote's account of the conditions under which a democratic constitution can survive. He then warned about the social conditions in which the Constitution would have to operate:

Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top dressing on Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic (Ambedkar, 1948).

Ambedkar's point is not simply that India needed a written constitution. He was concerned with the social conditions under which constitutional rules would operate. Consequently, constitutional morality cannot be just equated with adherence to the constitutional text. It necessitates that political figures and citizens acknowledge constraints on authority, adhere to institutional protocols, and regard one another as equal contributors in the political sphere. In a caste society, such conditions could not be assumed in advance. Constitutional government consequently had an educative as well as an institutional function (Ambedkar, 1948).

Ambedkar's account of liberty, equality, and fraternity provides the normative foundation for this argument. In the same 1949 address, he describes the three as bound together in what he calls a union, warning that separating them defeats the purpose of democracy:

Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative... Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things.

Ambedkar does not treat liberty and equality as competing principles that can be balanced independently of their social context. Liberty has little practical meaning where social relations deny individuals equal standing, while equality cannot justify the suppression of individual freedom. Fraternity addresses a different problem. It concerns the social relationship among citizens and the possibility of regarding one another as members of the same political community. This is particularly important in Ambedkar's analysis because caste produces separation and hierarchy precisely within the community that democracy presupposes.

Fraternity becomes especially significant when considered alongside Ambedkar's analysis of caste. This account of fraternity acquires a sharper edge than it might in a purely Western context, because Ambedkar is explicit that a society segmented into endogamous, hierarchically ranked castes cannot generate fraternal feeling by declaration alone. Ambedkar identifies intermarriage as the real remedy for breaking caste, arguing that 'nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste' (Ambedkar, 2021, p. 72). The three principles therefore perform different functions in Ambedkar's account. Liberty concerns the protection of individual freedom, equality concerns the removal of conditions that sustain hierarchical status, and

fraternity concerns the social relations through which citizens can recognise one another as members of the same political community.

Religion occupies an important place in Ambedkar's political thought because he understood religious belief as one of the sources through which caste hierarchy was legitimised. His argument is that the persistence of caste cannot be addressed without confronting the religious beliefs that sustain it. As Ambedkar puts it:

"Caste is a notion, a state of mind. Its destruction means a notional change. The Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman and non-headed. They observe caste chiefly because they are deeply religious. They are not wrong in observing caste. What is wrong is their religion, which inculcates this notion of caste. The real enemy is the shastras that teach them this religion of castes. Destroy this belief in the sanctity of the shastras and scriptures, destroy the authority, the sacredness, and divinity of the shastras and the Vedas" (Keer, 2021, p. 271).

This placed him at odds with reform approaches that sought to remove untouchability while retaining the broader religious framework of Hindu social life. Ambedkar regarded this as an attempt to reform caste from within a structure that could not be separated from caste, and he pressed instead for a change of religious identity itself as a political act of self-respect (Jaffrelot, 2005). This position was not merely theoretical, but pragmatic.

Ambedkar's decision to leave Hinduism gave this argument a practical and personal dimension. In 1935, at Yeola, Ambedkar announced that although he had been born a Hindu, he would not die one, a declaration that took him two decades to fulfil when he formally converted to Buddhism with hundreds of thousands of his followers in October 1956, only weeks before his death (Gopal, 2023). His choice of Buddhism was also philosophically significant. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar presents Buddhism as an ethical and social philosophy centred on human conduct and the transformation of social relations (Ambedkar, 1957).

The conversion gives a practical dimension to Ambedkar's concern with dignity. It says that citizens who are denied standing within a religious order will remain unequal citizens of the state as well. However generous its legal guarantees, the state cannot ensure such equality unless citizens can exercise the same freedom of religious self-determination that other citizens take for granted.

Ambedkar's approach to political representation follows the same concern with the limits of formal equality. At different stages of his career, he advocated for reserved seats, reserved posts, and separate electorates for his community. In *States and Minorities*, he elaborated a detailed scheme of safeguards for the Scheduled Castes, including reservations in legislatures, the civil service, and the armed forces (Ambedkar, 1947). He argued that these were not boons but corrections due to a community that had been systematically excluded from the normal channels of political and economic advancement. This is consistent with his general idea of democracy as a manner of life rather than a procedure, for a simple majority rule, applied to a society still arranged along caste lines. It would merely replace numerical preponderance with permanent political subservience for the non-dominant groups.

It is worth noting that Ambedkar's position on safeguards evolved. He had earlier pressed, unsuccessfully, for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes at the Round Table Conferences in London, a demand that led to the 1932 Poona Pact with Gandhi, under which separate electorates were replaced by reserved seats within joint electorates (Jaffrelot, 2005).

He was willing to adjust the institutional mechanism as long as the underlying principle, that structural disadvantage requires structural correction, was preserved. These were tactical judgments made in service of a stable philosophical commitment rather than evidence that his underlying theory of representation was unsettled or opportunistic.

Ambedkar's economic proposals also raise the question of his relationship with Marxism. His proposals therefore cannot be described simply as a defence of a minimal state. Yet he consistently argued that a class-based analysis of Indian society, on its own, could not explain the persistence of caste, because caste divides labour against itself in ways that a purely economic theory of exploitation does not anticipate. Workers belonging to different castes could therefore identify more strongly with caste hierarchy than with fellow workers from lower castes (Omvedt, 1994). Caste, on Ambedkar's reading, cuts across class in a way that a strictly materialist analysis tends to miss, because it organises consciousness along lines of ritual status rather than along lines of ownership and labour alone, and a political programme that addresses only the second axis will leave the first fully intact.

The most direct statement of this disagreement came late in his life, in the essay comparing the Buddha and Marx. Ambedkar acknowledged that Marx had correctly identified exploitation as the central problem of modern society, but he rejected the Marxist commitment to violent revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat as a route to justice, preferring instead a gradual, constitutional, and morally grounded transformation (Ambedkar, 1957). This is consistent with the position he had already taken in his final speech in the Constituent Assembly, when he told his colleagues quite explicitly that 'we must give up the bloody methods of revolution now that constitutional methods were available, and that to continue the methods of civil disobedience once a democratic constitution existed amounted to nothing but 'the Grammar of Anarchy' (Ambedkar, 1949). Ambedkar therefore rejected the idea that social transformation required abandoning constitutional methods. His disagreement with Marxism was therefore not a rejection of economic justice, but a disagreement about political method and the place of liberty in social transformation.

Ambedkar's constitutional work provided a practical test for these commitments. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he had an unusual opportunity to translate his political arguments into institutional design. The results are visible throughout the Constitution: the abolition of untouchability under Article 17, the provisions for reservation, and the elaborate scheme of fundamental rights, read alongside the directive principles, which commit the state to social and economic goals it cannot yet enforce as justiciable rights (Constitution of India, 1950). These all bear the imprint of the distinction between political and social democracy established earlier in this paper. But Ambedkar was equally attentive to the dangers a democracy faces even after such a constitution is adopted, and his final address to the Assembly is as much a warning about the future as a defence of the document just completed.

His final speech also contains warnings about the use of political power after constitutional government is established. He cautions against hero-worship, or what he calls bhakti in politics, which he describes as a path that, once it has transferred from religious devotion into democratic life, becomes “a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship” (Ambedkar, 1949). He also warns that constitutional freedom must be used not only to defend the nation but to address social inequality within it. Finally, he argues that methods of protest appropriate under colonial rule cannot remain the normal means of political action once constitutional avenues are available, describing their continued use as the “Grammar of Anarchy” (Ambedkar, 1949). The Constitution was therefore not, in Ambedkar’s view, the endpoint of democratic transformation. It was a framework within which that transformation had to continue.

Conclusion

Ambedkar’s political philosophy begins with the problem of how to preserve political equality within a social hierarchy. His analysis of caste shows that formal equality alone cannot create democratic citizenship. Caste determines social status, access to opportunities, and relations of power. Political equality therefore depends on changes in the social conditions under which political rights are exercised. His distinction between political and social democracy therefore forms the central link between his critique of caste and his concept of the democratic state.

Ambedkar did not oppose constitutionalism but demanded that it respond to social inequality. This larger project includes his ideas on the state, constitutional morality, safeguards for disadvantaged groups, and the relationship among liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet this reconstruction also generates important tensions. A state capable of challenging entrenched inequality requires substantial power, but that power must remain compatible with individual liberty. Constitutional law can alter institutional relations, but cannot by itself transform the social practices through which caste is reproduced. Fraternity presents a further difficulty because it concerns relations among citizens that cannot simply be created through legal rules.

Ambedkar’s political philosophy is therefore significant not for providing a fully settled theory of democracy, but for fundamentally changing the terms of the democratic question. The question is not just whether citizens have equal political rights, but whether the social conditions of their lives permit those rights to be exercised on terms of equality. His work links constitutional democracy to the perpetual reconstruction of social relations and locates the issue of substantive equality at the center of democratic legitimacy. In this respect, Ambedkar offers a distinctive political philosophy in which democracy is not complete with the establishment of equal political status; it remains an unfinished project so long as social hierarchy continues to determine the conditions of citizenship.

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