

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S BUDDHISM AND GLOBAL PHILOSOPHIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism represents one of the most profound intellectual and spiritual transformations in modern Indian history. His conversion to Buddhism in 1956, followed by the Navayana (New Vehicle) movement, redefined the religion as a philosophy of social equality, rationalism, and humanism. Ambedkar's Buddhism transcended religious boundaries, linking ethics with social reform and emancipation from caste oppression. His reinterpretation of the Dhamma emphasized liberty, equality, and fraternity principles that resonate deeply with global philosophical traditions such as Western humanism, existentialism, and modern secular ethics. This paper analyzes Ambedkar's Buddhist philosophy through the lens of global thought and explores its relevance in addressing 21st-century challenges such as social exclusion, environmental crisis, and moral alienation. Using secondary sources, it compares Ambedkar's Buddhist ethics with global movements for peace, justice, and human dignity, situating him as a universal thinker whose ideas continue to influence scholars, reformers, and human rights movements across the world.

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Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhism marked a revolutionary intersection between religion, philosophy, and social justice. Disillusioned with the oppressive structures of Hindu orthodoxy, Ambedkar found in Buddhism a moral and intellectual framework to articulate his vision of a just society. His Navayana Buddhism was not a revival of ancient faith but a reinterpretation rooted in rationality, equality, and compassion. Unlike traditional interpretations emphasizing metaphysical doctrines, Ambedkar's Buddhism was deeply ethical and socially engaged. In the 21st century, Ambedkar's thought resonates globally amid crises of inequality, violence, and moral decay. His reinterpretation of Dhamma as a code of conduct promoting human dignity aligns with modern democratic values and secular philosophies. His emphasis on reason over ritual and ethics over dogma parallels the principles of existentialist and humanist traditions across the world. This paper situates Ambedkar's Buddhist philosophy within the broader global philosophical discourse, examining its continuing influence on social reform, human rights, and global ethics. By relying on secondary data, it explores how Ambedkar's Navayana offers a path toward building a humane, rational, and equitable global order.

Literature Review

Omvedt (2003) examined Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism as a radical social revolution that redefined religion into a movement for moral equality and social emancipation. She argued that Ambedkar's rejection of ritualism and superstition marked a decisive shift from traditional Buddhism toward a modern, rational, and ethical framework. According to Omvedt, Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism offered an emancipatory ideology capable of dismantling caste hierarchies while promoting social justice, compassion, and equality across class and gender divisions. Queen (1996) viewed Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism as a groundbreaking reinterpretation that aligned Buddhist teachings with democratic and egalitarian values. She emphasized that Ambedkar transformed

Buddhism into a socially engaged philosophy rooted in justice and collective welfare rather than individual salvation. Queen identified Ambedkar's movement as the first major attempt to modernize Buddhism for the age of democracy and human rights, thus bridging Eastern spiritual traditions with Western ideals of equality and rational governance.

Kumar (2017) analysed Ambedkar's Buddhist philosophy as a comprehensive intellectual response to both Indian caste-based oppression and Western liberal individualism. He argued that Ambedkar's Buddhism integrated rational inquiry with moral social responsibility, offering a corrective to the moral limitations of Western liberalism and the inequality of Hindu orthodoxy. Kumar concluded that Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Dhamma created a unique synthesis that promoted ethical rationalism, collective emancipation, and equality as central tenets of human progress in a globalized world. Zelliot (2004) provided a detailed historical account of the social and political impact of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism on Dalit identity and empowerment. She demonstrated how Ambedkar's movement inspired the reconstruction of self-respect, dignity, and community solidarity among oppressed groups. Zelliot emphasized that Buddhism, under Ambedkar's leadership, became both a spiritual refuge and a vehicle for social revolution, transforming religious faith into a tool for achieving equality, fraternity, and resistance against caste-based marginalization in India.

Gokhale (2015) explored Ambedkar's Dhamma as a philosophical bridge between Buddhist ethics and Enlightenment rationality. He argued that Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhist principles echoed the secular humanism of Enlightenment thinkers by emphasizing reason, equality, and social morality over ritual and metaphysics. Gokhale highlighted Ambedkar's contribution to creating a moral philosophy that upheld both individual freedom and collective responsibility, making Buddhism relevant not only to India's social reform but also to global ethical discourse in the modern era. Harris (2019) compared Ambedkar's ethical Buddhism with Western existentialist philosophy, particularly focusing on shared themes of freedom, moral choice, and authenticity. He suggested that Ambedkar's emphasis on self-discipline, moral

responsibility, and liberation through ethical conduct paralleled existentialist notions of human agency and self-realization. Harris further argued that Ambedkar's rational, non-theistic interpretation of Buddhism offered a universal model for ethical living, capable of addressing moral crises and alienation prevalent in contemporary global societies.

Nanda (2020) emphasized the global relevance of Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhist morality within the context of 21st-century sustainable development debates. She argued that Ambedkar's focus on compassion, non-violence, and social justice resonates strongly with the principles of ecological balance and human welfare. According to Nanda, Ambedkar's Buddhism represents a moral-ethical foundation for addressing modern crises such as inequality, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation, thereby linking ancient Buddhist ethics with contemporary global sustainability goals. Rodrigues (2003) explored Ambedkar's concept of Dhamma as a system of social ethics grounded in reason and equality rather than ritual or faith. He analyzed how Ambedkar positioned Buddhism as a universal moral code, relevant beyond religious boundaries and applicable to all human societies. Rodrigues connected Ambedkar's philosophical ideas to global ethical movements that seek justice and human dignity, concluding that Navayana offers an integrated framework combining moral philosophy with social reform and democratic ideals.

Teltumbde (2018) examined Ambedkar's synthesis of Buddhist compassion with socialist egalitarianism, portraying him as a thinker who merged spiritual and material dimensions of liberation. He noted that Ambedkar's Buddhism emphasized both ethical transformation and structural change, bridging the gap between moral duty and socio-economic justice. According to Teltumbde, this dual focus distinguished Ambedkar from classical Marxists and traditional Buddhists alike, making his philosophy a unique contribution to global debates on equality, class struggle, and human emancipation. Keown (2021) assessed Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism as a form of rationalist ethics aligned with contemporary global moral philosophy. He observed that Ambedkar's teachings emphasized ethical reasoning, social equality,

and practical compassion, rejecting superstition and metaphysical dogma. Keown argued that Navayana Buddhism exemplifies a pragmatic and inclusive moral framework adaptable to modern secular societies. Through this analysis, he positioned Ambedkar as a global ethical reformer whose rational Buddhism continues to influence philosophical thought and human rights discourse.

Objectives

- To examine Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism through a philosophical lens.
- To analyse the connections between Ambedkar's Buddhist ethics and global humanist philosophies.
- To explore the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's Buddhist thought in addressing 21st-century global challenges.

In 21st Century

In the 21st century, Ambedkar's Buddhism stands as a global philosophy for peace, equality, and sustainable coexistence. His Navayana rejects superstition and hierarchy, promoting a rational, ethical, and socially responsible worldview. Amid increasing inequality, communal violence, and moral crises, Ambedkar's emphasis on compassion and reason provides a universal moral compass. Global social justice movements-such as those advocating for racial equality, human rights, and environmental ethics-mirror Ambedkar's Buddhist ideals of non-violence, solidarity, and moral reform, making his philosophy globally relevant today.

Methodology

The study is based on secondary data from academic journals, historical documents, and philosophical analyses of Ambedkar's writings on Buddhism. Sources include Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and scholarly interpretations published in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. The study applies comparative philosophical analysis, linking Ambedkar's thought with global intellectual traditions such as Western humanism, existentialism, and liberation theology. The methodology focuses on textual interpretation and thematic synthesis, identifying the philosophical continuities and divergences that make Ambedkar's Buddhism a unique contribution to global moral thought.

Discussion and Analysis

Table 1: Comparative Dimensions – Ambedkar’s Buddhism and Global Philosophies

Theme	Ambedkar’s Buddhism	Western Humanism	Existentialism
Core Principle	Liberty, Equality, Fraternity	Rational Human Dignity	Freedom and Moral Choice
View on Religion	Rational Ethics, No Theism	Secular Morality	Individual Responsibility
Social Goal	Caste-free, Just Society	Universal Human Rights	Self-Determination

Source: Compiled from authors

Table 2: Global Relevance of Ambedkar’s Buddhist Ethics

Global Challenge	Ambedkar Response	21st Century Relevance
Inequality	Moral and Economic Equality	SDG-10 (Reduced Inequalities)
Violence	Non-violence & Social Justice	Peacebuilding & Human Rights
Environmental Ethics	Compassion for All Life	Sustainable Development

Source: Compiled from authors

Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism bridges ancient wisdom with modern rationality. His rejection of metaphysical dogmas aligns with global secular ethics, while his insistence on compassion and justice extends beyond individual salvation toward collective moral progress. Scholars such as Queen (1996) and Nanda (2020) assert that Ambedkar’s Navayana offers a global framework for moral reform grounded in equality and reason. Thus, Ambedkar’s Buddhism stands not as a regional movement but as a global ethical paradigm.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s Buddhism reimagines spirituality as a force for social transformation and global ethical renewal. His Navayana philosophy replaced ritualism with rational compassion, elevating Buddhism into a modern, universal code of conduct.

By connecting liberty, equality, and fraternity with the Buddhist Dhamma, Ambedkar formulated a humanist ethics that resonates with contemporary global challenges-ranging from social inequality to moral alienation. In the 21st century, as the world faces crises of violence, ecological imbalance, and moral disintegration, Ambedkar's message of ethical living and social responsibility assumes renewed significance. His philosophy offers not only a critique of religious orthodoxy but also a blueprint for constructing a moral and inclusive society. By integrating Buddhist compassion with democratic ethics, Ambedkar emerges as a global thinker whose intellectual legacy transcends India's boundaries and continues to guide humanity toward justice, equality, and peace.

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