

# Concept of Social Justice through the Lenses of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: An Appraisal

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*This article reflects upon social justice, which is the essence of the Indian Constitution. To protect the social order of the society, it is the duty of the state to promote social justice for equal opportunity and equal rights for social, economic and political development. This paper makes an attempt to explore the concept of social justice through the lenses of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Thereafter, it focuses on his struggles and ideas on social justice in the Indian context and it try to explore the relevance of his concept of social justice in the present times.*

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## Introduction

Social justice is a manifestation of just action and a just state of affairs in society. According to McCormick, 'equal well-being of individuals as a basis to social justice.' Rousseau stated that men are equal by nature. But "...private property has made them unequal and further perpetuated inequalities. Therefore, the perfection of man lies in the improvement of society that can be done by remarking man cultivating natural feelings and sentiments which guarantee equality and social justice. The goal of social justice is the reordering of society to eliminate the source of injustice in social relations, such as discrimination on the basis of caste, sex, religion, race, creed, etc." (Patak, 2016).

The social justice concept emerged out of the process of evolution of social norms, order, law, and morality. It lays emphasis upon just action and created a space for intervention between the different strata of the society. The 'social justice' term consists of two words, one is 'social' and the second one is 'justice.' The term 'social' is related to all human beings living in society, while 'justice' is concerned with liberty, equality, and rights. Thus, social justice is concerned with liberty which provides equality and maintains individual rights for every human being in society. In other words, it is the highest possible development of the capabilities of all members of the society that may be called social justice.

Professor R.M.W. Dias states that 'Justice cannot be defined in one standard formula which can be applicable for all in the same manner. The concept of justice is complex and shifts the balance between many factors. Justice means 'the just allocation of advantages and disadvantages so it will prevent the abuse of power, preventing the abuse of liberty, is the just decision in the situation of disputes and thereby adopt the changes' (Dias, 1985).

Social justice is one dimension of the concept of justice that stands for the organization of society based on the basic principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity. It lays greater emphasis on the principle of equality, both social and economic, and fraternity with a view to creating such human social conditions that ensure the free and fair development of all human beings. The concept of social justice gave preference to deprived sections of society compared to favoured section of section and saw that each one would benefit.

Justice is considered one of the most important values in political philosophy (Anand, 2017). The different schools of thought on justice depend on "...whether they are ancient or modern, or whether they have originated in the East or the West. Greek thoughts on justice are very old and dominant too. The ancient Greek political thought identified justice as a virtue, which was incorporated into moral philosophy" (Anand, 2017). The king or the state was depicted as divine and considered the abode of justice. Plato and Aristotle equated "good society" as a "just society." For Plato, justice was the virtue of the wise and according to him, no ideal state was possible without justice. Aristotle identified justice with fairness and equity. The concept of social justice in the Roman-Greek tradition emphasizes what Cicero had said that is, "we are born for justice, and that right is based, not on man's opinion, but on his nature. It will be helpful if we have a clear concept of man's fellowship and union with his fellow beings, no one is like others, Thus, our existence depends upon the existence of others." (Sabine & Thorson, 1973).

The ancient Indian tradition has related justice to the performance of duties and not with the concept of rights. These two aspects were 'Dandaniti' and 'Dharma', which were related to justice. 'Dandaniti' was very much connected to the modern concept of justice (law and punishment). It also recommends the legal aspect of justice. Dharma was a synonym for the code of duties and justice. It was nothing but virtuous conduct with dharma. The platonic concept of justice differs from the Hindu concept of justice, justice means the performance of duties prescribed by dharma.

For Plato, social justice is a social order which is based on human nature consists of three main aspects: rational, spiritual, and appetitive. The rational aspect means wise and its main function was to rule and command; the function of the spiritual aspect is to maintain law and order in society; the function of an appetitive aspect of human nature leads to the satisfaction of bodily appetites. A person who has rational faculty is wisdom, respect, tolerance, reasoning, discipline.

## **Concept of Social Justice**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, being born in an untouchable (Mahar) community, was subject to socio-economic discrimination at every stage of his life. This indicates that man not only hated man, but the so-called upper caste Hindus kept themselves away from the shadows of the untouchables or Mahars. Untouchables were not allowed to enter temples as well as schools; if they take admission to school, then they need to sit outside the class and study. These inhumane traditions were the outcomes of the social structure and the caste system. In such a society, Ambedkar was born and brought up. Going through tremendous hard times in life after finishing his education, he launched himself politically to fight for the rights of the deprived and depressed classes and thereby tried to establish an equal society. He never made any compromise against injustice. He never cared for prestige and self-aggrandizement. He rebelled against social injustice and inequality which was present in traditional Indian Society. Ambedkar was the architect of the Indian Constitution and a promoter of social justice. Thus, he had a longing for fundamental social revolution as a precondition of all other kinds of transformations inclusive political and economic. For Ambedkar, a Just society is one in which a lot of reverence and less hatred exists, and compassionate society is created (NCERT, 2010: 63). His concept of social justice is based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. For him, religion is based on universal principles of morality and can be applied to all times, states, caste, and all races. This principle is based on unity, respect and acceptance of all human beings, irrespective of men, women, untouchables, or disadvantaged groups.

According to Ambedkar, the root cause of inequality in Indian society is the caste system. Ambedkar's concept of social justice is based on the equality of all human beings, the equal treatment of both men and women, and the respect for the weak and the downtrodden is similar. This aims at human rights, benevolence, mutual love, sympathy, tolerance, and charity towards fellow beings, humane treatment to all cases, dignified life to all citizens, the abolition of the caste system, education and property to all, goodwill and gentleness to all (Jatava, 1998). Ambedkar wanted social transformation through the establishment of social democracy where equality, fraternity, and liberty could prevail in every sphere of life of all members of society. This was the dream of Ambedkar and he tried to bring it into actuality with the help of the Indian Constitution; the theory of Social Justice emerged from the concept of social democracy. His concept of social justice emphasizes human rights, benevolence, mutual love, sympathy, tolerance, and charity towards a fellow being. His view on social justice emphasizes the removal of manmade inequalities through the law, morality, and public conscience; he supported the concept of justice for a sustainable society. His theory of Social Justice has been widely accepted and adopted into the field of Human Rights that speak not only about just political equality, but social equity, promoting inclusiveness of diversity and access to basic fundamental rights. This brings to mind another freedom activist in American civil liberties, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, a leader of the black civil rights movement in America. He fought for equal treatment in the social, economic, and political spheres of American life. Like the Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr. for the right of black people, even before the Dandi March, which was led by Mahatma Gandhi, Ambedkar led the Mahad Chavadar lake March at Mahad village in Maharashtra at Raigad district against the elite or privileged classes of the villages who denied equal access of water to the deprived caste known then as Mahars or Both Martin Luther King and Ambedkar were aware that they have the capacity to inspire a large number of crowds with their words.

Ambedkar denounced the religion he was born in and stated that he will not die in the religion in which he was born, i.e., Hinduism. He embraced Buddhism because this religion lays emphasis on the basic principle of equal value to all life everywhere, which he shared to a large extent in his fight for emancipation from discrimination. Buddhism inspires not only him to fight for the rights of untouchables but provided a platform for the people belonging to deprived classes by giving the slogan “Educate, Agitate, and Organize” and fighting for social, political, and economic justice through peaceful, lawful, and democratic means. For Ambedkar, Buddhism is rooted in liberty, equality, and fraternity, allowed for spiritual and ideological emancipation from the Caste system, and religious conversion meant, according to him, a change or an evolution in the way an individual or group views themselves with respect to society. Dewey inspired Ambedkar to break free from an unjust society; instead of living an anti-social life, he created a new community with principles of Buddhism that coincided with ideas of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity that Ambedkar could accept.

Valerian Rodrigues figures out Ambedkar as a political philosopher in his essay, “Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher,” he points out the concern of Ambedkar for justice, liberty, equality, community, democracy, and authority, legitimacy, and recognition (Rodrigues, 1993). His idea of social justice includes political and economic justice too. Ambedkar insists on “the social upliftment of the least advantaged, including Dalits, minorities, women, and workers. He believed that the caste system, communalism, patriarchy, and industrial exploitation of workers created hurdles and stood in the way of a just society” (Annand, 2017). The traditional Hindu society was rigid and had an unequal social fabric, so Ambedkar stated that this unequal society needed to be changed with some substantial principle of social justice.

### **Comparison of concept of social justice with other thinkers**

Ambedkar’s conception of justice was that all individuals should be treated as equals in terms of social status. He outrightly rejected the existing social inequality and exploitation present in society. He believed liberty, equality, and fraternity need to be maintained in society to secure an egalitarian just society (Annand, 2017). The caste system has violated the three basic principles of social justice, which were the root cause of the egalitarian society.

Ambedkar’s philosophy echoes existential philosophy, which states that man’s life is a continuous conflict in when the question of choice comes. Man is fundamentally free, and he makes his own ideals with a view to bringing about a particular social system in the future. Jean-Paul Sartre states that man cannot escape the usage of freedom as freedom is essential in the existence of mankind. Freedom would remain in life forever as long as the existence of man continues. So, Man’s freedom is unlimited, which means, freedom can never be destroyed by any law or moral rule; neither can it be eradicated by the oppression of an ideal or any system of obligations. However, this fact does not justify man’s escape from responsibility, which is the sole basis of the existential idea of justice. Man is responsible for all his actions as well as ideals, which he chooses as a free being, whether these actions and ideals are interconnected to justice, morality, democracy, or economic welfare. Man’s just ideals or unjust social or political system inspire him to choose his own course of action. Sartre states that man is responsible for himself and also for others. In the spirit of his choice, He creates a certain image (concept) of man...” (Sartre, 1947). When Ambedkar raised his voice for equal treatment for untouchables and other marginalized groups, he had the existential idea of justice in his mind, which led to social justice.

Rawls' conception of justice seeks equal deliberation of all people. Even Plato had thought of inequality when he noted that "democracy distributes an odd sort of equality to equals and unequal" (Bindeshwar, 1997). Rawls' idea of "justice as fairness" is both political as well as moral in conception; it is framed by keeping in mind the basic structure of modern constitutional democracy (Rawls, 1972). Here, Ambedkar's theory of justice resembles Rawls' theory of justice as fairness' which "seeks to establish a just and fair society considering the inequality within society" (Anand, 2017).

John Rawls states that the concept of social justice is that where all social primary goods, liberty, and opportunity, income, and wealth, need to be distributed equally among the people and any unequal distribution of these goods is needed then it should be done to favored the least one (Rawls, 1972). The 'least favored' in every society must be given initial advantages place to comply with the most favored in the society by the unequal distribution of "social primary goods" to the advantage of the least favored. In enunciating this view, Rawls must have foreseen the doctrine of 'Protective Discrimination' incorporated in the Constitution of India under Article 15.

Dr. Ambedkar has stated that the concept of social justice has moral and legal deliberations behind it. He accepted justice as a guiding and evaluative principle in shaping our own morality. His conception of social justice is based on human values adopted from the French Revolution such as liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Renaissance period brought intellectual development by giving rise to socio-political philosophers like Thomas Hobbs, John Locke, and even Rousseau, Ambedkar adopted the principles of their socio-political philosophy in the Indian Constitution in the form of a preamble which is meant as a guide to interpret the entire Constitution: "He believed that if these values are cultivated by individuals, then there will be neither caste barriers dividing them, nor any social obstacles created by caste preventing the individual from leading free lives" (Jamma, 2017). Each individual will have empathy and mutual respect for each other. To this, only Ambedkar calls Social Democracy. Therefore, social democracy is a way of life, which accepts liberty, equality, and fraternity. So the divorce from one of the above mention principals will defeat the very purpose of democracy. Social justice is an evaluative principle and dynamic because it accounts for the changing situation and suggests the abolition of unjust customs, traditions, and social structures to promote the welfare of the people and the preservation of the rights of the poor and marginalized sections of society. For him, the concept of justice does not merely mean the distribution of social wealth, but a way of life-based on values of liberty, equality, and fraternity extended to all sections of the society, and not just to the privileged classes. The soul of Ambedkar's conception of social justice lies in unity and equality of all human beings irrespective of independence of class, caste, gender, and social stature, with regards to social rights, tolerance and charity, and protection of dignity of all citizens. He instills social justice because it includes all kinds of justice, namely, legal, economic, political, moral, religious, natural, and administrative.

Ambedkar emphasizes in his theory of social justice that no person should be treated as a means to an end because every individual is independent, free, capable of intellectual discretion, and has the ability to choose what is best for him or her. In an ideal society, every individual should be given the means and opportunity to succeed in whatever they aspire for. Therefore, the aim and objective of the society is the growth and progress of every individual irrespective of caste, community, creed, and gender. He worked consistently for the rejuvenation of humanity, for the well-being of mankind, and for the transformation of man and society. He was a great social liberal. He was a great visionary and want to establish a new

society “based on the principles of justice, equality, and fraternity. Thus, the idea of justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity is a great achievement” (Malik, 2011).

A great political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in his book ‘Du Contract Social (1762)’ that man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains, those who consider themselves masters of others are the greatest slaves. He emphasized in his concept of social contract on liberty, equality and fraternity, which influenced Ambedkar to fight for the rights of marginalized or deprived classes of India.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, while discussing the concept of social justice through the lens of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, it also lays emphasis on the concept of social justice given by other thinkers. The social justice concept that has been defined here lays the foundation of a society that will be based on equality, liberty, and fraternity. Although Plato, Rawls, and existentialist philosophers have not defined social justice in these specific terms the way Dr. Ambedkar did. These principles of social justice were inferred from his writings on social justice. When the idea of social justice is understood, it becomes easy to infer from Ambedkar’s writings and speeches published posthumously, which focus on equality, liberty, and fraternity are the basic principles of his theory. He emphasized that, without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality will not be a natural course of things. Ambedkar thought that social justice can practice if political democracy is extended in the social and economic fields through constitutional means.

Beteille’s analysis of distributive justice includes distributing benefits equally to every member of society, equality before the law, equal protection of laws, and equality of opportunity, which is reflected in Ambedkar’s theory of social justice. From this, it can be viewed as that these principles are already preserved by Ambedkar’ in the Constitution of India. The principle of equality is preserved in the preamble of the Indian Constitution, not as a slogan, but it has been substantiated with the Right to equality (Article 14), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equality of condition, which is reservation (Articles 330, 332, 335 and 46). This was done especially because he must have thought that in Indian hierarchical society, equality of opportunity may, in turn, produce inequality and subordination.

Ambedkar agrees with Bergson’s idea of justice as it bases on the idea of equality, of the proportion of ‘compensation. Equality means equal rules and regulations, rights, and righteousness which are concerned with equality as a principle: “If all men are equal, then all men are of the same essence and the common essence imbibes them to the same fundamental rights and to equal liberty” (Ambedkar, 1987). Ambedkar’s concept of justice is grounded in human values. For Ambedkar, justice is simply another name for liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Ambedkar states that political democracy can last only if it is based on social democracy, which recognizes equality, liberty, and fraternity as the principles of life. The principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity should not be treated as separate because it forms a unity which means to separate one from the other is to destroy the very purpose of democracy. Hence, for Ambedkar, democracy is an essential component for attaining social justice.

For Ambedkar, liberty plays an important role in shaping human values, which are grounded in the expression of thought, belief, and faith. Man becomes and progresses when

he expresses himself in different ways and modes of life. He can explore hidden talents d through liberty and also can choose the best way to shape his destiny. To prevent absolute liberty, equality comes into the picture. It connects human beings to human beings belonging to different groups and brings them in mutual ties, cooperation, and social sympathy. Citizens cannot live in deprived conditions. The concept of equality acknowledges and gives rise to the conscious understanding of mutual obligations and mutual recognition of rights, which binds society members together. Equality is, therefore, the binding force of all the people belonging to different caste, creeds, gender, or communities. The fraternity provides an atmosphere wherein people can enjoy the values of liberty and equality.

Ambedkar reinforces that fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of all Indians, especially people belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds; solidarity in social life. Therefore, Ambedkar states that the principles of the trinity of the unity of these principles cannot be separated from each other as one supplements and complements the other in the process of social justice. The concept of social justice reinforces a mode of life that will help every man to acquire his rightful place in society. This principle help every individual to live a dignified and respectful life without any unnatural and manmade discrimination in society. The other principles of social justice indicate the supremacy of constitutional rules, equality before the law, grant of fundamental rights, the performance of duties, adherence to legal and social obligations, and finally, a firm faith in the value of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and dignity of human personality. His conception of justice is therefore holistic in nature. He is more concerned with social transformation and the development of society as a whole.

Relying on Ambedkar's thoughts on social justice, the Indian Constitution guarantees equal rights to all irrespective of differences and human dignity. He was genuinely concerned for the overall development of the vulnerable sections of the Indian society and therefore, he chose to demolish the existing caste discriminative social structure by enacting the Constitution. The above discussion emphasized that Ambedkar's concept of social justice is relevant even in today's contemporary Indian society because it promotes and upholds the rights and dignity of the deprived and marginal sections of the society in a constitutional and legal manner.

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