

**BETWEEN RIGHTS AND REALITIES:
INSECURITY, STIGMA AND MARGINALIZATION AMONG
IRANI WOMEN IN THE LIGHT OF AMBEDKAR'S VISION**

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment in India is often articulated through constitutional guarantees of equality and justice; however, its lived realization remains uneven across marginalized communities. This paper examines the experiences of Irani Muslim women, a micro-minority group largely absent from mainstream academic discourse. Drawing upon Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's framework of dignity, equality, and constitutional morality, the study explores how insecurity, stigma, and social exclusion shape their everyday lives. Using a qualitative and interpretive approach based on secondary sources and some observational insights, the paper engages with theories of social exclusion (Thorat and Kumar 2008), stigma (Goffman 1963), and capability deprivation (Sen 1999). It also situates the Irani community within broader histories of migration, cultural hybridity, and marginality (Haneda 1997; Hodgson 1974). The paper argues that Irani women occupy a position of "internal outsiders" (Mamdani 2020), where legal inclusion coexists with social exclusion. It concludes that empowerment cannot be reduced to formal rights and calls for an Ambedkarite rethinking of inclusion grounded in lived dignity.

KEYWORDS: *Irani Women, Social Exclusion, Ambedkar, Insecurity, Stigma, Marginalization, Micro-Minority.*

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Introduction

Across the world, women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in debates on development, democracy, and social justice. International frameworks emphasize equality, autonomy, and freedom from violence as essential indicators of progress. However, when these ideals are situated within specific social contexts, particularly in societies marked by deep structural hierarchies, their realization becomes uneven and complex. In India, the question of women's empowerment cannot be understood in isolation from caste, class, religion, and community identity. While constitutional provisions guarantee equality and dignity, the lived experiences of many women reveal persistent gaps between formal rights and everyday realities. These gaps become more pronounced in the case of marginalized and lesser-studied communities. Among such groups, the Irani Muslim community represents a significant yet underexplored case. Despite long-standing settlement within India, Irani women continue to experience insecurity, stigma, and limited social recognition. They are visible in public spaces, yet remain excluded from meaningful participation and acceptance. This paradox-of presence without belonging-raises important questions about the nature of empowerment itself. This paper argues that the condition of Irani women reflects a deeper contradiction between constitutional ideals and lived realities. By situating their experiences within Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's framework of social justice, dignity, and constitutional morality, the study highlights the limits of empowerment when it remains confined to legal provisions rather than social transformation.

A Note on the Irani Community: History, Identity, and Settlement

The Irani community in India refers to a small group of migrants who arrived primarily during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from regions of present-day Iran. Unlike the Parsis, who migrated earlier, the Iranis represent later waves of movement linked to trade networks, socio-economic mobility, and, in some cases, religious and political pressures in Iran (Haneda 1997). Over time, they established themselves in various parts of India, particularly in urban centers such as Mumbai, Hyderabad, and parts of Karnataka, where they became associated with small-scale businesses, cafés,

and itinerant occupations. Culturally, the Irani community reflects a hybrid identity shaped by Persian and Indian influences. Language, food practices, and occupational patterns often carry traces of Persian heritage while adapting to local contexts (Hodgson 1974). Despite this long-standing presence, the community remains numerically small and socially underrepresented, often positioned at the margins of both mainstream society and minority discourses.

In Karnataka, they have distinct and famous settlements particularly in regions such as Alipur, Chikkaballapur: (Alipur is famously nicknamed “Mini Iran”) located about 70km from Bengaluru in the Gauribidanur taluk. It is home to a population of approximately 25,000, of which roughly 23,000 are Shia Muslims with deep spiritual and historical ties to Iran. Haveri (Airani Village): There is also a historical connection to Airani village in the Ranebennur taluk of Haveri district, though this is often associated with the name itself rather than modern migrant settlement patterns. Dharwad: The “Irani Colony” in Dharwad serves as a central hub for the community, where families are often engaged in informal livelihoods or itinerant trades. Also in nearby districts, small clusters of Irani-origin families can be observed, often engaged in informal livelihoods and semi-nomadic or settlement-based occupations. Their presence, though visible in everyday life, remains largely undocumented in formal academic and policy discourse.

Locating Irani Women: Gender Within a Micro-Minority Context

Irani women occupy a complex position shaped by the intersection of gender, minority identity, and community invisibility. As members of a micro-minority, they experience forms of marginalization that differ from broader categories of “Muslim women.” Their lives are shaped not only by patriarchal norms within the community but also by external social exclusion and cultural misrecognition. Unlike dominant minority groups, Irani women often lack access to institutional support systems, educational opportunities, and community networks. Their participation in economic activities-often within family-based or informal sectors-does not necessarily translate into autonomy or recognition. This reflects what may be described as a condition of

layered marginality, where gendered disadvantage is intensified by community invisibility.

Local Realities: Some Observations from Dharwad

A closer look at Irani women in Dharwad reveals how structural marginalization is experienced in everyday life. Informal observations and interactions indicate that many Irani women face persistent insecurity in public spaces and even among police. Their mobility is often shaped by fear of harassment, moral policing, and social judgment, which restricts their participation in education, employment, and other activities. There are also accounts suggesting that interactions with specifically local authorities, including policing systems, are not always supportive. Women from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds, including Irani women, often report experiences of intimidation, harassment, or a lack of institutional protection. Such patterns are not unique to this community but reflect broader structural issues affecting marginalized women in India (Hasan 2009).

Additionally, Irani women frequently experience exclusion not only from mainstream society but also from within broader Muslim communities. Due to cultural differences and their relatively small population, they are often not fully integrated into local minority networks, religious functions, or collective activities. This positions them as a “minority within a minority,” intensifying their social isolation and limiting access to community-based support systems. These conditions reinforce what Thorat and Kumar describe as relational exclusion, where marginalization operates through everyday interactions that deny recognition and dignity (Thorat and Kumar 2008). Therefore, the experiences of Irani women in Dharwad demonstrate that marginalization is not only structural but also deeply localized. Their insecurity, exclusion, and limited belonging reflect the failure of social institutions to ensure dignity and protection. When viewed through Ambedkar’s framework, this condition highlights the absence of social democracy in everyday life, where formal rights exist but remain inaccessible in practice (Ambedkar 1936).

What Existing Studies Overlook: Extending Ambedkarite Thought Beyond Caste

Despite extensive scholarship on women's empowerment in India, micro-minority communities such as the Irani Muslims remain largely absent from academic discourse. Existing studies tend to homogenize Muslim women, overlooking the specificities of smaller, less visible groups. As a result, the intersection of gender, minority identity, and community invisibility remains insufficiently theorized. Moreover, while Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's framework of social justice offers a powerful lens to understand structural inequality, its application has largely remained confined to caste contexts, with limited engagement in the analysis of Muslim minority women. This paper addresses these gaps by offering a community-specific and intersectional analysis of Irani women, thereby extending Ambedkarite thought into underexplored domains of marginality.

The Paradox of Irani Women's Lives: Between Visibility and Insecurity

For many Irani women, insecurity is not an isolated experience but a continuous condition shaping everyday life. Their movement in public spaces is often cautious, shaped by fear of harassment, judgment, and misrecognition. This insecurity influences decisions related to education, employment, and mobility. Such experiences are not merely personal but structural. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, vulnerability emerges at the intersection of multiple identities (Crenshaw 1989). For Irani women, gender intersects with minority status and community invisibility, producing a layered sense of insecurity. Importantly, this insecurity is also internalized. It manifests in self-regulation-limiting movement, adjusting behaviour, and negotiating visibility. In this sense, insecurity operates not only as an external threat but as a social condition shaping everyday agency.

Stigma, Occupation, and Social Distance

The marginalization of Irani women is deeply tied to stigma. Their occupations, often located within informal sectors, become markers through which social judgments are imposed. These judgments are not neutral; they carry moral undertones that define them as "different" or "undesirable." Goffman's concept of stigma

helps explain this process. Stigma transforms individuals into bearers of “spoiled identities,” reducing them from full persons to socially discredited categories (Goffman 1963). For Irani women, such labeling affects not only how they are seen but also how they see themselves. This stigma contributes to social exclusion by limiting access to networks, opportunities, and recognition. As Thorat and Kumar (2008) argue, exclusion operates relationally-it is produced through everyday interactions that deny dignity.

Belonging Without Acceptance

Despite long-term settlement in India, the Irani community continues to be perceived as culturally distinct. This creates a condition of ambiguous belonging. Mamdani’s idea of “neither settler nor native” captures this position effectively (Mamdani 2020). Irani women, in particular, embody this contradiction. They are geographically inside the nation but socially outside its moral community. This results in what may be called internal othering, where exclusion is not enforced by law but sustained through everyday practices of distancing and judgment. This condition also reflects the politics of belonging, where inclusion depends not on citizenship but on conformity to dominant norms. As a result, Irani women remain socially peripheral despite formal inclusion.

Livelihood and the Question of Choice

A critical dimension of Irani women’s lives lies in their occupational patterns. While these are often interpreted as choices, a closer analysis reveals them as outcomes of structural constraint. Limited access to education, restricted mobility, and intergenerational continuity of occupations significantly narrow available opportunities. Amartya Sen’s concept of capability deprivation provides a useful lens here. According to Sen, deprivation is not merely a lack of income but a restriction of freedoms-the ability to choose the life one values (Sen 1999). In the case of Irani women, this deprivation is both material and psychological. Thus, livelihood becomes less a matter of choice and more a strategy of survival. This challenges dominant narratives that equate participation with empowerment.

Ambedkar, the Question of Dignity and Toward an Ambedkarite Reinterpretation

Ambedkar's contribution to women's empowerment was rooted in the idea of dignity. His advocacy for legal reforms, including the Hindu Code Bill, sought to transform women's position within both family and society. However, Ambedkar also warned that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy (Ambedkar 1936). His concept of constitutional morality emphasized that rights must be practiced in everyday life (Ambedkar 1947). The experiences of Irani women reveal a failure of this moral framework. While rights exist in law, they remain absent in lived experience. This gap highlights the limits of empowerment when it is understood only in legal terms. This paper extends Ambedkar's framework by demonstrating that dignity must be understood not only in legal terms but as an everyday lived condition shaped by social recognition and security.

Conclusion

The condition of Irani women demonstrates that marginalization is not incidental but structurally produced and socially sustained. Their experiences of insecurity, stigma, and exclusion reveal a profound gap between constitutional ideals and everyday realities. This paper argues that empowerment must be understood not only as a matter of rights but as a lived experience of dignity, recognition, and belonging. An Ambedkarite approach requires moving beyond formal equality toward substantive social transformation. Ultimately, the question is not whether Irani women are included in the nation, but whether they are recognized as equal participants within it.

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