



## HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL EQUALITY: CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL RELEVANCE OF DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR AND MAHATMA GANDHI

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### Abstract-

*This paper explores the intertwined philosophies of B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi on human rights and social equality, examining their enduring global relevance in the twenty-first century. Both leaders emerged from the crucible of colonial India, but their approaches to justice, dignity, and equality diverged in significant ways. Ambedkar rooted his advocacy in the constitutional framework, emphasizing legal safeguards, institutional reforms, and the annihilation of caste as essential prerequisites for democracy. Gandhi, in contrast, envisioned social equality through moral transformation, non-violence (ahimsa), and a decentralized vision of Sarvodaya that sought upliftment of the most marginalized. While Ambedkar advanced a rights-based discourse aligned with liberal constitutionalism, Gandhi articulated a duty-centered framework grounded in ethical responsibility.*

*The paper situates these divergent yet complementary perspectives within contemporary debates on human rights, democracy, and social justice. It highlights how Ambedkar's insistence on legal protection resonates with present struggles for caste justice, minority rights, and gender equality, while Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence and moral politics continues to inspire movements such as environmental activism, sustainable development, and global peace initiatives. Their philosophies are then applied to global case studies- Black Lives Matter in the United States, Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa, Dalit rights movements in India, and #MeToo worldwide to demonstrate the universality and adaptability of their thought. In critically engaging their legacies, the paper acknowledges both the limitations and appropriations of Ambedkarite and Gandhian ideas in contemporary political discourse. While Ambedkar's constitutionalism sometimes risks being reduced to legal formalism, Gandhi's spiritualized politics is often critiqued for inadequately addressing structural inequalities. Yet, taken together, their visions offer a holistic framework that balances institutional reform with moral transformation. By re-examining Ambedkar and Gandhi through a global lens, this study argues that their philosophies remain not only historically significant but also indispensable for navigating contemporary struggles for human dignity, equality, and justice across the world.*

**Keywords:** B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, human rights, social equality, constitutional morality, non-violence, global justice

### 1. Introduction-



Human rights and social equality are often regarded as the twin pillars of modern democracy. Across nations, movements for freedom, dignity, and justice have revolved around these ideals. Yet their realization remains incomplete, marked by persistent inequalities of caste, race, class, gender, and economic status. In the Indian context, two towering figures- B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi provided distinctive yet interconnected responses to these enduring challenges.

Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, developed a legal-institutional framework that sought to protect the rights of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, while promoting democratic values. His advocacy for constitutional morality, political safeguards, and affirmative action made him a pioneer of rights-based approaches in India. Gandhi, by contrast, emphasized moral reform, spiritual upliftment, and grassroots activism. His doctrine of nonviolence (ahimsa), civil disobedience, and Sarvodaya aimed to transform society through ethical and communal responsibility.

This paper situates Ambedkar and Gandhi within the broader discourse on human rights and social equality. It seeks to answer three central questions:

1. How do Ambedkar and Gandhi conceptualize human rights and equality in their respective frameworks?
2. What is the contemporary global relevance of their ideas in addressing issues such as racial justice, gender equality, economic disparities, climate justice, and digital exclusion?
3. How can their legacies be synthesized to provide a more comprehensive response to today's challenges?

The structure of the paper follows a thematic progression. Section 2 discusses the philosophical foundations of human rights, comparing Western liberal traditions with Ambedkar's constitutional morality and Gandhi's moral-spiritual humanism. Section 3 analyzes their approaches to social equality, highlighting similarities and differences. Section 4 addresses their global relevance in light of contemporary issues, followed by Section 5, which presents global case studies. Section 6 critically examines their limitations and challenges. Section 7 concludes by synthesizing their legacies into a framework for contemporary global justice.

This inquiry is timely. Globally, human rights frameworks are under strain from authoritarian regimes undermining civil liberties to economic systems widening inequalities. Simultaneously, grassroots movements are demanding justice in new domains: racial equality, gender rights, environmental sustainability, and digital freedoms. In such a context, the visions of Ambedkar and Gandhi, though emerging from the Indian struggle for freedom offer powerful insights for the world.

## 2. Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights-

### **2.1 Western Liberal Traditions-**

The modern human rights framework has its roots in Enlightenment thought, emphasizing liberty, equality, and fraternity. Thinkers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Stuart Mill provided the theoretical basis for individual rights, social contracts, and utilitarian ethics. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) built upon these traditions, asserting inalienable rights for all humans. However, critiques argue that Western liberal traditions often ignored structural inequalities, focusing narrowly on individual liberties while neglecting collective and cultural dimensions.

### **2.2 Ambedkar's Constitutional Morality-**

Ambedkar brought a distinctive voice to the philosophy of rights by grounding them in constitutional morality. He argued that political democracy could not survive without social democracy, defined as “a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality, and fraternity as principles of life.” Unlike liberal individualism, Ambedkar’s vision recognized systemic barriers such as caste and sought institutional safeguards. The Indian Constitution, with its fundamental rights, directive principles, and affirmative action policies, reflects this vision.

### **2.3 Gandhi's Moral-Spiritual Humanism-**

Gandhi’s approach to human rights was rooted in spiritual ethics. For him, rights flowed not from legal contracts but from duties towards others. His concept of Sarvodaya- the welfare of all, emphasized community harmony, nonviolence, and voluntary self-restraint. Gandhi was skeptical of a rights-centric discourse detached from moral obligations, arguing instead that true equality arises from the recognition of shared humanity. While Ambedkar emphasized structural reforms, Gandhi emphasized inner transformation.

## **3. Ambedkar and Gandhi on Social Equality-**

The question of social equality stood at the heart of both B.R. Ambedkar’s and M.K. Gandhi’s political and ethical visions, though they approached it from different philosophical premises and practical strategies. Their contributions continue to provide valuable insights into dismantling entrenched hierarchies and advancing human dignity.

### **3.1 Ambedkar's Perspective on Social Equality-**

Ambedkar regarded caste as the greatest obstacle to equality in Indian society. His seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, argued that social hierarchies cannot be dismantled through mere moral persuasion but require structural transformation. He consistently maintained that without equality in social and economic life, the promise of political democracy would remain hollow. For Ambedkar, legal safeguards, affirmative action, and constitutional provisions were non-negotiable instruments to secure justice for the oppressed. His advocacy during the drafting of the Indian Constitution led to explicit guarantees of equality before law, abolition of untouchability, and provisions for affirmative action. Ambedkar also expanded the discourse of equality by emphasizing



women's rights, labor protections, and socio-economic empowerment, making his framework both inclusive and progressive.

### **3.2 Gandhi's Vision of Social Equality-**

Gandhi approached social inequality from a moral and spiritual standpoint. For him, caste hierarchies represented a moral failing rather than simply a structural defect. He rejected untouchability, calling it a "sin against humanity," but sought reform within the framework of varna rather than its total abolition. Gandhi believed in the idea of Sarvodaya- the welfare of all and Antyodaya- the uplift of the last person. His methods relied heavily on personal transformation, community reform, and the ethical awakening of the privileged classes. Non-violence (ahimsa) was not merely a political tool but also a principle of social interaction, meant to build bonds of trust and harmony across divides.

### **3.3 Convergences and Tensions-**

Despite their shared commitment to dignity and justice, their approaches diverged sharply. Ambedkar criticized Gandhi for seeking reform within the caste system rather than advocating its annihilation. Gandhi, in turn, believed that radical disruption might erode social harmony and create long-term instability. Yet, their legacies need not be seen as oppositional. Ambedkar's insistence on institutional guarantees complements Gandhi's stress on ethical and moral responsibility. Together, they underscore the need for both legal frameworks and inner transformation to build truly egalitarian societies.

In today's world, their ideas remain highly relevant. Ambedkar reminds us of the indispensability of structural reforms, while Gandhi underscores the necessity of moral conscience and collective empathy. Taken together, they provide a holistic vision of social equality that balances external reforms with internal transformation.

## **4. Contemporary Global Relevance-**

The philosophies of B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi continue to resonate in the twenty-first century, extending beyond India to shape global debates on human rights and social equality. Although their strategies differed, Ambedkar focusing on constitutional safeguards and Gandhi emphasizing moral transformation, their combined legacies provide valuable tools to address today's complex challenges.

### **4.1 Human Rights Frameworks-**

Ambedkar's insistence on legal safeguards for marginalized groups remains highly relevant to international human rights discourse. His idea that dignity must be secured through enforceable rights echoes in global debates on racial justice, disability rights, and protections for refugees. For instance, constitutional courts across the world increasingly serve as arenas where marginalized groups contest discrimination, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Ambedkar's constitutionalism.

### **4.2 Non-Violent Movements-**

Gandhi's strategy of ahimsa (non-violence) continues to inspire social movements worldwide. From Martin Luther King Junior's civil rights campaign in the United States to contemporary climate justice activism, Gandhi's methods highlight the moral power of peaceful resistance. In an era where violent protests often escalate conflict, non-violence offers a sustainable approach to change.

#### **4.3 Social Equality in the Global Economy-**

Ambedkar's critique of entrenched hierarchies speaks to modern concerns about structural inequality in global capitalism. Issues such as income disparity, labor exploitation, and systemic racism parallel his arguments that entrenched social divisions cannot be overcome without structural reform. Gandhi's philosophy of trusteeship also finds renewed relevance as corporations are pressured to adopt socially responsible and sustainable practices. Together, they encourage a balance between institutional accountability and ethical responsibility.

#### **4.4 Intercultural and Religious Dialogue-**

In increasingly diverse societies, Gandhi's emphasis on harmony between communities and Ambedkar's advocacy for minority rights provide complementary frameworks for peaceful coexistence. As religious and cultural conflicts intensify in many regions, their legacies remind us of the importance of both moral respect and legal protection.

#### **4.5 Digital and Climate Justice-**

New challenges, such as digital inequality and climate change, also reveal the adaptability of their thought. Ambedkar's focus on access to opportunities resonates with demands for equitable digital rights, while Gandhi's call for ecological balance is echoed in global sustainability efforts. Both philosophies offer guidance on ensuring justice in emerging arenas of struggle.

In sum, the global relevance of Ambedkar and Gandhi lies in their ability to speak simultaneously to structural reforms and moral transformation- two pillars without which human rights and social equality cannot be realized in contemporary times.

### **5. Case Studies of Global Relevance-**

The global resonance of Ambedkar's and Gandhi's ideas can be seen through contemporary movements and initiatives that draw upon their philosophies, either directly or indirectly. While Ambedkar emphasized institutional safeguards and the constitutional protection of rights, Gandhi stressed non-violence and moral responsibility. Together, their legacies continue to influence struggles for justice in diverse contexts.

#### **5.1 Black Lives Matter (United States)-**

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement reflects Ambedkar's demand for structural reforms to protect marginalized groups. Like Ambedkar's struggle against caste oppression, BLM highlights systemic discrimination rooted in law enforcement and institutions. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent protest is also echoed in the peaceful

demonstrations and moral appeals for dignity. This dual framework illustrates how structural change and moral awakening are both necessary to address racial injustice.

### **5.2 Truth and Reconciliation (South Africa)-**

Post-apartheid South Africa offers another example where Gandhi's presence as a young lawyer and his later philosophy of ahimsa influenced the ethos of reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) emphasized forgiveness, dialogue, and healing principles central to Gandhi's vision. At the same time, Ambedkar's focus on institutional reforms resonates with the country's constitutional guarantees of equality, showing the complementary nature of both approaches.

### **5.3 Dalit Rights Movements (India)-**

Within India, Ambedkar's constitutional vision remains a living force in Dalit rights activism. Grassroots campaigns against caste-based violence and exclusion draw strength from his insistence on legal safeguards. At the same time, Gandhian ideals of moral persuasion are used by some activists to foster intercaste solidarity, suggesting that both legacies continue to shape the Indian struggle for equality.

### **5.4 Gender Justice and #MeToo (Global)-**

The global #MeToo movement reflects Ambedkar's demand for equality and dignity, particularly his advocacy for women's rights in the drafting of the Indian Constitution. At the same time, Gandhian ideals of truth and non-violence inform the peaceful yet firm stance of survivors speaking against patriarchal abuse. This demonstrates how their philosophies can guide efforts to dismantle gender hierarchies in contemporary societies.

### **5.5 Environmental Movements-**

Finally, movements like Extinction Rebellion and India's Chipko Movement echo Gandhi's vision of sustainable living and trusteeship, linking moral responsibility to ecological survival. Ambedkar's insistence on justice also extends to climate justice debates, where marginalized communities demand equal participation in shaping sustainable futures.

Together, these case studies demonstrate that Ambedkar and Gandhi's legacies are not confined to India; they offer frameworks for global struggles against injustice, inequality, and exploitation.

## **6. Critiques and Challenges-**

While the philosophies of B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi continue to inspire global conversations on human rights and social equality, their approaches have also been subject to significant critique. These challenges, both historical and contemporary, invite a careful reassessment of their ideas not to diminish their contributions, but to situate them within the complexities of social realities and evolving debates on justice.

### **6.1 Critiques of Ambedkar's Framework-**

Ambedkar's insistence on a rights-based, constitutional framework has been praised for securing the legal recognition of marginalized communities in India. However, critics



argue that this emphasis sometimes resulted in an over-reliance on state institutions and legal mechanisms. While the Indian Constitution stands as a monumental achievement, the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities highlights a persistent challenge. Laws against caste discrimination, untouchability, or inequality exist, but enforcement remains uneven, often hindered by bureaucratic inertia or social resistance.

Another critique centers on Ambedkar's vision of social reform through radical restructuring of caste society. His call for the annihilation of caste, while morally and philosophically powerful, is seen by some scholars as utopian in the short term. Caste, deeply entrenched in cultural, economic, and religious life, has proven remarkably resilient, raising questions about the feasibility of rapid social transformation. Furthermore, Ambedkar's later advocacy for conversion to Buddhism as a path of liberation has been critiqued as exclusionary by those who argue that social justice must be achieved within, rather than outside, traditional cultural frameworks.

Yet, these critiques also underline the strength of Ambedkar's thought: he forced society to confront its contradictions and exposed the limitations of gradualism in tackling systemic injustice. His radicalism was not a weakness but a necessary provocation against complacency.

### **6.2 Critiques of Gandhi's Framework-**

Gandhi's moral and spiritual approach to equality has also been widely debated. One major critique is that his vision of Harijan upliftment, while compassionate, did not directly dismantle the caste hierarchy. By focusing on reforming the hearts of upper castes rather than demanding structural change, Gandhi has been accused of preserving the social order in subtle ways. Ambedkar himself criticized Gandhi for opposing separate electorates for Dalits, arguing that Gandhi's approach subordinated the rights of marginalized groups to the broader unity of the Hindu community.

Another critique of Gandhi lies in his economic and developmental vision. His model of village self-sufficiency and rejection of industrialization, though rooted in sustainability and moral responsibility, has been critiqued as impractical in a rapidly modernizing world. Critics contend that Gandhi underestimated the role of technology, urbanization, and large-scale economic growth in reducing poverty and inequality. Similarly, his reliance on non-violence has been questioned in contexts where oppressive regimes do not respond to moral persuasion.

Nevertheless, Gandhi's emphasis on moral responsibility continues to inspire grassroots activism and offers a counterbalance to purely materialist notions of progress. Even his critics acknowledge that his stress on ahimsa remains one of the most influential contributions to global human rights discourse.

### **6.3 Broader Challenges-**

Both Ambedkar's and Gandhi's frameworks face broader critiques when applied in contemporary global contexts. Human rights discourse today grapples with issues such as

digital inequality, climate justice, and transnational migration challenges that neither leader directly addressed. Adapting their philosophies to these contexts requires creative reinterpretation rather than direct application. For example, Ambedkar's constitutionalism provides tools for legal inclusion in digital rights, while Gandhi's trusteeship can inform global debates on corporate accountability in the age of multinational capitalism.

Another broader challenge lies in reconciling their divergent methods. Ambedkar's radical insistence on structural transformation and Gandhi's gradualist, moral reform sometimes appear at odds. Scholars debate whether these can truly be harmonized, or whether their differences reflect fundamentally incompatible worldviews. Yet, this tension itself can be productive: it forces scholars and activists to consider both the structural and moral dimensions of justice, ensuring that one does not overshadow the other.

#### **6.4 Moving Forward-**

The critiques and challenges surrounding Ambedkar and Gandhi do not diminish their relevance; instead, they underscore the need to engage with their ideas critically. Ambedkar's constitutionalism must be matched with social movements that ensure laws are translated into lived equality. Gandhi's moral vision must be combined with structural reforms to address entrenched inequalities. Taken together, their legacies push us to ask not only what justice requires in principle, but how it can be implemented in practice across diverse contexts.

#### **7. Conclusion-**

The intellectual and political legacies of B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi stand as two towering yet distinct pillars in the pursuit of human rights and social equality. Emerging from the crucible of colonial India, both leaders articulated powerful critiques of oppression and envisioned pathways to a more just social order. Ambedkar's vision was grounded in the language of constitutional morality, legal rights, and institutional safeguards; Gandhi's was rooted in non-violence, ethical self-discipline, and the spiritual transformation of individuals and communities. At first glance, their approaches appear contradictory, but when examined with a broader lens, they reveal a deep complementarity that continues to hold relevance for contemporary global challenges.

Ambedkar's emphasis on constitutionalism was revolutionary in its insistence that human rights are meaningless without enforceable legal protections. His recognition that democracy must extend beyond formal electoral systems into social and economic domains anticipated many modern concerns about systemic inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. Ambedkar's insistence on the annihilation of caste resonates strongly with today's struggles against racial injustice, gender inequality, and religious discrimination. He provided a robust framework that underscores the necessity of



institutional reforms, affirmative action, and social justice policies as essential conditions for substantive equality.

Gandhi, by contrast, approached the question of human rights and social equality from a moral and spiritual standpoint. His doctrine of ahimsa offered not only a strategy for political resistance but also an ethical compass for personal and collective life. Gandhi's ideal of Sarvodaya- the welfare of all challenged materialist and individualist notions of progress, offering instead a vision of interconnectedness, compassion, and responsibility. His principle of trusteeship highlighted the moral duty of the wealthy and powerful to safeguard the interests of the poor, prefiguring contemporary debates on corporate responsibility, sustainable development, and environmental stewardship.

Placed together, Ambedkar and Gandhi represent two necessary dimensions of justice. Ambedkar highlights the structural and institutional foundations without which liberty and equality remain hollow; Gandhi illuminates the moral and ethical dimensions without which law risks degenerating into coercion or mere proceduralism. Both understood, albeit through different pathways, that human rights and social equality demand more than rhetoric: they require sustained transformation in the ways individuals live, societies organize themselves, and states exercise power.

The global relevance of their ideas is evident in diverse contemporary struggles. The Black Lives Matter movement echoes Ambedkar's insistence on dismantling systemic oppression through law and policy, while also drawing inspiration from Gandhian non-violent protest. Environmental justice movements today incorporate Ambedkar's demand for inclusive development and Gandhi's emphasis on harmony with nature. Gender justice initiatives benefit from Ambedkar's advocacy for women's rights in constitutional frameworks and Gandhi's recognition of the transformative role of women in moral reconstruction. Even in the digital age, where questions of privacy, access, and exclusion dominate, Ambedkar's legal approach and Gandhi's ethical compass together provide a balanced framework.

It is equally important to recognize their critiques of one another as part of a productive dialectic rather than an irreconcilable conflict. Ambedkar was correct to highlight that Gandhi's reliance on moral persuasion often underestimated the entrenched nature of caste hierarchies. Gandhi, on the other hand, rightly cautioned that legal and institutional measures, while necessary, cannot by themselves eradicate prejudice or cultivate compassion. Taken in combination, these critiques remind us that neither law nor morality alone suffices; both are indispensable. A rights-based framework without moral responsibility risks becoming mechanical, while moral appeals without structural safeguards risk perpetuating inequality.

The future of global human rights discourse can thus be enriched by integrating Ambedkar's structural realism with Gandhi's ethical idealism. Ambedkar offers the grammar of justice- codified, enforceable, and institutionalized. Gandhi offers the poetry



of justice- motivating people to internalize values of equality, compassion, and dignity. Together they provide a holistic vision: Ambedkar ensures that justice is guaranteed; Gandhi ensures that it is embraced.

In an era marked by rising authoritarianism, climate crises, economic inequality, and digital exclusion, the combined legacies of Ambedkar and Gandhi present a guiding framework for action. They remind us that justice must be both systemic and humane, both institutional and moral, both enforceable and transformative. The relevance of their thought does not lie merely in historical commemoration but in active reinterpretation for contemporary realities.

In conclusion, the pursuit of human rights and social equality in the twenty-first century cannot rely solely on the ideals of one or the other. Ambedkar and Gandhi, with their distinct approaches, offer complementary pathways toward a shared horizon: a world where dignity is non-negotiable, equality is substantive, and justice is both a legal reality and a moral commitment. Their legacies, taken together, provide not only inspiration but also practical guidance for addressing the pressing human rights challenges of our times. Rather than viewing their differences as irreconcilable, we can embrace them as mutually enriching two voices in a global symphony of justice that continues to unfold.

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