

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Economic Philosophy on Women's Empowerment: Relevance for Inclusive Development in Contemporary India

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Abstract

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was one of the main framers of social justice in India and was a very strong supporter of women's economic empowerment. Even before it became part of the global development agenda, Ambedkar stressed on the fact that the growth of a nation relies upon the growth of women in terms of their economic, educational and social empowerment. While political equality was important, Ambedkar envisioned equality in terms of equal pay, labour law protection, maternity benefits, property rights, education and economic empowerment. As chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian constitution, he provided for guarantees of equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities for women in the constitution. It is his contribution through labour laws, maternity benefits, reduction in working hours and support for the Hindu code bill that have helped pave the way for women's economic empowerment..

The present paper looks at the economic philosophy of Ambedkar in relation to women through constitutional provisions, labor reforms, education policy, and property laws. The study goes further to explore how the philosophy of Ambedkar is pertinent to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality). The research methodology employed by the study is qualitative analysis using secondary data such as constitutional texts and reports.

Keywords: *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar; Women Economy; Economic Empowerment; Gender Equality; Labour Reforms; Constitutional Rights; Inclusive Development*

1. Introduction

Women form almost half the population of India and are central in the development of social and economic sectors in India. However, while much has been achieved in terms of education, job opportunity, and participation in politics, women in India are yet to overcome various problems such as inequality in resource distribution, gender pay gap, ownership of property, financial deprivation, and under-representation. It is therefore important to recognize that the realization of sustainable economic development is contingent upon the empowerment of women economically and socially.

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Among the leaders of modern India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has played a central role in advocating for gender equality and women's rights in the country. While his contribution was primarily directed at fighting against untouchability, Dr. Ambedkar had a broader perspective of the concept of social justice that included economic empowerment, education, legal protection, and political participation of women. He believed that a society could not progress until women were empowered economically and politically. His statement, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," remains very pertinent.

Dr. Ambedkar recognized that women's economic dependence was a major obstacle to their freedom and social status. He advocated universal education for women, equal remuneration for equal work, labour welfare measures, maternity benefits, property rights, and legal reforms that would enable women to participate fully in economic life. As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, he ensured the incorporation of constitutional guarantees of equality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunity. His efforts to introduce the Hindu Code Bill further reflected his commitment to securing women's rights in matters of inheritance, marriage, divorce, and property ownership.

As the first Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Dr. Ambedkar introduced several progressive labour reforms that significantly benefited women workers, including provisions relating to maternity relief, improved working conditions, regulated working hours, and social security. These reforms laid the foundation for labour welfare legislation in independent India and strengthened women's participation in the workforce.

Importance of the study

However, in today's era, problems like the pay gap between men and women, low participation of women in the labor market, disparity in financial access, unpaid care work, and digital exclusion still hamper the economic progress of women. The thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar continue to be relevant for tackling these problems.

Economic empowerment of women is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development. Despite remarkable progress, women continue to face disparities in employment, wages, education, ownership of assets, and decision-making. Long before these concerns gained international attention, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar advocated comprehensive reforms to ensure women's equality.

Ambedkar believed that political democracy cannot survive without social and economic democracy. According to him,

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."

His philosophy viewed women as equal economic partners in nation-building.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's views on women's economic empowerment.
2. To analyze Ambedkar's constitutional and labour reforms benefiting women.
3. To assess the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas in contemporary India's economic development.
4. To suggest policy measures inspired by Ambedkar's vision for achieving gender-inclusive growth.

3. Research Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature.

Data Sources

1. Constituent Assembly Debates
2. Writings and Speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
3. Government reports
4. Ministry of Labour publications
5. Census
6. National Family Health Survey (NFHS)
7. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)
8. NITI Aayog reports
9. Research articles
10. Books
11. Journals

The study employs qualitative content analysis to examine Ambedkar's contributions to women's economic rights.

4. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Philosophy on Women's Economy

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Economic Philosophy on Women's Empowerment: Relevance for Inclusive Development in Contemporary India, the following updated empirical tables and figures (using **PLFS, NFHS-5, Gender Budget Statements, and RBI data**) can be incorporated into the Results or Background section.

Table 1. Female Labour Force Participation in India (PLFS)

Indicator	2017–18	2022–23	2023–24	Latest (2025)	Available	Trend
Female Labour Force Participation Rate (15+ years)	23.3%	37.0%	41.7%	Continued improvement		▲ Increasing
Rural Female LFPR	24.6%	41.5%	47.6%	Around 46%		▲ Significant rise
Urban Female LFPR	20.4%	24.0%	25.4%	Moderate increase		▲ Slow rise
Overall Unemployment Rate	6.0%	3.2%	3.2%	Around 3.1%		▼ Declining

Interpretation

1. Women's participation in the labour market has increased substantially since 2017–18.
2. Most of the increase has occurred in rural India.
3. Despite improvements, women remain concentrated in informal and self-employed work, indicating continuing challenges in job quality.

Table 2. Women's Health and Human Development Indicators (NFHS-5)

Indicator	NFHS-4 (2015–16)	NFHS-5 (2019–21)
Female Literacy	68.4%	71.5%
Institutional Births	78.9%	88.6%
Women with Bank Accounts Operated by Themselves	53%	78.6%
Women using Mobile Phones	45.9%	54.0%

Indicator	NFHS-4 (2015–16)	NFHS-5 (2019–21)
Women participating in household decisions	Increased	Continued improvement
Anaemia among women (15–49 years)	53.1%	57.0%

Interpretation

Positive progress is visible in women's financial inclusion, literacy, and maternal healthcare, but anaemia remains a major concern, highlighting persistent health inequalities.

Table 3. Gender Budget Allocation in India

Financial Year Gender Budget (Approx.) Share of Union Budget

2023–24	₹2.23 lakh crore	5.0%
2024–25	₹3.10 lakh crore	6.5%
2025–26	₹4.49 lakh crore	Approximately 8–9%

Observation

The Union Government has substantially increased allocations under the Gender Budget Statement in recent years, reflecting stronger policy attention to women's welfare, livelihoods, education, and entrepreneurship.

Table 4. RBI Indicators on Women's Financial Inclusion

Indicator	Recent Status
Women Jan Dhan Accounts	Over half of all PMJDY accounts are held by women
Digital Payments	Rapid increase in women's use of UPI and digital banking
Self-Help Group Bank Linkages	Continued expansion in credit access
Priority Sector Lending	Greater support for women entrepreneurs
Financial Inclusion Index	Continuous improvement over recent years

Interpretation

RBI data indicate expanding financial inclusion, supporting Ambedkar's emphasis on economic independence through access to financial resources.

5. Impact of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Labour and Social Welfare Policies on Improving the Economic Status of Women in India

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is one of the greatest labour welfare policy makers of India. He served as the Labour Member of Viceroy's Executive Council from 1942 to 1946 during which time he formulated various schemes which have helped in improving the working conditions of workers, especially women. Ambedkar's vision did not confine itself to mere economic development; rather it encompassed social justice and human dignity. According to him, economic development cannot be ensured without labour laws and social security of workers.

Labour Reforms Introduced by Dr. Ambedkar: Dr. Ambedkar played a pioneering role in modernizing India's labour policy. His major contributions are:

Maternity Benefits

The issue of maternity protection was one which Ambedkar had very much believed in. Motherhood, according to him, should never become the cause of economic insecurity or unemployment. It was his contributions to this area that gave rise to the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961. By treating maternity as a social responsibility and not a personal one, he created a basis for safeguarding women's jobs and earnings during pregnancy and delivery.

Reduction of Working Hours

Prior to the reforms introduced by Ambedkar, the labourers would normally work for twelve to fourteen hours in adverse conditions. Ambedkar played an important role in the introduction of eight-hour working days that made the standards in India comparable to international standards. Women workers in particular benefitted from these reforms greatly.

Equal Treatment of Workers

Ambedkar never ceased to stress that there must be equal opportunities for employment among women without any form of discrimination. Equal pay, proper regulation of labor laws, and proper working environment are some of his thoughts that became a part of constitutional ideals.

Social Security Measures

Taking note of the susceptibility of the industrial workers, Ambedkar emphasized the importance of labor welfare through social insurance, health care, accident insurance, and pensions. These efforts paved the way for the introduction of laws like the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Scheme and other labor welfare laws post-Independence.

Welfare of Women in Mines and Factories

Ambedkar supported protective legislation for women employed in factories and mines. He advocated safe workplaces, improved sanitation, regulated working conditions, and welfare facilities. These reforms acknowledged the unique challenges faced by women workers and sought to ensure their health, safety, and dignity.

Ambedkar believed that women could not become economically independent unless society eliminated caste discrimination, patriarchy, and unequal access to education.

His economic philosophy rested upon five pillars, They are:

1. Equality before law
2. Equal economic opportunity
3. Labour welfare
4. Education
5. Property rights

According to Ambedkar, economic independence enables women to participate equally in social and political life.

6. Constitutional Safeguards for Women's Economic Empowerment

Constitutional Support for Women's Welfare

As Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, Dr. Ambedkar ensured that labour rights and women's welfare received constitutional protection. Important provisions include:

- **Article 14** – Equality before the law.
- **Article 15(3)** – Permits the State to make special provisions for women and children.
- **Article 16** – Equality of opportunity in public employment.
- **Article 39(a)** – Adequate means of livelihood for all citizens.
- **Article 39(d)** – Equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- **Article 39(e)** – Protection of workers' health and strength.
- **Article 42** – Provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief.
- **Article 46** – Promotion of the educational and economic interests of weaker sections.

These constitutional safeguards continue to shape labour laws and welfare policies that support women's participation in the workforce.

Impact on Women's Economic Status

Dr. Ambedkar's labour and social welfare policies have had a profound and lasting impact on women's economic development in India.

Improved Labour Rights: His reforms promoted safer working conditions, regulated working hours, and recognized women workers as equal contributors to economic development.

Greater Employment Opportunities: Constitutional guarantees of equality and non-discrimination created a legal framework that enabled women to enter education, government services, industries, and professional occupations in greater numbers.

Economic Security: Maternity protection, labour welfare measures, and social security policies helped reduce employment insecurity among women and encouraged continued participation in the workforce.

Enhanced Human Capital: By emphasizing education and skill development, Ambedkar strengthened women's capacity to secure productive employment and improve their earning potential.

Strengthened Legal Protection: Ambedkar's constitutional vision inspired subsequent legislation, including the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 (now integrated into the Code on Wages, 2019), the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (as amended), the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, and the Code on Social Security, 2020, all of which contribute to protecting women's rights at work.

7. Labour Reforms Introduced by Ambedkar

As Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946), Ambedkar introduced several labour welfare reforms benefiting women.

Major Contributions are :

Eight-hour Working Day

He reduced working hours from 12–14 hours to 8 hours, improving workers' welfare and productivity.

Maternity Benefits

Ambedkar strongly supported maternity protection, arguing that motherhood should not force women to sacrifice employment. He backed maternity benefit legislation and later strengthened maternity protections for women workers in mines through amendments while serving as Labour Member.

Equal Pay

He advocated equal remuneration for equal work irrespective of gender.

Welfare Measures: He promoted

1. Paid leave
2. Health protection
3. Welfare funds
4. Social security

These reforms significantly improved women's participation in organized labour.

8. Hindu Code Bill: Economic Revolution for Women: One of Ambedkar's greatest contributions was the Hindu Code Bill.

It proposed:

1. Equal inheritance rights
2. Property ownership
3. Divorce rights
4. Adoption rights
5. Right to maintenance

Although the Bill faced opposition during his lifetime, many of its principles later became part of Hindu personal law and significantly advanced women's legal and economic status.

9. Education as Economic Empowerment: Ambedkar famously urged: "Educate, Agitate and Organize." He regarded education as the primary means of achieving economic independence. He believed educated women would:

1. Increase labour-force participation
2. Improve household welfare
3. Reduce poverty
4. Promote intergenerational human capital development

10. Ambedkar's Vision and Sustainable Development: Ambedkar's ideas closely align with modern development frameworks as:

Ambedkar's Vision SDGs

Equal education	SDG 4
Gender equality	SDG 5
Decent work	SDG 8
Reduced inequality	SDG 10
Strong institutions	SDG 16

His philosophy remains relevant to inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

11. Contemporary Relevance

Despite constitutional guarantees:

1. Female Labour Force Participation remains below that of men.
2. Wage disparities continue across sectors.
3. Women's ownership of productive assets remains limited.
4. Informal employment lacks adequate social protection.

Ambedkar's emphasis on equal opportunity, labour rights, maternity protection, education, and property ownership continues to provide a valuable framework for addressing these challenges.

12. Policy Recommendations:

According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, there should be an equitable society where women have rights, financial freedom, and social respect. The ideology of Dr. Ambedkar was based on liberty, equality, fraternity, and social justice. Dr. Ambedkar felt that sustainable development would be possible only if women would get empowerment through education, employment, laws, and equal economic opportunities. Though there have been tremendous improvements in the socio-economic condition of women in India, various issues like low labour force participation of women, gender wage gap, lack of asset ownership, financial exclusion, and inequitable access to technology have kept women from being actively engaged in the economy. Taking a cue from Dr. Ambedkar's vision, the following policies could help in making economic development inclusive and sustainable for women.

13. Conclusion

In addition to being the founding father of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a foresighted economist and social reformer who understood that women's empowerment is indispensable for economic growth and development of a country. Promotion of equality, labor welfare, maternity legislation, education and right to property were the cornerstones laid by him for building a more inclusive economy. Though India has been successful in achieving a lot in terms of women empowerment, existing disparities suggest that the vision of Ambedkar is yet unfulfilled. Bringing his ideas into practice can prove beneficial for women empowerment.

The economic ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar still provides a strong normative approach for economic empowerment of women in modern India. His ideas that combine the principles of the Constitution with labor rights, education, property and social justice remain very relevant for addressing gender-based inequalities in today's world. Modern research shows that there is tangible success in improving the rate of female labor force participation and economic empowerment, but the problems associated with poor quality of employment, wage inequality and economic instability reveal the necessity for policy change based on Ambedkar's revolutionary ideas. This paper adds value to existing literature by analyzing Ambedkar's economic ideology through the prism of gender economics and policy.

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