

Universalising Ambedkar: human rights and social equality in global context

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the global relevance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideology within contemporary human rights discourse and social justice movements. Through qualitative analysis and comparative studies, this paper explores how Ambedkar's vision of social equality, human dignity, and constitutional morality transcends the Indian context to offer valuable insights for global human rights frameworks. The study analyzes parallels between Ambedkar's thought and Western human rights theorists, examines the reception of Ambedkarite ideas in international academia and diaspora communities, and identifies challenges in universalising his philosophy. Findings suggest that Ambedkar's comprehensive approach to social justice provides a robust framework for addressing contemporary global inequalities, particularly in areas of minority rights, affirmative action, and intersectional discrimination. The research concludes that integrating Ambedkar's perspectives into global human rights discourse could significantly broaden and strengthen international approaches to social equality and human dignity.

Keywords: *Ambedkar, human rights, social equality, global justice, caste, discrimination.*

Introduction

The struggle for human rights and social equality represents one of humanity's most enduring challenges, manifesting across cultures, continents, and historical periods in diverse yet interconnected forms. From the abolition of slavery in the Americas to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, from civil rights movements in the United States to decolonization struggles across Asia and Africa, the quest for human dignity and equal treatment has shaped modern political discourse and international law. Within this global tapestry of resistance and reform, the contributions of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) stand as a remarkable yet underexplored voice in the broader conversation about human rights and social justice.

Ambedkar's intellectual and political legacy extends far beyond his role as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution or his leadership of the Dalit liberation movement. His comprehensive vision of social transformation, grounded in principles of equality, fraternity, and human dignity, offers profound

insights that resonate with contemporary global struggles against discrimination, marginalization, and structural inequality. His critique of hierarchical social systems, advocacy for constitutional morality, and emphasis on education as a tool of emancipation provide frameworks that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries.

The significance of examining Ambedkar's thought within a global context lies not merely in academic curiosity but in the urgent need to diversify and strengthen human rights discourse. As scholars like Upendra Baxi (2006) and Cossman and Kapur (2010) have argued, the international human rights framework has been dominated by Western philosophical traditions, often marginalizing voices and experiences from the Global South. By exploring how Ambedkar's ideas can contribute to universal human rights principles, this study addresses what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) terms the "epistemological diversity" necessary for creating truly inclusive approaches to global justice.

Purpose and scope of the study

This research aims to explore how Ambedkar's ideological contributions transcend the specific Indian context of caste-based discrimination to offer valuable insights for global human rights discourse and contemporary social justice movements. The study seeks to establish theoretical and practical connections between Ambedkar's vision and international frameworks for addressing inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion.

The scope encompasses an examination of Ambedkar's core philosophical tenets, their alignment with international human rights principles, comparative analysis with other global justice theorists, and assessment of how Ambedkarite thought has been received and applied in different cultural and political contexts. The research focuses particularly on areas where Ambedkar's insights can enhance understanding of minority rights, affirmative action policies, and intersectional approaches to discrimination.

Research questions

This study is guided by several key research questions:

1. How can Ambedkar's philosophical and political thought be interpreted within the framework of global human rights discourse?
2. What specific relevance does his ideology hold for contemporary global social justice movements addressing racism, discrimination, and structural inequality?
3. What are the theoretical and practical implications of integrating Ambedkarite perspectives into international human rights frameworks?
4. What challenges and opportunities exist in universalizing Ambedkar's ideas across different cultural and political contexts?

Methodology

This research employs qualitative methodology incorporating comparative analysis, interpretive reading of primary and secondary texts, and examination of case studies demonstrating the application of Ambedkarite thought in various global contexts. The approach includes content analysis of Ambedkar's writings, comparative study of his ideas with other human rights theorists, and assessment of contemporary applications of his philosophy in diaspora communities and international academic discourse.

Social justice and equality

Central to Ambedkar's philosophical framework is a comprehensive critique of social hierarchy and systematic discrimination. His analysis of the caste system in India provides insights that extend beyond specific cultural contexts to illuminate broader patterns of social stratification and exclusion. Ambedkar (1936) argued in "The Annihilation of Caste" that hierarchical social systems are fundamentally incompatible with principles of democracy and human dignity, stating that "caste has killed public spirit" and prevented the development of genuine social solidarity.

Ambedkar's understanding of social justice encompasses both negative and positive dimensions—the elimination of discriminatory practices and the active promotion of equality through institutional mechanisms. This dual approach anticipates contemporary human rights frameworks that recognize both civil-political rights and socio-economic rights as indivisible and interdependent. Ambedkar's emphasis on structural transformation rather than mere legal reform demonstrates sophisticated understanding of how deeply embedded systems of oppression require comprehensive intervention.

The universalizability of Ambedkar's critique becomes evident when examining other forms of systematic discrimination globally. His analysis of how dominant groups maintain privilege through cultural, economic, and political mechanisms offers insights applicable to understanding racism in the United States, ethnic conflicts in Africa, class-based discrimination in Europe, and indigenous marginalization in settler colonial societies.

Human dignity and constitutional morality

Ambedkar's conception of human dignity forms the philosophical foundation of his approach to constitutional design and democratic governance. His role in framing the Indian Constitution reflected his belief that legal frameworks must actively protect and promote human dignity rather than merely preventing its violation. This understanding of constitutional morality—the idea that constitutional principles should guide political behavior and social relationships—provides a framework for strengthening democratic institutions globally.

His emphasis on constitutional morality as distinct from social morality represents a crucial insight for human rights discourse. Ambedkar (1949) argued that while social customs and traditions might perpetuate inequality, constitutional principles should embody universal values of equality and justice. This distinction offers important guidance for addressing tensions between cultural relativism and universal human rights in international contexts.

The concept of constitutional morality developed by Ambedkar resonates with contemporary debates about constitutional design in post-conflict societies, transitional democracies, and contexts where traditional power structures conflict with democratic principles. His insights about the need for institutional mechanisms to protect minority rights and prevent majoritarian tyranny remain highly relevant for contemporary constitutional scholarship and practice.

Economic justice and democracy

Ambedkar's vision of social transformation included sophisticated analysis of economic inequality and its relationship to political democracy. His critique of capitalism's tendency to concentrate wealth and power, combined with his advocacy for state intervention to ensure economic justice, anticipated many contemporary debates about inequality and development. His famous assertion that "political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" (Ambedkar, 1949) highlights the interconnection between economic equality and democratic governance. His approach to economic justice emphasized both redistribution and recognition—addressing material inequality while also challenging cultural patterns that legitimize economic exclusion. This dual focus aligns with contemporary frameworks in development studies and political economy that recognize the multidimensional nature of poverty and marginalization.

Ambedkar's ideas about economic democracy, including worker rights, state responsibility for welfare, and the need to prevent concentration of economic power, offer insights relevant to global debates about sustainable development, corporate accountability, and the role of government in addressing inequality.

Education and emancipation

Throughout his life and work, Ambedkar emphasized education as fundamental to individual liberation and social transformation. His famous exhortation to "educate, agitate, organize" reflects understanding of how knowledge, consciousness-raising, and collective action work together to challenge oppressive systems. His personal educational journey—from Dalit community in rural Maharashtra to Columbia University and London School of Economics—demonstrated the transformative potential of education while also revealing its limitations in societies structured by systematic discrimination. Ambedkar's approach to education encompassed both formal learning and critical consciousness. He advocated for education that would enable oppressed communities to understand their circumstances, develop alternative visions, and

organize for change. This critical pedagogical approach resonates with the work of Paulo Freire and other liberation educators, suggesting universal principles for emancipatory education. The relevance of Ambedkar's educational philosophy extends to contemporary global challenges including educational inequality, cultural imperialism in curricula, and the need for education that promotes critical thinking and social responsibility. His insights about education as both individual empowerment and collective liberation offer guidance for educational initiatives in various contexts of marginalization and exclusion.

Human rights framework: a global overview

Evolution of human rights

The contemporary international human rights framework emerged from the catastrophic experiences of World War II and the Holocaust, culminating in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This foundational document, followed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966, established the basic architecture of international human rights law.

However, the development of this framework coincided with decolonization movements across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, creating tensions between universal aspirations and diverse cultural contexts. Critics have argued that the human rights framework reflects primarily Western philosophical traditions and political experiences, potentially marginalizing alternative approaches to human dignity and social organization.

The evolution of human rights discourse has gradually incorporated broader perspectives, including feminist critiques, postcolonial analyses, and indigenous worldviews. This expansion reflects growing recognition that truly universal human rights must be grounded in diverse philosophical traditions and responsive to varied forms of oppression and marginalization.

Contemporary challenges

Despite significant progress in establishing international human rights norms and institutions, contemporary global society faces persistent challenges in realizing human rights for all. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other characteristics continues to affect billions of people worldwide. Economic inequality has reached unprecedented levels, with implications for the realization of both civil-political and socio-economic rights.

The rise of authoritarianism, ethnic nationalism, and religious fundamentalism in various regions poses new threats to human rights and democratic governance. Climate change, technological disruption, and global migration

create additional challenges that existing human rights frameworks struggle to address adequately.

These contemporary challenges highlight the need for more sophisticated and inclusive approaches to human rights that can address structural inequalities, intersectional discrimination, and emerging forms of oppression. The limitations of state-centered enforcement mechanisms and the growing influence of non-state actors require new strategies for human rights protection and promotion.

Relevance of subaltern voices

The concept of “subaltern voices”—perspectives from marginalized and oppressed groups—has gained increasing recognition in human rights discourse. Scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies collective, including Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Spivak, have argued for the importance of understanding how dominated groups experience and resist oppression.

The integration of subaltern perspectives into human rights discourse serves multiple purposes: it diversifies the philosophical foundations of human rights, provides insights into forms of oppression that may be invisible to dominant groups, and offers alternative strategies for resistance and transformation. This integration also addresses critiques of human rights as a form of cultural imperialism by demonstrating how universal principles can be grounded in diverse cultural traditions.

Ambedkar’s thought exemplifies the contribution that subaltern voices can make to human rights discourse. His analysis of caste-based oppression, developed from the perspective of those who experienced it directly, offers insights that complement and challenge dominant approaches to understanding discrimination and inequality.

Ambedkar and the global human rights discourse

Comparison with western thinkers

Ambedkar’s intellectual contributions demonstrate remarkable parallels with prominent Western thinkers in human rights and social justice, while also offering distinctive insights shaped by his unique position as both scholar and social activist from a marginalized community. The comparison with Martin Luther King Jr. reveals shared commitments to nonviolent resistance, constitutional change, and the integration of moral and political arguments for equality. Both leaders emphasized the interconnection between individual dignity and social transformation, though Ambedkar’s analysis of structural oppression was perhaps more systematic and comprehensive.

The intellectual connection with W.E.B. Du Bois is particularly striking, as both scholars developed sophisticated analyses of how dominant groups maintain privilege through cultural, economic, and political mechanisms. Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness” finds parallels in Ambedkar’s analysis of how oppressed groups internalize dominant ideologies while simultaneously

developing critical perspectives on their circumstances. Both thinkers emphasized the importance of education and intellectual development for liberation movements.

Ambedkar's relationship to John Rawls's theory of justice reveals both convergences and tensions. Like Rawls, Ambedkar was concerned with developing principles for a just society that could command rational consent from all members. However, Ambedkar's emphasis on the need for positive measures to address historical injustice and structural inequality goes beyond Rawls's focus on fair procedures and equal opportunity. Ambedkar's insights about how deeply embedded systems of oppression require active intervention to achieve genuine equality anticipate contemporary debates about affirmative action and reparative justice.

The comparison with John Stuart Mill illuminates Ambedkar's distinctive contribution to liberal political thought. While Mill's "On Liberty" focuses primarily on protecting individual freedom from governmental interference, Ambedkar's analysis recognizes how social oppression can be as limiting as state coercion. His emphasis on positive liberty—the capacity to realize one's potential—complements Mill's negative liberty while addressing its limitations in contexts of systematic discrimination.

Ambedkar's vision in international law and policy

Ambedkar's contributions to constitutional design and democratic theory offer valuable insights for international law and policy development. His approach to minority protection through constitutional guarantees, affirmative action, and institutional safeguards provides models for addressing similar challenges in other contexts. The Indian Constitution's provisions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which Ambedkar helped design, offer practical examples of how legal frameworks can address systematic discrimination.

His understanding of federalism as a mechanism for protecting minority interests while maintaining national unity offers insights for constitutional design in diverse societies. The balance between central authority and regional autonomy reflected in the Indian Constitution addresses tensions present in many contemporary multi-ethnic and multi-religious states.

Ambedkar's vision of democratic governance extends beyond electoral procedures to encompass what he termed "constitutional morality"—the idea that democratic institutions must be guided by principles of equality, fraternity, and justice. This concept offers guidance for strengthening democratic institutions globally, particularly in contexts where formal democratic procedures coexist with systematic exclusion and inequality.

His analysis of the relationship between economic and political democracy anticipates contemporary debates about global governance, corporate accountability, and the role of international institutions in addressing inequality.

His insights about the need for both national and international mechanisms to protect human rights remain relevant for discussions about global governance and human security.

Transnational movements

The global circulation of Ambedkarite ideas has facilitated the development of transnational movements addressing caste-based discrimination and related forms of systematic exclusion. Dalit rights organizations have increasingly framed their struggles within international human rights discourse, seeking recognition of caste-based discrimination as a form of racial discrimination under international law.

The involvement of Dalit organizations in the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001) demonstrated the potential for connecting local struggles with global human rights frameworks. Despite resistance from the Indian government and some international actors, these efforts have contributed to growing recognition of caste-based discrimination as a global human rights concern.

The development of transnational networks addressing caste-based discrimination illustrates broader patterns in contemporary social movements, including the use of international forums to pressure national governments, the development of solidarity networks across national boundaries, and the strategic deployment of universal human rights language to address particular forms of oppression.

These transnational dimensions of Ambedkarite thought demonstrate its potential for contributing to global social justice movements while also revealing challenges in translating culturally specific analyses into universal frameworks.

Case studies and applications

Dalit movements in diaspora

The presence of significant Dalit populations in countries including the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada has created opportunities for examining how Ambedkarite thought translates across cultural and political contexts. In the United States, Dalit activists have drawn connections between caste-based discrimination and African American experiences of racism, creating coalitions that highlight commonalities while respecting differences in historical experience and contemporary circumstances. The legal recognition of caste-based discrimination in employment and educational settings in some U.S. jurisdictions represents a significant development in the internationalization of human rights frameworks. The inclusion of caste as a protected category in anti-discrimination ordinances in cities like Seattle demonstrates how local activism can contribute to broader recognition of forms of discrimination that may not be visible within dominant cultural frameworks.

In the United Kingdom, Dalit organizations have worked within existing anti-racism frameworks while also advocating for specific recognition of caste-based discrimination. The inclusion of caste discrimination provisions in UK equality legislation reflects growing recognition of the need for intersectional approaches to discrimination that address multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage. Canadian contexts have provided opportunities for examining how Ambedkarite thought relates to indigenous rights movements and multiculturalism policies. The emphasis on collective rights and recognition of historical injustice in Canadian approaches to indigenous issues offers points of connection with Ambedkarite analyses of systematic oppression and the need for reparative justice.

Ambedkarite thought in global academia

The reception of Ambedkar's ideas within international academic discourse has been uneven but increasingly significant. In postcolonial studies, Ambedkar's analysis of the relationship between colonialism and internal forms of oppression has contributed to more sophisticated understanding of how multiple systems of domination intersect and reinforce each other.

Critical race theory has found valuable insights in Ambedkar's analysis of how dominant groups maintain privilege through cultural, legal, and economic mechanisms. His understanding of how oppressed groups develop alternative epistemologies and resistance strategies resonates with critical race theorists' emphasis on counter-narratives and experiential knowledge.

Development studies has increasingly recognized Ambedkar's contributions to understanding the relationship between social inclusion and economic development. His insights about how discrimination limits human potential and economic productivity have influenced approaches to inclusive development and poverty reduction. The growing presence of Ambedkarite thought in international academic conferences, journals, and collaborative research projects demonstrates its increasing recognition as a significant contribution to global knowledge about social justice and human rights.

Cross-cultural relevance

The application of Ambedkarite insights to other contexts of systematic discrimination demonstrates both the universalizability of his core principles and the need for contextual adaptation. Indigenous rights movements have found valuable parallels in Ambedkar's analysis of how dominant groups use cultural narratives to legitimize oppression and how marginalized communities can develop alternative sources of identity and solidarity.

Racial justice movements in various contexts have drawn on Ambedkar's understanding of how structural discrimination operates through multiple institutions and mechanisms. His emphasis on the need for both legal reform and

cultural transformation resonates with contemporary analyses of systematic racism and the limitations of purely legal approaches to achieving equality.

Anti-caste activism beyond South Asian contexts, including among South Asian diaspora communities and in solidarity movements, demonstrates how Ambedkarite thought can inform broader struggles against hierarchy and discrimination. The development of intersectional analyses that connect caste, race, gender, and class reflects the influence of Ambedkarite insights about the complexity of oppression and the need for comprehensive approaches to liberation.

Challenges in universalising Ambedkar

Cultural and political translation

The process of universalizing Ambedkar's thought faces significant challenges in cultural and political translation. The concept of caste, central to Ambedkar's analysis, does not translate directly to other cultural contexts, creating difficulties in communicating the specificity of caste-based oppression while also identifying broader principles applicable to other forms of systematic discrimination.

The challenge of translation extends beyond linguistic issues to encompass deeper questions about how culturally specific experiences and analyses can contribute to universal understanding. The risk exists that universalization might dilute the specificity of Ambedkar's insights or, conversely, that emphasis on cultural specificity might limit their broader application. Political translation involves adapting Ambedkarite insights to different political systems and constitutional frameworks. The specific mechanisms that Ambedkar developed for addressing caste-based discrimination within the Indian political system may not be directly applicable to other contexts, requiring creative adaptation that preserves core principles while addressing different institutional arrangements.

Resistance and misinterpretation

The universalization of Ambedkar's thought encounters resistance from multiple sources. Within dominant Western academic and policy circles, there may be reluctance to acknowledge non-Western contributions to human rights thinking or to recognize forms of oppression that are not well understood within Western analytical frameworks.

Misinterpretation represents another significant challenge, particularly when Ambedkar's ideas are abstracted from their cultural and historical contexts in ways that distort their meaning or implications. The risk exists that selective appropriation of Ambedkarite insights might serve to legitimize existing power structures rather than challenge them.

The challenge of epistemic exclusion—the systematic marginalization of knowledge produced by oppressed groups—affects the reception of Ambedkarite thought within international academic and policy circles.

Overcoming this exclusion requires not only presenting Ambedkar's ideas effectively but also challenging the structural factors that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others.

Need for intersectionality

The universalization of Ambedkar's thought requires sophisticated understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect and interact. While Ambedkar's analysis focused primarily on caste-based discrimination, his insights must be integrated with analyses of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of oppression to develop comprehensive approaches to social justice.

The development of intersectional analyses that build on Ambedkarite foundations while addressing multiple forms of discrimination represents both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in developing more sophisticated understanding of how systematic oppression operates through multiple and overlapping mechanisms. The challenge lies in maintaining the specificity and power of Ambedkar's analysis while also addressing forms of oppression that he did not explicitly examine.

The integration of feminist, anti-racist, and other critical perspectives with Ambedkarite thought requires careful attention to how different analytical frameworks can complement and strengthen each other without losing their distinctive insights.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research demonstrates that Ambedkar's ideological contributions offer significant potential for enriching global human rights discourse and strengthening international approaches to social justice. His comprehensive vision of social transformation, grounded in principles of equality, fraternity, and human dignity, provides frameworks that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries while offering distinctive insights shaped by experiences of systematic oppression. The comparative analysis reveals important parallels between Ambedkar's thought and prominent Western theorists of human rights and social justice, while also highlighting his unique contributions to understanding structural discrimination and the requirements for genuine equality. His emphasis on constitutional morality, positive measures to address historical injustice, and the interconnection between individual liberation and social transformation offer valuable insights for contemporary human rights frameworks.

The examination of case studies demonstrates both the potential and the challenges involved in universalizing Ambedkarite thought. The successful application of his insights in diaspora contexts, international academic discourse, and cross-cultural social movements illustrates the universalizability

of core principles, while also revealing the need for contextual adaptation and intersectional analysis.

Theoretical and practical implications

The integration of Ambedkarite perspectives into global human rights discourse has several important theoretical implications. It contributes to the epistemological diversity necessary for developing truly inclusive approaches to human rights by incorporating insights from subaltern experiences and non-Western philosophical traditions. It strengthens understanding of how systematic oppression operates through multiple mechanisms and institutions, requiring comprehensive rather than piecemeal approaches to social transformation.

The practical implications include enhanced frameworks for addressing minority rights, affirmative action policies, and intersectional discrimination. Ambedkar's insights about constitutional design, democratic governance, and the relationship between economic and political equality offer guidance for institutional development and policy implementation in various contexts. The research also highlights the importance of developing transnational networks and solidarity movements that can learn from diverse experiences of oppression and resistance while respecting cultural specificity and historical differences.

Future research directions

Several important directions for future research emerge from this study. Comparative studies examining how Ambedkarite insights apply to different contexts of systematic discrimination could deepen understanding of both universal principles and contextual variations in oppression and resistance. Policy integration research could explore specific mechanisms for incorporating Ambedkarite perspectives into international human rights frameworks, including treaty development, monitoring mechanisms, and enforcement procedures. This research could also examine how national legal systems can learn from Ambedkar's approach to constitutional design and minority protection.

Educational frameworks research could develop pedagogical approaches that introduce Ambedkarite thought to diverse audiences while maintaining its critical edge and transformative potential. This research could also explore how educational institutions can implement Ambedkar's vision of emancipatory education in various cultural contexts.

The universalization of Ambedkar's thought represents both an opportunity and a responsibility. The opportunity lies in strengthening global human rights discourse through the integration of insights from one of the most sophisticated analysts of systematic oppression and social transformation. The responsibility lies in ensuring that this universalization process respects the specificity of Ambedkar's analysis while also facilitating its contribution to broader struggles for human dignity and social justice. As global society continues to grapple with persistent inequality, discrimination, and exclusion, Ambedkar's vision of comprehensive social transformation grounded in principles of equality,

fraternity, and justice offers hope and guidance for creating more inclusive and equitable societies. The challenge lies in translating this vision into concrete action that can address contemporary forms of oppression while honouring the legacy of those who have struggled for human dignity throughout history.

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