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## Revisiting Ambedkar's Democratic Philosophy: Foundational Perspectives on Tribal Development in India

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### ABSTRACT:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's democratic philosophy, rooted in social democracy, constitutional morality, and human dignity, offers critical perspectives for addressing tribal marginalization in India. Despite constitutional protections and affirmative action policies, tribal communities continue to experience systemic exclusion, economic deprivation, and cultural erosion. This paper examines Ambedkar's foundational principles—education as liberation, women's rights, political participation, and dismantling hierarchical structures—to develop a transformative framework for tribal empowerment beyond paternalistic welfare approaches. By integrating Ambedkarite philosophy with participatory development models, policymakers can address structural causes of marginalization while respecting cultural autonomy and self-determination.

### KEYWORDS:

B.R. Ambedkar, democratic philosophy, tribal development, social democracy, constitutional morality, educational empowerment.

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### Introduction:

India's tribal communities, constituting about 8.6 per cent of the country's population, remain among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the nation (Census of India, 2011). Despite constitutional safeguards under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and targeted development programs, tribal populations continue to face disproportionate poverty, educational backwardness, land alienation, and political underrepresentation (Shah et al., 2017). This paradox of persistent tribal marginalization within

the world's largest democracy demands a fundamental rethinking of development paradigms.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of India's Constitution, developed a comprehensive democratic philosophy centered on liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar, 1949). While most commonly associated with Dalit emancipation, his broader vision of social democracy offers critical insights for tribal development (Guru, 2016). This article revisits Ambedkar's democratic philosophy to extract foundational principles applicable to tribal empowerment, arguing that genuine development must transcend economic metrics to encompass political agency, educational advancement, and preservation of dignity.

### **Ambedkar's Democratic Philosophy: Core Tenets**

Ambedkar's conception of democracy extended far beyond electoral politics and representative governance. He understood democracy as a comprehensive social system that ensures equal opportunities, protects individual rights, and dismantles oppressive hierarchies (Ambedkar, 1936). Three core elements characterize his democratic philosophy.

First, Ambedkar emphasized that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy. In his final address to the Constituent Assembly, he warned that India was entering a life of contradictions—political equality coexisting with social and economic inequality (Ambedkar, 1949). This principle directly applies to tribal communities, whose formal political rights often remain hollow absent social and economic empowerment.

Second, education occupied a central place in Ambedkar's emancipatory vision. He famously declared "educate, agitate, organize" as the pathway to liberation (Ambedkar, 1942). Ambedkar viewed education not as mere literacy but as critical consciousness enabling oppressed groups to recognize rights, question injustice, and collectively mobilize for change (Jaffrelot, 2005).

Third, Ambedkar championed constitutional morality—commitment to constitutional principles and processes as democracy's foundation (Ambedkar, 1949). He believed India's traditional social structures, rooted in hierarchy and exclusion, were fundamentally incompatible with democratic values, requiring cultivation of new social attitudes prioritizing equality and rational deliberation.

### **Tribal Communities and Democratic Deficits:**

"Tribal Communities and Democratic Deficits" highlights the disparity between the democratic ideals and constitutional rights promised to Indigenous populations and their reality of marginalization and human rights violations within democratic nation-states, especially in India. India's tribal populations face intersecting forms of marginalization that undermine democratic participation. Land alienation through mining, forest policies, and commercial agriculture threatens tribal livelihoods and cultural identity (Padel & Das, 2010). Educational deprivation perpetuates poverty, with tribal literacy rates lagging national averages and high dropout rates, especially among girls (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2018). The education system often fails to accommodate tribal languages, cultural contexts, and learning needs, effectively alienating tribal children from formal schooling (Deshpande, 2013). Political underrepresentation persists despite reserved seats, as centralized planning ignores tribal knowledge systems and imposes culturally inappropriate solutions (Baviskar, 2005; Jayal, 2013). Economic marginalization compounds these challenges through limited access to credit, markets, and employment (World Bank, 2011).

### **Applying Ambedkarite Principles to Tribal Development**

Ambedkar's democratic philosophy offers foundational insights for reimagining tribal development strategies, shifting focus from paternalistic welfare to transformative empowerment.

### **Ambedkar: A True Educationist of the Tribal Communities**

Traditional Hindu scriptures prohibited Dalits and Adivasis from accessing sacred knowledge or formal education, creating structural barriers entrenching social inequality. Against this backdrop, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged as a transformative force redefining the relationship between marginalized communities and education. He championed constitutional safeguards, advocated inclusive state policies, and established institutions such as Siddharth College and Milind Mahavidyalaya which served as crucial educational hubs for marginalized communities, including tribal students. He was instrumental in ensuring constitutional provisions like reservation in education and jobs for Scheduled Tribes to promote socio-economic advancement.

Education as Liberation: Following Ambedkar's emphasis, tribal

development must prioritize quality, culturally relevant education building critical consciousness. This requires establishing residential schools in tribal areas with adequate facilities, recruiting tribal teachers, developing curricula incorporating tribal languages and knowledge systems, and creating pathways to higher education. Educational initiatives should produce a new generation of tribal intellectuals and leaders capable of articulating community interests and navigating democratic institutions.

### **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Advocate for Tribal Women's Rights**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a visionary advocate for women's rights, emphasizing an intersectional approach acknowledging compounded challenges faced by women from marginalized communities, particularly Scheduled Tribes. He championed legal, constitutional, and social reforms securing equality, dignity, and autonomy for all women, with special attention to those confronting intersecting barriers of caste, class, and gender discrimination. His work laid foundations for tribal women to assert rights and participate fully in social, economic, and political life.

### **Institutionalizing Local Agency: PESA and FRA**

PESA and FRA stand as statutory embodiments of democratic decentralization and resource justice. PESA vests Gram Sabhas with authority over minor forest produce, local dispute resolution, and consent for land transfers in scheduled areas—institutions designed to restore self-governance (PESA Act). FRA attempts to convert customary use and occupation into legally enforceable rights, a step toward economic and social equality (FRA). Together, they operationalise Ambedkar's insistence that democracy must empower communities rather than exclude them from decisions shaping livelihoods.

Constitutional Morality and Rights Consciousness: Cultivating constitutional morality within tribal communities involves rights education and legal literacy programs enabling tribal populations to claim constitutional entitlements. This includes understanding land rights, accessing welfare schemes, challenging discrimination, and seeking legal remedies. Building constitutional morality in broader Indian society requires combating stereotypes through public education and media representations affirming tribal dignity (Sarin, 2014).

Economic Democracy and Asset Creation: Rather than welfare dependency, Ambedkarite principles suggest promoting economic

democracy through asset creation and livelihood security. This includes securing tribal land rights, supporting sustainable livelihoods based on traditional knowledge, facilitating access to credit and markets, and ensuring fair compensation for resources extracted from tribal areas. Cooperatives and collective enterprises can enable tribal communities to participate in economic development while maintaining social cohesion.

**Dismantling Hierarchies:** Ambedkar's critique of social hierarchies applies to patronizing attitudes toward tribal communities portraying them as backward or primitive. Development must respect tribal cultural autonomy while providing opportunities for advancement on terms defined by communities themselves. This balance requires dialogue, humility, and recognition that tribal societies possess valuable knowledge systems and sustainable practices from which mainstream society can learn.

**Conclusion:**

Revisiting Ambedkar's democratic philosophy highlights essential insights for addressing the continued marginalization of India's tribal communities. For Ambedkar, real democracy demands transforming social relations, economic structures, and cultural attitudes—not merely building political institutions. His emphasis on education, political empowerment, constitutional morality, and dismantling hierarchical inequalities offers a strong framework for tribal development beyond welfare approaches."

Applying Ambedkarite principles today requires reforms that promote critical, identity-respecting education; genuine tribal self-governance; strong legal protections; and asset-building economic policies. Above all, it calls for recognizing tribal communities as rights-bearing citizens and active agents of change. In the 21st century, Ambedkar's vision of social democracy remains deeply relevant, providing both analytical insight and moral direction for ensuring dignity, equality, and freedom for India's most marginalized citizens."

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