



The Dalit Critique of Indian Nationalism: Ambedkar's Constitutional Vision and the Challenge to Caste Hegemony

Alisha Subba

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Maharaja Nandakumar Mahavidyalaya, Purba Medinipur, India

Abstract: The conventional history of Indian independence often treats the movement as a unified struggle led by the Indian National Congress, culminating in political sovereignty in 1947. Yet this narrative obscures parallel struggles for social emancipation, especially those led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's seminal critique of "Hindu nationalism" emphasized that without dismantling caste hierarchies, Swaraj (self-rule) would simply replace British colonial rule with a **caste-based hegemony**. Drawing on John Dewey's pragmatist democracy, Ambedkar argued that Indian society required *social Swaraj*—equality and interaction across caste, in order to sustain political democracy (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 57). His analysis in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and in debates such as the Poona Pact and the Hindu Code Bill debate reveals that caste itself was a structural barrier to democracy. This paper examines Ambedkar's intervention as a necessary reorientation of the nationalist narrative. It shows how his concepts of social endosmosis, Dalit political agency, and constitutional morality challenged Gandhian moral reformism and exposed the limits of mere political sovereignty. Through highlighting these arguments, the paper argues that Ambedkar redefined freedom as an unfinished project requiring the eradication of caste domination, and made democracy contingent on social transformation (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* 20).

Keywords: Ambedkar, Indian Nationalism, Caste System, Pragmatism, Social Democracy, Constitutional Morality, Subaltern Studies, Hindu Code Bill

I. Introduction: The Paradox of the Dual Struggle

The historiography of Indian independence frequently portrays 1947 as the climax of a unified anti-imperialist struggle led by the Indian National Congress. In this "**national narrative**," political sovereignty is the primary measure of freedom, and 1947 the culmination of liberation. But this account masks a paradox: many Indians were uncertain if independence would truly be an emancipation. For Dalits (the communities traditionally regarded as "untouchable" under the caste system), the transfer of power to Indian elites risked replacing British rule with a different form of domination—one grounded in caste hierarchy. B. R. Ambedkar, a leader of Dalit emancipation, was the most vocal critic of this paradox. He insisted that India's freedom struggle was twofold: against *external* colonial rule and against the *internal* tyranny of caste. Political democracy, he argued, could not endure on a foundation of graded inequality; *social democracy* had to underlie political rights. He famously proclaimed that "political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 57). In other words, without substantive equality in social life, elections and constitutions would be hollow.

In emphasizing caste as a structural contradiction in Indian society, Ambedkar confronted nationalist histories that subordinated social justice to political unity. He warned that if Swaraj replaced colonial rule without uprooting caste, "you cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up morality" (*Annihilation of Caste* 20). This article treats Ambedkar's critique as an

essential corrective to nationalist historiography. It argues that Ambedkar redefined freedom as an ongoing, contested project: independence in 1947 was not a finishing line but a step towards true emancipation. In this light, Ambedkar's interventions expose the limits of the conventional narrative and underscore the unfinished nature of Indian democracy.

II. Methodology and Conceptual Approach

This paper takes an interpretive, intellectual-historical approach. Instead of viewing the Independence Movement as a single event, it is treated as a field of competing ideas about democracy, sovereignty, and social order. The analysis relies on close readings of Ambedkar's own texts especially *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and his collected *Writings and Speeches* (several volumes)—as well as the Constituent Assembly debates on caste and personal law. In interpreting Ambedkar's ideas, the paper frames them through several conceptual lenses: **American Pragmatism**, **jurisprudential theory**, and **subaltern theory**.

Ambedkar studied at Columbia University (1913–1916) under John Dewey and William James, absorbing pragmatist ideas that democracy is rooted in everyday social life. The paper analyzes how Ambedkar's democratic thought adapted Dewey's notion of democracy as *associated living* (Dewey 1916, 914) to the Indian context. In pragmatist terms, ideas are judged by practical consequences; for Ambedkar, democracy must be evaluated by whether ordinary social relations allow equality and free association. This pragmatist perspective underlies Ambedkar's critique of Indian social structures.

The paper also uses a **jurisprudential framework**: it examines Ambedkar's distinction between rule-bound legal orders and principle-based constitutional orders. This distinction is key to understanding his critique of Hindu law (as embodied in texts like the *Manusmriti*) and his advocacy for a constitutionally grounded morality of equality. Lastly, the analysis is informed by **subaltern theory**, which stresses the importance of marginalized voices in national discourse. Ambedkar's position as a leader of a subaltern group (Dalits) parallels later Subaltern Studies critiques of Indian nationalism. Putting Ambedkar's ideas in dialogue with these frameworks, it can be seen that caste is not a peripheral anomaly but is central to how democracy was (or was not) realized in India.

III. Pragmatism and the Ethics of Association

Ambedkar's thought was decisively shaped by American Pragmatism, particularly John Dewey's philosophy. Dewey rejected abstract moralism and instead defined democracy as a mode of life based on interaction and shared experience. As Dewey wrote, "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a *mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience*" (Dewey 1916, 914). In this view, democracy requires a social milieu in which citizens freely communicate and act with one another; it cannot be reduced to voting alone. Ambedkar found in Dewey's ideas a vocabulary to critique the rigid hierarchy of Indian society.

Importing Dewey's emphasis on interaction, Ambedkar argued that caste was a fundamental obstacle to democratic living. Caste was not merely one divisive feature among others; it was a system that fixed social identities and prevented meaningful contact across group lines. In *Annihilation of Caste* he stated bluntly that caste was "not merely a division of labour, but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar 1936, 14). Caste norms such as strict endogamy, taboos on inter-dining, and notions of "purity" and "pollution", tore society into "water-tight compartments" (Ambedkar 1936, 45). Each caste became a closed community with little social exchange with others. From a pragmatist standpoint, such a society could not support true democracy. Dewey insisted that a democratic society needs "varied and free points of contact" among its members (Dewey 1916, 914). Ambedkar applied this insight to India: the absence of **social endosmosis**—that is, the free circulation of ideas, values, and sympathies across caste lines meant that India lacked a common moral universe. Without endosmosis, people in different castes could not develop understanding or solidarity. As Ambedkar noted, "Caste has made public opinion impossible... A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste; his loyalty is restricted only to his caste" (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 1:12). When social life is partitioned this way, democratic virtues such as mutual respect and collective decision-making cannot emerge organically. Political equality thus remains a formal fiction.

This pragmatist analysis underpins Ambedkar's fierce critique of Gandhi's approach to caste. Gandhi addressed untouchability through individual moral reform: he preached spiritual uplift, ethical persuasion, and the re-education of higher castes. He famously coined the term *Harijans* ("children of God") for Dalits to promote fraternity among Hindus. But Ambedkar argued that Gandhi's moral exhortations did not touch caste's structural core. In Ambedkar's words, caste was woven into religion, law, and economy, "the very soul of Hindu society" (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 1:23), so abstract appeals could not uproot it. He

declared, “You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up a morality” (*Annihilation of Caste* 20). By privileging moral unity over social restructuring, Gandhian nationalism, Ambedkar argued, risked preserving the very divisions it claimed to fight.

Thus, grounded in pragmatist ethics, Ambedkar reconceived democracy as a lived social practice rather than a mere political ceremony. Legal and political rights have little meaning if everyday life remains segregated. Equality must be experienced in schools, workplaces, villages, and homes to be real. For Ambedkar, social democracy had to precede political democracy, because without the annihilation of caste, institutions risk being “hollow forms” legitimating inequality rather than overcoming it. This pragmatist orientation allowed Ambedkar to critique both Indian nationalism and Western democratic theory: he showed that political freedom was hollow unless social relations were fundamentally transformed.

IV. Social Endosmosis and the Limits of Indian Nationhood

Ambedkar’s concept of **social endosmosis** crystalizes this argument. Adapting Dewey’s metaphor, he likened society to a membrane: endosmosis is the free flow of social fluid between different groups, needed to equalize and integrate society. In an essay later collected in his speeches, Ambedkar explained that endosmosis is like fraternity or democracy itself, a “mode of associated living” with communication and reciprocal experience (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 1:17). In a healthy democracy, ideas and values flow freely across communities; in caste-ridden India, they did not.

Ambedkar wrote that caste created “water-tight compartments” which made social exchange impossible. He argued that endogamy, pollution rules, and hierarchical practice systematically blocked communication. In *Annihilation of Caste* he wrote that caste destroyed public charity and opinion: “There is no common ground of understanding between the groups” (Ambedkar 1936, 45). When people never share meals, schools, or public spaces with others, there is no “common ground” for public discussion or mutual respect. In Deweyan terms, such isolation contradicts the very essence of democracy, which thrives on “varied and free points of contact” (Dewey 1916, 914). This insight led Ambedkar to reject the nationalist claim that India was already a unified *nation*. Indian nationalists defined nationhood in terms of territory or culture, but Ambedkar insisted that genuine nationhood requires social integration. He argued that India’s population was actually “a collection of antagonistic groups” often in conflict due to caste segregation (Ambedkar 1936, 50). Without endosmosis, he held, the rhetoric of unity was a fiction. Political institutions alone could not forge a cohesive public sphere if ordinary life remained fractured. He summed it up: “A nation is not a mere geographical area; it is a fellowship. If the fellowship is fractured, the nation is a fiction” (Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches* 1:38). In Ambedkar’s view, independence from Britain would mean little if Hindus and Untouchables continued to live as isolated castes.

Social endosmosis thus became both an analytical tool and a normative yardstick in Ambedkar’s thought. It helps explain why democracy in India could not take root without social change. It shows that political sovereignty alone could not weld “the varied interests” of Indians into a single polity. More fundamentally, Ambedkar argued, casteism undermined the ethical reciprocity on which democracy depends. Without daily interaction and solidarity across castes, Indians could not share democratic values. In emphasizing endosmosis, Ambedkar reframed freedom as not merely a change of rulers in 1947, but as the creation of social conditions in which citizens could truly live as equals.

V. Dalit’s as a Political Minority

Ambedkar’s critique of caste also led him to reconceive the place of Dalits in Indian political life. Nationalists and reformists often treated Dalits paternalistically, as a “social problem” to be solved by charity or Hindu revivalism. In contrast, Ambedkar insisted that Dalits were a **distinct political minority** whose interests were irreconcilably in tension with caste Hindus. He rejected any notion that Dalits were passive recipients of Hindu society’s goodwill. In his view, caste was not an accidental injustice but “the very soul of Hindu society” (*Writings and Speeches* 1:23). So, Untouchability was not a deviation but a structural feature.

In politicizing the Dalit condition, Ambedkar shifted the agenda from benevolent reform to rights and representation. He argued that emancipation required legal and institutional safeguards, not just moral persuasion. This outlook was clear in the Poona Pact of 1932, where Ambedkar had originally demanded separate electorates for Dalits. Separate electorates would have recognized Dalits as an autonomous political community capable of choosing their own representatives in the legislature. Ambedkar argued that without such structural guarantees, caste Hindus would perpetually dominate politics. He bluntly stated, “the interests of the untouchables are irreconcilable with the interests of the upper castes...no reconciliation is possible

without structural guarantees” (Ambedkar 1936, 72). In other words, justice for Dalits required not assimilation into a Hindu mainstream but recognition of their political agency.

This stance anticipated insights of later subaltern theory (Guha 1983). In insisting that Dalits *claim* sovereignty rather than wait for charity, Ambedkar challenged any nationalist narrative that subsumed marginalized groups under a majority identity. He famously declared, “We do not want charity; we want justice” (*Writings and Speeches* 1:31). For Ambedkar, freedom meant that Dalits would not be objects of upper-caste benevolence but equal participants in the republic. This meant constitutional safeguards, reserved seats in legislatures, non-discrimination laws, equitable education and most radically, the rejection of Hindu orthodoxy that justified exclusion.

In reframing Dalits as a political minority with legitimate claims, Ambedkar laid the foundations for understanding democracy as more than a majority’s rule. His vision emphasized institutional design, legal rights, and positive policies (like affirmative action) to secure equality. Democracy, he taught, is a lived social condition. Its legitimacy depends on including historically marginalized communities as autonomous actors in shaping the nation. Ambedkar’s political theory of Dalits thus turned the dominant narrative on its head: independence was not the end of caste oppression, it was a moment when Dalit agency must enter the national arena.

VI. Ambedkar and Gandhi: Competing Democratic Visions

The confrontation between B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi over caste illuminates these divergent visions. Gandhi addressed untouchability through Hindu reform and individual ethics. He distinguished the traditional four-fold *varna* from *jati* (caste), arguing that *varna* was a divine division of labour. He launched the weekly *Harijan* (“children of God”) in 1933 to uplift Untouchables spiritually and to encourage upper castes to accept them. In Gandhi’s view, caste oppression would be solved by the moral awakening of caste Hindus and the voluntary uplift of Dalits through *punya* (virtuous acts). He even suggested that Shudras and Untouchables could improve by adopting the “virtuous qualities” of the term *Harijan* (the name borrowed from saint Narsinh Mehta). Underlying his stance was the belief that ethical persuasion and Hindu unity could overcome untouchability.

Ambedkar flatly rejected this moral-religious framing. He saw no analytic distinction between *varna* and caste: *varna* was itself the root of hierarchy. To Ambedkar, caste was a systemic institution grounded in scripture and custom. Thus, Gandhian prescriptions fell short. Ambedkar argued that only structural change could break caste. His famous dictum in *Annihilation of Caste* was: “The real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste” (Ambedkar 1936, 38). Inter-caste marriage symbolized the kind of deep social integration that caste rules forbade. Ambedkar insisted that moral exhortation alone could not dismantle the inequalities encoded in laws, religion, and tradition.

This theoretical divide reflected fundamentally different concepts of democracy and freedom. Gandhi’s vision privileged voluntary reform and moral transformation; he assumed that if Hindus changed their hearts, caste would fade. Ambedkar, however, argued that democracy requires enforceable rights and institutions to protect the vulnerable. He warned that without embedding equality in law, “political democracy cannot last” (*Writings and Speeches* 1:57). For Ambedkar, constitutional guarantees of equality were essential to make political freedom substantive rather than a sham. In short, Gandhi saw liberation as primarily a spiritual and moral journey; Ambedkar saw it as requiring the reorganization of social, legal, and political institutions for justice. Their conflict was not merely personal but represented a broader clash: *ethical persuasion* versus *constitutional radicalism*.

This debate has endured in India’s public life. Gandhi’s model assumed that caste Hindus could be weaned away from prejudice, while Ambedkar’s model demanded litigation and legislation. The difference remains central to contemporary discussions: should reform rely on cultural persuasion or on strong laws? Ambedkar’s insistence on constitutional mechanisms foreshadowed later struggles (e.g., debates over reservation laws, anti-discrimination legislation, and civil rights) by emphasizing that rights without enforcement are empty. Gandhi’s approach, by contrast, pointed to the power of social movements and moral appeals. Ambedkar’s critique, however, warned that idealism unbacked by law risks perpetuating the very hierarchies it condemns.

VII. Jurisprudence: Rules, Principles, and Constitutional Morality

Ambedkar's legal philosophy further develops the contrast between *rules* and *principles*. He observed that traditional Hindu society was governed by a dense web of prescribed rules (for example, those in the *Manusmriti*) rather than by overarching ethical principles. In a rule-bound system, behavior is externally dictated by scriptural diktat, leaving little room for reasoned moral choice. As Ambedkar put it in *Annihilation of Caste*: “a society in which rules dictate every action cannot cultivate the habits of reasoned justice and equality” (Ambedkar 1936, 25). In other words, if every caste duty and penalty is spelled out, individuals never learn to exercise conscience or challenge injustice. This rigidity made genuine social reform impossible in Ambedkar's view.

In contrast, Ambedkar championed what he called **constitutional morality**. By this he meant fidelity to the constitution's core values—liberty, equality, fraternity, as guiding principles of public life. Constitutional morality demands that citizens and leaders put these principles above traditional customs or narrow sectarian loyalties. Ambedkar wrote that “the letter of the law is of little value if society is unwilling to respect the principles upon which it is based” (*Writings and Speeches* 14/1:45). The Indian Constitution guaranteed formal rights and equality, but Ambedkar knew these were fragile if society did not live by the Constitution's spirit. For him, democracy required not only institutions but also citizens who internalize its ethical commitments.

This jurisprudential insight had a practical side, best exemplified by Ambedkar's work on the Hindu Code Bill in the 1950s. As Law Minister, he attempted to replace the complex body of Hindu customary laws with a single statutory code based on equality and individual rights. In Ambedkar's words, law must be “a living instrument to secure justice to every individual, irrespective of caste, gender, or social standing” (*Writings and Speeches* 14/1:23). The Hindu Code Bill embodied principle-based law: it abolished legal differences among castes, established monogamy, granted daughters equal inheritance, permitted divorce, and protected inter-caste marriage (Ambedkar 1936, 45). These reforms were grounded in the principle that all citizens are equal, not in preserving any particular caste custom.

Through advocating these reforms, Ambedkar operationalized his rule–principle distinction. He argued that appeals to conscience or voluntary conversion might help a few individuals, but they could not overturn laws sanctioned by scripture and society. Only constitutionally enshrined principles could break caste's hold. Constitutional morality, therefore, was for Ambedkar a structural path to justice. Democracy was both legal and social: laws must protect rights, and society's norms must evolve. His focus on principles over strict rule-following anticipated later constitutional theory debates about substantive justice versus formal legality. Ambedkar famously declared, “Freedom is not merely the absence of external restraint; it is the capacity to exercise reasoned choice in the context of just institutions” (*Annihilation of Caste* 1936, 27).

Ambedkar's insights remain central to understanding law and social change. In a society steeped in hierarchy, even progressive laws can be undermined by entrenched attitudes. Ambedkar warned that unless constitutional values are internalized, legal rights may prove impotent. Thus, he saw democracy not as a mere electoral mechanism but as a set of ethical commitments embodied in both law and culture.

VIII. The Hindu Code Bill and the Crisis of Social Democracy

The Hindu Code Bill crisis illustrates the stakes of Ambedkar's vision. Introduced in 1950, the Bill was one of independent India's most ambitious reforms. Its goal was to unify Hindu personal law (marriage, inheritance, divorce, adoption) across castes, eliminating discriminatory customs. Ambedkar insisted that substantive equality—*social democracy*—was the real foundation of the Indian republic, not simply winning freedom from Britain. His legislative agenda reflected this: inheritance rights for women, the right to divorce, abolition of polygamy, and protection for inter-caste marriages. These measures directly challenged patriarchal and caste hierarchies, embodying the principles of liberty and equality he championed.

Despite its progressive content, the Hindu Code Bill faced fierce opposition. Conservative members of the Congress, orthodox Hindu groups, and even some secularists argued that the state should not tamper with religious customs. Opponents claimed such reforms violated *Hindu dharma* and family tradition. Ambedkar observed that the state's “reluctance to interfere in matters of social custom demonstrates that political independence alone is insufficient for social emancipation” (*Writings and Speeches* 14/1:58). In practice, the persistence of religiously sanctioned hierarchy hamstrung reform. Even Nehru conceded politically that enforcing the Bill risked severe backlash.

Disillusioned by the retreat, Ambedkar resigned as Law Minister in September 1951. In his resignation speech he declared that he quit because “the state has refused to act decisively to secure justice for all, and in this failure, the hopes of an emancipated society are betrayed” (*Writings and Speeches* 14/1:112). His

departure was both personal and symbolic: it affirmed his thesis that legal sovereignty without social restructuring cannot guarantee Dalit rights. The Hindu Code Bill episode vindicated Ambedkar's warnings about majoritarianism unchecked by constitutional morality. When the Bill was diluted and watered-down over the years, it confirmed his fear, political power in India would not automatically yield social democracy.

At a deeper level, the Hindu Code Bill conflict showed how Ambedkar linked law and ethics. He saw the Bill as more than legislation; it was an attempt to instill constitutional morality into society. In embedding gender and caste equality into law, he aimed to transform social habits. Its eventual dilution and the controversies around it highlighted the profound challenge Ambedkar posed: to make India's democracy not just a liberty from foreign rule, but an *ethical* order where the values of equality and fraternity are lived. In the end, the fate of the Bill underscored Ambedkar's message: political freedom is incomplete without social revolution.

IX. Conclusion: Democracy as an Unfinished Project

Ambedkar's critique compels us to rethink freedom beyond the moment of 1947. Political independence, he insisted, was not sufficient if it came on the same social foundations of caste and hierarchy. Sovereignty could simply install a new *caste hegemony* under Indian rulers. Instead, he argued, democracy must be grounded in social equality. His work showed that without dismantling caste privilege, democratic institutions remain fragile shells, unable to serve all citizens equally. In Ambedkar's terms, India's independence was but a formal milestone; the real task was the annihilation of caste as the basis of social order.

Central to Ambedkar's vision is the idea that democracy is primarily a social condition. Citizenship is not only a relationship between individual and state, but a network of relations among citizens. For democracy to flourish, liberty, equality, and fraternity must be realized in everyday life. Ambedkar warned that where caste continues to regulate where one can sit, whom one can marry, or what job one can hold, political democracy loses its meaning. He emphasized the need for **constitutional morality** to bridge law and society. Citizens must subordinate unjust traditions to the constitution's principles. Without this, even a progressive constitution is at risk of being hollowed out by entrenched prejudices.

Ambedkar's insights into caste, democracy, and law remain vividly relevant. Contemporary India continues to grapple with the gaps he identified: disparities in education, lingering discrimination, and the exclusion of minorities. Debates over citizenship laws, minority rights, and reservation policies reflect the unresolved tension between democratic ideals and hierarchical social practices. In these debates, Ambedkar's constitutionalism stands as a beacon: it demands that the letter of law be supported by an ethical commitment to equality. He showed that law is not enough unless society internalizes its values.

Ultimately, Ambedkar's legacy is that democracy is an unfinished project. He refused to accept the common assumption that freedom was fully achieved in 1947. By highlighting the disjunction between political independence and social equality, he redefined freedom as an ongoing struggle against structural domination. The **annihilation of caste**, he insisted, is not a supplementary reform but the precondition for true democratic life. To engage with Ambedkar's thought is to acknowledge that Indian democracy remains incomplete, not for lack of elections or constitutions, but for the persistent failure to fulfill their promise. His constitutional vision challenges us to continue the struggle: to transform India's democracy into the egalitarian and inclusive fellowship it was meant to be.

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