

**CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE THOUGHTS OF
BASAVESHWARA AND AMBEDKAR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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ABSTRACT:

The research article is intended to study civil society and democracy reflected in the thoughts of Basaveshwara and Ambedkar. Although both thinkers and philosophers lived in different eras, their thoughts on caste hegemony and principles of equality, liberty and fraternity match. Basaveshwara focused on equality, community solidarity and moral values while Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized on constitutional morality, democracy and legal safeguards as the basis of democratic governance. The present article is aimed to analyze their thoughts and its contemporary relevance to democratic governance and civil society. In this research qualitative and interpretative research methodology has been applied in order to bring out ideological similarities. Basaveshwara’s vachanas and Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste have been selected for the examination of civil society and democracy reflected in their thoughts.

The comparative studies of both the selected works reveal that although there is an ideological similarity in rejecting social hierarchy and promotion of equality and humanity, difference is found in their mechanism of reformation; Basaveshwara believed in spiritual reformation and Ambedkar’s ways of reformation go through institutional and legal frameworks. In this article, an attempt has been made to study both Basaveshwara’s and Ambedkar’s thoughts comparatively and find out how both the thinkers contribute in strengthening civil society and democracy in Indian society.

KEYWORDS:

Civil Society, Democracy, Equality, Humanity, Social Reform.



Introduction

Civil society and democracy are often seen as interconnected pillars that promote social justice and inclusive governance. Civil society functions as a space where individuals come together through collective action, associations, and voluntary efforts, while democracy provides the political framework that upholds popular sovereignty, equality, and rights (Held, 2006). When these two dimensions interact, they strengthen participation, accountability, and empowerment in governance.

In the Indian context, the roots of these ideas can be traced to reformist thinkers across different periods. Basaveshwara, in the 12th century, through the Sharana movement, questioned the dominance of caste and promoted an egalitarian vision of society. Many centuries later, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), as a jurist and chief architect of the Indian Constitution, laid down the principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity within a modern constitutional framework. Despite their different historical backgrounds, both thinkers contributed significantly to shaping ideas of civil society and democracy. This article examines their perspectives and highlights their continuing relevance to contemporary democratic practices.

Meaning of Civil Society

Civil society refers to the arena of voluntary associations and collective action outside the state, family, and market. Tocqueville (1835/2003) observed how civic associations nurtured democratic habits in America, while Gramsci (1971) described civil society as a sphere of ideological contestation where hegemony is produced and challenged. It provides citizens with avenues to articulate grievances, participate in governance, and monitor state power.

Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is a political system based on popular sovereignty and political equality, ensuring citizens' participation in decision-making. Lincoln's (1863/1953) characterization—"government of the people, by the people, for the people"—remains central. Modern theorists emphasize inclusivity, accountability, and substantive participation (Dahl, 1989). Civil society plays an indispensable role in making democracy participatory and responsive.

Basaveshwara's Vision of Civil Society and Democracy

Civil Society Basaveshwara (1134–1196), a prominent social and spiritual reformer of Karnataka, imagined a society very different from the rigid caste-based order of his time. Through the Sharana movement, he sought to dismantle social hierarchies and build a community based on equality, moral responsibility, and mutual respect. His concept of civil society was not confined to religion but extended to social, economic, and ethical dimensions of life.

At the heart of his philosophy was the idea of equality. He opposed discrimination rooted in caste, gender, or occupation, and emphasized the inherent dignity of every individual. This principle offered an alternative to the dominant social order, where one's birth determined status and opportunities.

Two of his important contributions were Kayaka (work as worship) and Dasoha (sharing). Through Kayaka, he gave dignity to all forms of labor, rejecting the belief that certain jobs were inferior. Honest work, in his view, was not only an economic necessity but also a spiritual practice. Dasoha complemented this idea by encouraging the redistribution of wealth and resources for the collective good. Together, these principles created an ethical framework for social and economic life, promoting justice, responsibility, and compassion.

The establishment of the Anubhava Mantapa, an open forum where people from all backgrounds could participate in discussion, was a practical expression of these values. It encouraged dialogue, reasoning, and collective reflection, and can be seen as one of the earliest forms of participatory civil society in India.

Democracy

Basaveshwara, though a medieval thinker, introduced practices that contained striking democratic values. His creation of the Anubhava Mantapa is often viewed as an early experiment in collective decision-making. Unlike the rigid and hierarchical institutions of his time, this forum provided equal space for individuals from different castes, genders, and occupations to voice their opinions. Decisions were not imposed by authority or determined by social rank but emerged through dialogue, reasoning, and consensus. This approach reflected inclusivity, participation, and respect for diverse perspectives.

Central to his vision was the idea that governance and social life should rest on dignity of labor, mutual responsibility, and the welfare of all. By linking ethical values with social participation, he advanced an alternative model that stood against inequality and exclusion. Although rooted in a spiritual context, Basaveshwara's framework anticipated modern democratic ideals of equality, accountability, and community-based participation, making his legacy enduring and relevant. Basaveshwara laid an ethical foundation that resonates strongly with modern ideas of democracy and civil society.

Ambedkar's Vision of Civil Society and Democracy

Civil Society:

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), one of India's foremost social reformers and the principal architect of the Constitution, believed that civil society in India could not evolve unless caste oppression was dismantled. He considered caste not just a form of social division but an instrument of inequality that denied dignity, freedom, and opportunity to millions. For Ambedkar, genuine civil society was possible only when justice, inclusion, and equal participation were guaranteed to all sections of the population.

Central to his vision were the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty was not only political but also social—the right of every individual to think, act, and live with dignity. Equality meant rejecting caste and gender hierarchies that restricted opportunities. Fraternity, which Ambedkar placed above the other two, required recognizing shared humanity and fostering solidarity across groups. He argued that without fraternity, liberty and equality would lose their real meaning.

Ambedkar also emphasized that social justice must form the foundation of civil society. Justice, in his view, was not a moral appeal alone but demanded practical steps such as access to education, resources, and opportunities for marginalized groups. He insisted that reform could not be left to goodwill or persuasion but had to be secured through strong institutions and legal frameworks. Unlike earlier reformers, Ambedkar placed his faith in constitutional guarantees. By advocating for fundamental rights, affirmative action, and protections for minorities, he sought to create structural safeguards against exclusion. In this sense, his vision of civil society was inseparable from the legal and constitutional order.

Democracy:

Ambedkar's concept of democracy went beyond elections and institutions. He distinguished between political democracy, which involved electoral systems and legislative processes, and social democracy, which meant embedding liberty, equality, and fraternity into everyday life. He warned that political democracy could not survive without social democracy, since legal rights alone were meaningless if society continued to deny equality in practice.

Through the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar worked to institutionalize his vision. Fundamental rights and affirmative action policies aimed to empower disadvantaged communities and promote substantive equality. For him, democracy was both a system of governance and a way of life that transformed social relations. His insistence on linking constitutionalism with social justice gave Indian democracy a unique character and lasting strength.

Comparative Analysis

Basaveshwara and B. R. Ambedkar lived nearly eight centuries apart, their visions of civil society and democracy reveal notable similarities as well as clear differences. Both thinkers were deeply committed to the principles of equality and justice, yet the tools and frameworks they employed reflected their distinct historical and social contexts.

On the principle of equality, both leaders rejected caste as the foundation of social order. Basaveshwara advanced an ethical and spiritual approach, grounded in the ideals of Kayaka (dignity of labor) and Dasoha (sharing of resources). For him, equality was a moral responsibility practiced in everyday life through respect, compassion, and active community participation. Ambedkar, in contrast, viewed equality through a legal-constitutional lens. He argued that entrenched caste hierarchies could not be removed by ethics alone; they required enforceable rights, affirmative action, and systemic change guaranteed by law.

Civil society, too, was imagined differently by the two thinkers. Basaveshwara's model was community-centered and spiritually guided. The Anubhava Mantapa served as a forum where individuals, regardless of caste or gender, could engage in dialogue, reflection, and shared learning. It symbolized an early experiment in inclusive participation

based on trust and cooperation. Ambedkar, however, saw civil society as inseparable from constitutionalism. For him, social justice could not depend on voluntary ethics but required legal protections for liberty, equality, and fraternity. His approach ensured that marginalized groups could claim their rights within a secure institutional framework.

Their democratic visions also differed in scope and method. Basaveshwara's democracy was participatory and ethical, expressed through the Anubhava Mantapa where decisions emerged by consensus rather than authority. It reflected a moral community that valued dialogue, inclusion, and respect. Ambedkar's democracy was modern, institutional, and rights-based. He emphasized the coexistence of political democracy—elections, representation, and legislative structures—and social democracy, which demanded liberty, equality, and fraternity in social life. Without the latter, he argued, the former would remain incomplete.

Methodologically, Basaveshwara emphasized spiritual reform and collective morality, while Ambedkar relied on constitutional and secular instruments of justice. Together, their approaches demonstrate two complementary pathways: one based on ethical-spiritual transformation and the other on legal-constitutional safeguards. Taken together, their contributions underline the enduring need to combine moral values with institutional guarantees in building an inclusive and just society.

Comparative Chart: Basaveshwara vs. Ambedkar

Aspect	Basaveshwara (12th century)	B. R. Ambedkar (20th century)
Equality	Ethical-spiritual equality; Kayaka & Dasoha	Legal-constitutional equality; rights & reform
Civil Society	Community-based, Anubhava Mantapa forum	Rooted in constitutional safeguards
Democracy	Participatory, consensus-based, ethical	Institutional, rights-based, social + political
Methodology	Spiritual reform and collective morality	Secular, legal, and constitutional mechanisms
Focus	Dignity of labor, moral conduct, solidarity	Justice, rights, fraternity, systemic change

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The contributions of Basaveshwara and Ambedkar continue to hold strong relevance in contemporary India. Basaveshwara's message of equality, dignity of labor, and ethical governance still inspires grassroots

movements, particularly in Karnataka, where his teachings guide struggles against caste discrimination and promote social harmony. Ambedkar's constitutional vision, on the other hand, remains the backbone of India's democratic system, shaping policies on social justice, affirmative action, and civil rights. Together, their philosophies remind us that democracy cannot endure without inclusivity, fraternity, and justice. Their legacies thus provide both ethical and institutional frameworks for addressing ongoing challenges of inequality.

Conclusion

Basaveshwara and Ambedkar shared the goal of creating a society free from caste-based inequality and rooted in human dignity. Basaveshwara promoted ethical and spiritual reform through the Anubhava Mantapa, which encouraged dialogue, equality, and collective responsibility. Ambedkar, working within a modern framework, embedded these values into the Constitution, ensuring rights, representation, and social justice for marginalized groups. Together, their visions highlight that democracy and civil society are not static but evolving processes. They must continuously challenge injustice while fostering inclusivity, solidarity, and equal participation for building a just and humane society.

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