

**Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s Views on Population,
Birth Control and Reproductive Rights
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17804005>

ABSTRACT:

Dr. Ambedkar’s visionary stance on women’s rights—including what we today understand as reproductive rights—is equally significant but often underexplored. Though the contemporary framework of “Reproductive Rights” was not articulated during Ambedkar’s lifetime, his work consistently emphasized the centrality of bodily autonomy, gender equality, and social reform as preconditions for genuine liberation. Reproductive Rights can be traced through his writings, speeches, and especially his legislative efforts. Poverty is the cause of overpopulation in our country, unfortunately, today also, it is highly impossible to uproot poverty without the aid of birth-control. As a champion of female health and birth control measures, Ambedkar enthusiastically asserted it is, therefore, established that there is no go without recourse to modern contraceptives. As an economist, our expectations increase on how Dr Ambedkar visualized the role of population control policy in the development of the country further maintaining the economic balance of the state. The aim of the paper is to throw light on Ambedkar’s views on reproductive rights, though expressed in the language of his time, align closely with modern principles of reproductive justice. His insistence on equality, autonomy, and dignity for all, especially for women at the intersection of caste and gender oppression, makes his thought highly relevant to ongoing debates about reproductive freedom in India. As we revisit his legacy, it becomes clear that Ambedkar not only envisioned political freedom but also a deeply personal, social freedom—one that included the right of every woman to control her own body and destiny.

KEYWORDS:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Women, Population, Reproductive Rights, Birth Control, Health.



Introduction:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a towering figure in Indian social, economical and political thought, is best known as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and a relentless crusader for the rights of marginalized communities, especially Dalits. His visionary stance on women's rights—including what we today understand as reproductive rights—is equally significant but often underexplored. Though the contemporary framework of “Reproductive Rights” was not articulated during Ambedkar's lifetime, his work consistently emphasized the centrality of bodily autonomy, gender equality, and social reform as preconditions for genuine liberation.

Ambedkar's views on Reproductive Rights can be traced through his writings, speeches, and especially his legislative efforts—most notably the Hindu Code Bill, which he introduced as India's first Law Minister in independent India. This bill aimed to reform Hindu personal laws, granting women greater rights in marriage, inheritance, divorce, and family planning. It represented a radical attempt to secure for women the legal recognition and autonomy that had long been denied to them. Ambedkar believed that without the right to control their own bodies, reproductive choices, and family life, women could not achieve true equality in Indian society.

Reproductive Rights, for Ambedkar, were inseparable from the broader struggle against social and economic structures that subjugated women. In his sharp critique of Brahminical patriarchy, he pointed out how religion and tradition had been used to control women's sexuality, enforce child marriage, deny education, and restrict access to public life. He argued that caste itself was maintained through the control of women's reproductive choices, as caste purity depended on the regulation of marriage and childbirth. Thus, Ambedkar's challenge to caste was inherently also a challenge to patriarchal control over reproduction.

Ambedkar's emphasis on education and economic independence for women also had direct implications for reproductive freedom. He believed that only through education could women become aware of their rights and challenge oppressive norms, including those related to childbirth, family planning, and maternal health. He advocated for state responsibility in providing healthcare and welfare support, recognizing the structural barriers that poor and marginalized women faced in accessing basic services.

The Efforts Taken by Ambedkar Towards Women's Rights.

- » Equal participation of women – Ambedkar advocated for equal participation of women in both personal and professional spheres.
- » Unequal treatment of women in factories – He is the first to raise his voice against the unequal treatment of women in factories and other workplaces.
- » He was instrumental in reducing working hours and improving working conditions for women.
- » Equal pay and equal rights – He drafted legislation such as the Mines Maternity Benefit Act, which demanded equal pay and equal rights for coal mine workers.
- » Maternity leave for women – He ensured that the question of maternity leave for women was brought up and they were protected under labour laws.
- » Reproductive rights of women – He was a strong believer of it and urged them to make their own choices about conception.
- » Joginis and devadasis – Since they were typically belonged to Dalit he was against devadasi system.
- » Birth control facilities – In 1938, Ambedkar as a Legislative Assembly member of Bombay, recommended that birth control facilities be made available to women.
- » Hindu Code Bill – It addressed a variety of issues
 - Property Rights – It abolished the idea of birthright to property and unequal ownership of property,
 - Abolition of caste – It supported the abolition of caste in matters of marriage
 - Polygamy & divorce – It addressed taboo topics such as polygamy and divorce
 - Conjugal rights – It led to the restitution of conjugal rights and judiciary rights, which enabled women to consciously make divorce a choice.
- » From the Hindu code of bill the following acts were passed
 - The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 – Right to divorce and maintenance
 - The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 – Legal right to inherit property
 - The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 – Legal right

for women to adopt a child

- The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956 – Granted women the status of natural guardian of her children.
- » These reforms led to the enactment of Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961.
- » Caste system – His paper on Castes in India outlines how atrocities on women are rooted in the caste system and denounced sati, child marriage, and the condemnation of widow remarriage.

Ambedkar realized very earlier that the increased population would be a burden on the growing economy of free India's future development. Therefore, to eradicate poverty, unemployment, and safeguard reproductive health, Ambedkar favored proper birth control policies and measures to be implemented by the government for progressive and stabilized growth and development of the country.

If we talk about India, it has the youngest population in the world with 472 million children still globally India contributes about 21% of the total global burden of child death. The current population of India as per the census of 2011 is 1210.2 million.² This increased population is a burden on the economy and the future development of India. Dr Ambedkar was quick to acknowledge this problem when on behalf of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the speech delivered by Shri P. J. Roham on 10th November, 1938 in Mumbai Provincial Assembly on a non-government resolution was to be considered, it is a fundamental base to understand the thoughts of Dr B. R. Ambedkar on family planning and population control. The resolution was comprised of the limited size of the family and the urgent need for proactive measures among the masses regarding birth control.

Dr Ambedkar was equally sympathetic with the women as with the downtrodden class of Indian society. He not only recognized the freedom of women from the superstitions of religion and higher classes dogmas but also keen for her independence on childbirth. Together with the young lives, Ambedkar was concerned for the health and well-being of the females of society. As he writes, "The present keen struggle of life renders timely marriage impossible for many and thus exposes them to various diseases and habits. Many women become invalid for life and some even lose their lives by the birth of children in their diseased condition or in too great numbers or in too rapid succession."³ Availability of data on maternal mortality and morbidity in colonial India is not sufficient to

assess the loss of lives during childbirth, assessment made by our great leader's open doors to understand the need reformation in healthcare. Ambedkar emphasized that "attempts at abortion, resorted to for the prevention of unwanted progeny, exact a heavy toll of female lives. Birth-control is the only sovereign specific that can do away with all these calamities. Whenever a woman is disinclined to bear a child for any reason whatsoever, she must be in a position to prevent conception and bringing forth progeny which should be entirely dependent on the choice of women. Society would in no way profit by the addition of unwanted progeny. Only those children, who are welcomed by their parents, can be of social benefit and hence every woman must be enabled to resort to prevention of conception quite easily."⁴

Extensive literature contributed towards Dr Ambedkar's as a social reformer and as an economist.⁵By analyzing various aspects of Ambedkar's thoughts on population control and reproductive rights, Dr Rajendra (2014)⁶ studies the opinion of former on birth-control and highlights that Ambedkar emphasis on population-control was to bestow on people the equal standard of living and for that population control is inevitable. Similarly, taking his speech in the assembly, Bhadarge (2017)⁷ shows Ambedkar's insistence on the need for birth-control measures in the country. He studies the propagation of birth-control through his journal Samajswathayay to educated people on the problems of over-population. This work, however, in colonial setting attempts to explore the significance of Ambedkar's ideas of birth-control when the infant and maternal health was higher in India. The paper thus studies Ambedkar as a visionary who understood the complexities of over-population as an obstacle in economic growth of the country and thus suggested birth-control both for colonial and post-colonial India.

Even today also the increased infant mortality is a serious concern to the government. Dr Ambedkar not only emphasized on the reduction of infant mortality rates in India but was also concerned with the percentage of survival of the children, as he suffered the loss of four out of five children which according to him he never regretted. He argued, "due to excessive child-mortality, the rate of growth of the population of countries like India is not equal to that of countries like England though the birth-rates in countries of the former type are higher than those in the latter type. The birth-rate of England is nearly half that of India. Yet we find

that the population in England increased by nearly 23 per cent. Between 1901 and 1931, while the population in India rose by only 17 per cent in the same period. This will show that even for a rapid growth of numbers, the better way is to adopt the practice of birth-control and thus cut down infantile mortality.”⁸

In contrast to people who were condemning western medicine and considered it a threat to indigenous medical practices, Dr Ambedkar welcomed the new development wholeheartedly. He advocated the movement of reformers who raised voices for women’s freedom of contraception as “the experience of several scientists from different places has proved that the higher the birth-rate, the higher is the death-rate also and no sooner the birth goes down, the death-rate also declines. The result is that not only is the survival-rate not adversely affected but very often it even rises. Dr Maria Stopes has found from the experience gained in “The Mothers’ Clinic” that the greater the number of conceptions the higher is the rate of maternal and infantile mortality.”⁹

Poverty and Burden of Population:

Poverty is the cause of overpopulation in our country, unfortunately, today also. The poor people have a notion that the more children you have, the more hands to work and earn. But what they ignore is the fact that those earning hands have the mouth too. It’s because of poverty that the poor parents fail to rear their children properly. As Ambedkar himself born in a low-income family, he understood the lack of facilities whether it is food or education, a child faces because of poverty. But this challenge, he considers was because of the parents who for the purpose of economic strengthening of the family gave birth to more children. Thus he emphasized that eradication of poverty is essentially more than the introduction of measures to control overpopulation. For he opined, “in our country, the same condition prevails in cities like Bombay. A few exceptions apart, it is observed that virtue is palsied where poverty prevails. Further on it will be shown how it is well-high impossible to uproot poverty without the aid of birth-control. 10

Marriage and Birth-Control:

Marriage reform campaigns relied heavily on official maternal and infant mortality rates and medical professionals spoke out publicly in favor of raising the age of consent and against the practice of child

marriage, calling it 'barbarous'.¹¹ Two significant legislations for marriage reform were 'Age of Consent Bill 1891' and the 'Sarda Act of 1929'. These campaigns led to the confluence of medical opinion, official attitude and nationalist agitation with the demand of increasing the age of marriage from 12 to 14 years.

Dr. Ambedkar quoted the conclusions drawn by Mr. P. K. Wattal on the fertility-enquiry based on the 1931 census that "even when late marriages would come into vogue generally, there is no chance of population being appreciably checked thereby.¹² More children would live up to mature ages and hence there is a chance of an increase and not a decrease in the rate of growth of our population."¹³ He emphasized on the birth-control even when the government increased the age of marriage for girls and for people being unable to marry at proper ages.

Ambedkar's View on Birth Control:

He further criticizes the spiritual thoughts of Gandhi in the following words, "Self-control has been proved to be useless for birth-control from the experience of several countries and ages. Even the advocates of continence cannot claim that ordinary persons will be able to eschew sexual intercourse altogether throughout their lives. The laying aside of continence even for a single day every year may lead to an annual conception. Even, if we assume that self-control enables certain persons to bring about birth control, we cannot draw the conclusion that others will be able to follow them. It is necessary to remember that just as appetite for food differs in the case of different persons, so sexual appetite also varies from person to person." In his speech, he emphasized "strict observance of certain rules laid down in Hindu scriptures necessitates the neglect of the ideal of family-limitation. For instance, verse 8, Chapter 54, of "Vishnu Smriti" enjoins sexual intercourse on certain specified days. As a doctor has wisely remarked if men had to bear the pangs which women have to undergo during child-birth none of them would ever consent to bear more than a single child in his life. It is wrong to hold that because the ideal of large families is before society up to this time nobody wishes to limit his family."¹⁴

As a champion of female health and birth control measures, Ambedkar enthusiastically asserted...it is, therefore, established that there is no go without recourse to modern contraceptives. To deny the necessity

of those remedies is to show one's preference for abortions, infanticides, etc.”¹⁵ He was, thus, one of the chief advocates of western medicine in the country paving the way for the freedom of women on contraception and decline in the child mortality rates in the country.

Society and Population:

Dr B. R. Ambedkar further recognized that the common people even illiterate were sensible enough to understand the significance to modern medicine and if proper promotion of latest research executed properly and birth control measures were made available to them by the colonial government they would use them at a greater extent, than expected.

Economy and Population-Control Measures:

India's economy primarily rests on agriculture. Even today agriculture is the mainstay of our economy as about 70% of our population depends on this industry. Thus, it increases the burden on land which forces the people to withdraw and look for other sources else thrown to the mouth of utter poverty. As an economist, our expectations increase on how Dr Ambedkar visualized the role of population control policy in the development of the country further maintaining the economic balance of the state. He considered that the economic independence of women has nothing to do with family planning as women working on fields still have many children. It was believed that independence would change the then situation, but Ambedkar disagreed with them. By comparing the situations in America and other western countries asserted that due to overpopulation countries like Holland, America, Britain failed to feed its population with proper diet. Hence the rate of malnutrition is higher among the children and people of the state and thus failed to prepare for health policy for all. He considered that India could gain economic development and maintain the standard of life of the masses only if there is a comprehensive policy for population control as “with every opportunity afforded for its expansion, population begins to grow rapidly and thus nullifies all the advantages secured through great efforts.”¹⁶

He suggested that the post-colonial government must take into account the rising poverty which not only a cause of over-population but also a means of high rates of malnutrition in the country. As poor could not afford nutritious food, it will increase the prevalence of diseases and

anemia among women, who on the other hand will produce weak bodies. Emphasizing the need and advantages of the implementation of birth control measures, he exemplified the western countries where such measures had brought not only prosperity but also economic advancement.

Ambedkar explained that the main object of the movement for birth-control is to reduce birth- He highlighted that it is necessary to remember that equal distribution would never bring a permanent and material amelioration of the condition of the people unless the growth of population is controlled by means of family-limitation. 17

Conclusion:

Ambedkar asserted that “Birth control movement has afforded such an opportunity to our provincial government and it is hoped that they will not let it slip but will fully utilize it to the benefit of themselves and the people.” Unfortunately, his resolution was defeated, only eleven members voted in favor and fifty-two opposed it.

It is unfortunate that we have still not focused towards the problem of overpopulation highlighted by Dr. Ambedkar. It is a high time when if we underestimate the suggestions and warnings of the great leaders and intellectuals of our country we would face utter disorder, poverty, unemployment and ill-health. Ambedkar advocated birth control measure to be a prominent and sole measure through which a country can beat the consequences of over-population. He propagated the modern scientific investigations of twentieth century in the country for the welfare of women and children which failed to attract attention of leaders and masses. His vision for the new India was the path of continuous and comprehensive economic progress which could be achieved by checking the growth of population through birth-control measures.

To sum-up, Ambedkar’s views on reproductive rights, though expressed in the language of his time, align closely with modern principles of reproductive justice. His insistence on equality, autonomy, and dignity for all, especially for women at the intersection of caste and gender oppression, makes his thought highly relevant to ongoing debates about reproductive freedom in India. As we revisit his legacy, it becomes clear that Ambedkar not only envisioned political freedom but also a deeply personal, social freedom—one that included the right of every woman to control her own body and destiny.

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Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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