

Ambedkar's Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights: The Concept of Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity

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ABSTRACT:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophical approach to human rights is grounded in the interrelated principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity, which he regarded as essential pillars of a just and democratic society. Drawing inspiration from Enlightenment thought, constitutionalism, and Buddhist ethics, Ambedkar redefined these concepts within the Indian socio-cultural context marked by caste-based discrimination and social hierarchy. He viewed equality as the eradication of all forms of social and economic oppression; liberty as the freedom of thought, expression, and choice necessary for individual self-realization; and fraternity as the moral and emotional bond that ensures social harmony and collective responsibility. Ambedkar emphasized that the sustainability of democracy depends on the balanced coexistence of these values, as none can function effectively in isolation. His vision forms a comprehensive philosophical foundation for modern human rights discourse and continues to offer a transformative framework for addressing contemporary issues of inequality, injustice, and exclusion. This abstract highlights Ambedkar's enduring relevance as a global thinker whose ideas contribute significantly to the on-going pursuit of human dignity and social justice.

KEYWORDS:

Equality, Liberty, Fraternity, Human Rights, Philosophy.

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Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar stands as one of the most influential thinkers in modern India whose vision of human rights transcends time, geography, and social boundaries. Confronting centuries of caste-based discrimination, structural inequality, and social exclusion, Ambedkar developed a comprehensive philosophy rooted in the universal ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity. For him, these three principles were not merely political slogans but the ethical and moral foundation of a humane and democratic society. He believed that true freedom could not be achieved

simply through political independence; it required the dismantling of social hierarchies, the affirmation of human dignity, and the creation of a society where individuals could live with self-respect.

Human rights constitute a set of principles governing the treating the individuals and groups by states and non-state actors on the basis of moral principles regarding what society considers fundamental to a honest life. These norms are blended into national and international legal systems, which define mechanisms and procedures to hold the duty-bearers responsible and provide redress for presumed victims of human (Stephen P Marks 2005). Dated back the history of human rights is as old as the civilization itself and it has been developed from over thousands of years and draws its sources from various religious cultural legal and philosophical developments. These human rights have been documents in every stage of history in different forms which contains religious as well as philosophical documents

Ambedkar's understanding of human rights was shaped by multiple intellectual influences, including Enlightenment thought, Western liberalism, Buddhism, and his own lived experiences of social oppression. He argued that equality must extend beyond legal rights to include social and economic justice; liberty must guarantee freedom of thought, expression, and personal autonomy; and fraternity must cultivate a sense of collective belonging, compassion, and mutual respect among citizens. Importantly, Ambedkar emphasized that these three principles are interdependent—none can sustain itself without the support of the others.

In the context of contemporary human rights debates, Ambedkar's philosophical framework remains deeply relevant. His insistence on social democracy, constitutional morality, and ethical human relationships provides a powerful lens for understanding and addressing persistent issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, economic marginalization, and threats to democratic values. Thus, exploring Ambedkar's conception of equality, liberty, and fraternity offers profound insights into both the theoretical foundations and practical applications of human rights in today's world.

Equality: Ending Social Hierarchy and Affirming Human Dignity

For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, equality was the most fundamental pillar of human rights and the essential condition for a truly democratic society.

He firmly believed that no nation can claim to be free when deep social and economic inequalities continue to shape people's lives. Ambedkar argued that the caste system, with its rigid hierarchy and practice of untouchability, represents the greatest violation of human dignity and must be completely abolished to establish real equality. He emphasized that equality must go beyond legal declarations and ensure equality of status and opportunity, replacing all inherited social privileges. For him, political democracy—symbolized by voting rights—remains incomplete without social and economic democracy, which guarantees access to education, fair representation in political institutions, protection against discrimination, and the redistribution of opportunities. Ambedkar maintained that every human being possesses inherent dignity, and oppressive structures like caste undermine this moral foundation. Thus, the realization of equality is not merely a social ideal but a necessary precondition for the full enjoyment of human rights.

Why Equality Matters for Human Rights?

Equality is central to the very idea of human rights because it affirms that all individuals possess the same inherent dignity and worth. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar argued that without equality, the concept of human rights becomes hollow, as social structures that privilege some groups over others inevitably violate the dignity of those who are marginalized. In the Indian context, he identified the caste system as the most oppressive structure that destroys the moral basis of equality by assigning people unequal status at birth. Such hierarchies deny individuals the opportunity to realize their full potential and restrict their access to basic freedoms and resources. Ambedkar believed that genuine human rights could flourish only when all forms of social discrimination are dismantled and every individual receives equal respect, treatment, and opportunity. Thus, achieving equality is not simply a social reform but a fundamental precondition for building a just, democratic society where human rights are protected and experienced by all.

Liberty: Ensuring Freedom of Thought, Expression, and Action

For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, liberty was essential for human development and social progress. He believed that true liberty must include freedom of thought, conscience, religion, speech, and personal choice, allowing every individual to shape their own life. Ambedkar

criticized the caste system for destroying liberty by restricting a person's social interactions, profession, and marriage. He also emphasized that liberty cannot stand alone; without equality, it becomes a tool for the powerful to dominate the weak. To protect real freedom, Ambedkar stressed the need for strong constitutional rights and a society where people can live without fear, pursue education, choose their occupation, and enjoy dignity.

Liberty as Human Empowerment

For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, liberty was not simply a constitutional guarantee but a powerful instrument of human empowerment. He believed that individuals can realize their full potential only when they are free to think, speak, question, and make choices without fear or external control. Liberty, in this sense, enables people to break away from oppressive traditions and assert their dignity and individuality. Ambedkar argued that the absence of liberty—especially under rigid systems like caste—cripples human growth by denying people the freedom to choose their profession, pursue education, or form social relationships. Thus, liberty becomes the foundation on which self-confidence, self-respect, and social participation are built. By empowering individuals to act independently and responsibly, liberty fosters a society in which every person has the opportunity to shape their own destiny and contribute to collective progress.

Fraternity: The Ethical Glue of a Democratic Society

For Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, fraternity—or the spirit of brotherhood—was the most vital yet often neglected element of a just and democratic society. He believed that fraternity creates a sense of common belonging and shared humanity among people, binding society together beyond differences of caste, class, or religion. Ambedkar argued that without fraternity, the principles of equality and liberty cannot survive, because legal rights alone cannot sustain social unity or moral responsibility. The caste system, in his view, destroys fraternity by fostering divisions, promoting inequalities, and preventing people from seeing one another as equals. In contrast, fraternity nurtures social harmony, compassion, mutual respect, and ethical cooperation, enabling individuals to live together peacefully and work collectively for the common good. For Ambedkar, fraternity was not just a social value but the ethical force necessary to realize true democracy.

The Concept of Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity

Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity form the core ethical triad of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy of social justice and human rights. He believed that equality ensures the removal of all forms of discrimination and affirms the inherent dignity of every individual. Liberty, for Ambedkar, guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and action, allowing individuals to develop their full potential without fear or oppression. Fraternity creates a sense of shared humanity, compassion, and social solidarity, ensuring that liberty and equality are sustained in everyday life. Ambedkar emphasized that these three principles are deeply interdependent: liberty without equality leads to domination, equality without liberty becomes mechanical, and without fraternity, both lose meaning. Together, they provide the moral and social foundation for a just, democratic, and humane society.

Buddhist Influence on Ambedkar

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's intellectual and moral vision was profoundly shaped by the principles of Buddhism, which he regarded as a philosophy of social equality, rationality, and human dignity. From his early studies to his later political and social reflections, Ambedkar found in Buddhism a moral framework capable of challenging caste oppression and promoting social justice. He believed that the teachings of the Buddha—centred on compassion, non-violence, morality, and the rejection of social hierarchy—offered a practical and ethical foundation for building an inclusive society. Buddhism's emphasis on inner freedom, equality of all beings, and the cultivation of fraternity resonated deeply with Ambedkar's quest to create a society free from discrimination and exploitation. Ultimately, this influence culminated in his conversion to Buddhism in 1956, which he described as not just a religious act, but a transformative social and political statement. Through Buddhism, Ambedkar sought to restore human dignity to the oppressed and provide a philosophy rooted in reason, justice, and equality.

Findings of the study:

The triad is conceptually interdependent and normative: Contemporary scholars emphasize that Ambedkar treated equality, liberty, and fraternity not as separable slogans but as an interwoven moral framework: each principle sustains the others and together they form the ethical core of his human-rights thought. This interdependence is central

to his constitutionalism and social theory.

Equality for Ambedkar is social and economic as well as legal: Research repeatedly shows Ambedkar expanded the meaning of equality beyond formal legal equality — insisting on equality of status and opportunity, removal of untouchability, affirmative measures (reservations), and social/economic democracy as prerequisites for true human rights. Empirical and legal analyses trace these ideas into constitutional provisions and policy debates in India.

Liberty is both political and psychosocial — a route to empowerment: Recent studies highlight Ambedkar's emphasis that liberty includes freedom of thought, conscience, religion, speech and the psychological capacity to act (free from fear and social coercion). Scholarship links this notion to his critique of caste which, by restricting occupation, marriage and social life, systemically robs people of effective freedom.

Fraternity is the ethical glue required for democratic legitimacy: Academics stress that Ambedkar saw fraternity (social solidarity, mutual respect, compassion) as the moral force that makes equality and liberty workable — without social fraternity legal rights can be hollow. Studies argue that this ethical dimension distinguishes his approach from purely rights-formalism.

Navayana Buddhism provided a normative and political resource: Scholarship on Ambedkar's later years shows his reinterpretation of Buddhism (Navayana) served as a philosophical and mobilizing tool: it provided a non-caste ethical framework, psychological emancipation for converts, and a public, politicized identity for Dalit assertion. The mass conversions of 1956 and the continuing Dalit Buddhist movement are widely studied as an empirical consequence of this strategy.

Institutional translation: constitutional design and policy: Research documents how Ambedkar translated his philosophy into concrete constitutional architecture — fundamental rights, directive principles, anti-discrimination clauses, and reservation policies — and scholars evaluate both the successes (legal protections, political representation) and persistent gaps (implementation, social attitudes).

Measured impacts and ongoing challenges: Empirical literature finds measurable gains in political representation, access to education, and legal tools for redress for marginalized groups; yet many studies also point

to continuing caste-based exclusion, socio-economic inequality, and the limits of legal change without deeper social transformation — reinforcing Ambedkar's argument that equality must be substantive, not merely formal.

Contemporary relevance and critical engagements: Recent scholarship uses Ambedkar to critique neoliberal policies, gendered inequalities, and majoritarian politics — while some critics say his focus on constitutional remedies underestimates grassroots cultural resistance or that Navayana's reception has been uneven. Overall, academics treat Ambedkar as both a normative theorist and a practical reformer whose ideas remain pivotal for global human-rights debates.

Conclusion

The study of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophical foundations of human rights—centered on the interdependent principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity—reveals a transformative vision for building a just and humane society. Ambedkar did not treat these ideals as abstract political concepts; instead, he integrated them into a powerful framework for dismantling social hierarchies, empowering individuals, and strengthening democratic life. His insistence on equality sought to eliminate caste-based discrimination and ensure dignity for all. His understanding of liberty demanded not only political freedoms but also the social and psychological conditions necessary for individuals to realize their full potential. Above all, his emphasis on fraternity highlighted the ethical and emotional bonds required to sustain democracy, social harmony, and collective wellbeing.

Ambedkar's human-rights philosophy continues to hold immense contemporary relevance as societies worldwide struggle with inequality, exclusion, and threats to democratic values. His vision reminds us that legal rights alone are insufficient unless supported by moral commitment, social solidarity, and active efforts to remove systemic injustice. Therefore, his triad of equality, liberty, and fraternity remains an enduring guide for policymakers, scholars, and citizens seeking to create an inclusive, democratic, and compassionate world. In essence, Ambedkar's thought affirms that true human rights can be realized only when these three principles coexist and reinforce one another in both law and everyday life.

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