

Revisiting the Foundations of Indian Labour Justice through Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Socio-Economic Vision and Legislative Legacy

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Abstract:

Dr. B. R. Dr. Ambedkar's contributions to the development of Indian labour justice represent a remarkable integration of legislative transformation, social philosophy and economic reform. This paper seeks to revisit the foundations of India's labour system through the lens of Dr. Ambedkar's socio-economic vision and his enduring legislative legacy. Before his intervention, Indian labourers, particularly those from marginalized communities, were suffering from poor working conditions, economic exploitation due to lack of legal safeguards. This paper states the historical background of colonial labour's poor condition. Dr. Ambedkar's involvement with the labour issue was neither incidental nor secondary to his struggle for social justice. It was essential to his larger idea of democracy based on dignity and equality. The paper explores Dr. Ambedkar's efforts as an architect of labour justice. The paper focuses on Dr. Ambedkar's foundation of the Labour Party of India in 1936 as a vehicle for political mobilization of the working class and his pioneering role as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–46). During this period, Dr. Ambedkar introduced several transformative acts relating to factory conditions, social insurance, maternity benefits, and trade union rights that collectively shaped the foundation of modern Indian labour law. By analyzing these legislative efforts along with his socio-economic philosophy, this paper contends that Dr. Ambedkar saw labor reform as an attempt to democratize India's economic system and harmonize industrial relations, rather than only as economic regulation. When talking about labor code reforms today, his emphasis on social democracy, state accountability, and welfare-oriented government is still quite relevant. In the end, this study highlights how Dr. Ambedkar's principles continue to guide the pursuit of equality, dignity, and welfare in India's changing labor landscape and confirms his role as the overlooked architect of labor justice in that country.

1. Introduction:

The evolution of labour justice in India is inseparable from the nation's socio-economic transformation. Working under conditions of economic exploitation and social subordination, the laborers were deprived of both rights and dignity during colonial authority. Labour laws, where they existed, were primarily regulatory rather than welfare-oriented, designed to protect industrialists and industrial productivity rather than labour welfare. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), a philosopher, jurist, and reformer whose contributions revolutionized the social and economic justice, arose against this backdrop. Dr. Ambedkar's engagement with labour was rooted in his larger project of dismantling structural inequalities particularly caste and class oppression. His philosophical framework of economic democracy complemented his political

demand for constitutional equality. As Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–46), Dr. Ambedkar not only introduced several pioneering legislations but also institutionalized welfare mechanisms that foreshadowed the post-independence labour structure. This paper seeks to revisit those foundations through a critical analysis of his socio-economic thought and legislative action.

2. Research Objectives

- To examine Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's socio-economic philosophy and its direct influence on the development, reform, and codification of Indian labour laws.
- To study Ambedkar's major legislative contributions (1942–46)
- To evaluate whether contemporary labour reforms continue to uphold Ambedkar's principles of economic democracy, social justice, and worker dignity.

3. Research Methodology

This research is based mainly on qualitative and historical methods. It examines the condition of Indian labourers during the colonial period through historical documents, government records, and previous research studies. A doctrinal legal method is used to study the labour laws that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar introduced or influenced. The four new Labour Codes of 2020 are also analysed to understand how far they reflect Dr. Ambedkar's ideas on labour justice. The study includes a detailed reading of Ambedkar's speeches, writings, labour department reports, and Constituent Assembly debates. Secondary sources like books, journal articles, labour policy reports, and ILO publications are also used to support the analysis. A comparative approach is applied to compare labour conditions before Ambedkar, the improvements made through his reforms, and the features of the new labour codes.

4. Historical Context: Labour Conditions before Dr. Ambedkar

Indian laborers lived in dreadful conditions prior to Dr. Ambedkar's rise to prominence as a legislator. India's working class had emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution, but it lacked rights. Colonial economic policies were extractive, designed to feed Britain's industrial economy rather than promote domestic welfare. The Factories Acts of 1881, 1891, and 1911, though nominally progressive, served primarily to regulate factory operations for efficiency rather than to improve labour conditions (Government of India Labour Department Report 1911).

Workers faced extreme hardships like long hours, low wages, unsafe working conditions, and no social security. Women and children worked alongside men in factories and mines with minimal protection. Labour movements were broke out but largely in urban area; rural and unorganized sectors remained unremarkable. Moreover, Inequality was exacerbated by caste

hierarchy, which restricted Dalits and "untouchable" communities to low-paying, menial jobs.(Zelliot 74). Dr. Ambedkar later emphasized that such caste-based division of labour reinforced both economic and moral servitude.

Indian labour before the 1930s had little legal recognition. Trade unions were weak and often suppressed under colonial law. The nationalist movement largely focused on political freedom, leaving labour rights as a secondary concern. Dr. Ambedkar's intervention changed this dynamic by placing labour justice at the centre of social democracy.

5. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Socio-Economic Philosophy

Dr. Ambedkar's socio-economic vision stemmed from his deep conviction that political democracy cannot endure without social and economic democracy. He argued that "liberty, equality, and fraternity" must operate not only in the political realm but also in the industrial and economic spheres (Dr. Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste 36). His philosophy combined moral humanism with practical state intervention.

In States and Minorities (1947), Dr. Ambedkar proposed constitutional safeguards for the working class, including state ownership of key industries, collective bargaining, and minimum wage guarantees. These ideas were revolutionary for a colonial society still rooted in laissez-faire economics. His notion of economic democracy demanded that every individual have access to the material conditions necessary for a dignified life. He envisioned a welfare state that actively mitigates inequalities through legislation and public policy.

Dr. Ambedkar also critiqued both capitalism and traditional socialism. While he rejected unregulated capitalism for its exploitative tendencies, he was cautious of centralized socialism that ignored individual rights. Instead, he advocated "state socialism within democracy," a balanced model ensuring liberty alongside state responsibility. This philosophical synthesis later influenced the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution, particularly Articles 38–43, which mandate the state to secure social, economic, and political justice.

6. Establishment of the Labour Party of India (1936)

Long before his official position in government, Dr. Ambedkar recognized that labour rights needed political representation. In 1936, he founded the Labour Party of India, marking a critical moment in India's labour movement. The party's objectives went beyond trade unionism; it sought to create a political platform for workers, peasants, and marginalized classes (Rodrigues 212).

The Labour Party's manifesto demanded:

- State control of industries and key economic resources.
- Right to organize and strike.

- Abolition of bonded labour.
- Provision of unemployment relief and housing for industrial workers.

The Labour Party's manifesto, published in Bombay in 1936, was one of the first documents in Indian history to articulate labour rights as fundamental rights.

Dr. Ambedkar's party also attempted to integrate labour issues with the larger democratic movement. He argued that the freedom of India would remain incomplete without the liberation of its workers. The party contested provincial elections in Bombay Presidency and won significant support among industrial labourers.

While the Labour Party eventually merged with broader movements like the Scheduled Castes Federation, its ideological contribution was immense. It shifted labour discourse from mere wage demands to questions of social justice and human rights. This early political experiment anticipated Dr. Ambedkar's later constitutional vision, where economic and social justice became the twin pillars of democracy.

7. Dr. Ambedkar's Legislative Role and Labour Reforms (1942–1946)

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's tenure as the Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1942 to 1946 marks one of the most transformative phases in the history of Indian labour legislation. During the last years of British rule, the working class was going through a significant structural transformation as a result of industrial growth during the war. Dr. Ambedkar seized this moment to create a systematic, humane, and forward-looking framework for labour welfare that harmonized economic growth with social justice.

Dr. Ambedkar was not merely a policy administrator; he was a moral economist. His legislative philosophy rested on the belief that industrial efficiency must rest on human welfare rather than exploitation. He declared in one of his Council speeches (1943):

“The progress of industry should not be measured only by its profits, but by the well-being of its workers.”

His contributions can be better understood when examined act-wise, as follows:

7.1 The Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Act, 1943

Dr. Ambedkar recognized that a free and organized labour movement was central to industrial democracy. The 1926 Indian Trade Unions Act had legalized trade unions but imposed restrictive conditions on registration and limited their immunities. Dr. Ambedkar's 1943 amendment sought to strengthen the legal position of unions by:

- Broadening the scope of recognized unions;
- Ensuring internal democratic functioning through mandatory executive accountability;

- Protecting union funds from misuse by management or political intermediaries; and
- Granting limited immunity from civil and criminal liability for acts done in furtherance of lawful strikes.

This amendment laid the groundwork for the development of collective bargaining in India. Dr. Ambedkar saw trade unions not as instruments of disruption but as “schools of industrial democracy” (Rodrigues 304).

7.2 The Indian Factories (Amendment) Act, 1944

The colonial Factory Acts had primarily served regulatory purposes, focusing on productivity rather than worker welfare. Dr. Ambedkar’s 1944 amendment transformed the nature of industrial regulation by emphasizing safety, health, and welfare. Key provisions included:

- Introduction of an eight-hour working day, replacing the earlier norm of 10–12 hours;
- Mandatory weekly holidays and rest intervals;
- Provisions for clean drinking water, sanitation, lighting, and ventilation;
- Appointment of factory inspectors with wider powers to ensure compliance; and
- Special protective measures for women and adolescent workers.

This was one of the first instances in colonial India where labour law reflected a welfare orientation rather than merely industrial discipline. Even before India ratified the relevant ILO conventions, Dr. Ambedkar insisted on an eight-hour workday. (Government of India Labour Department Report, 1944).

7.3 The Mines Maternity Benefit Act, 1941 (Implemented under oversight of Dr. Ambedkar, 1942–43)

Even though it was passed prior to Dr. Ambedkar's tenure, his leadership was crucial to its execution and growth. He ensured the Mines Maternity Benefit Act provided real welfare protections for women miners who were neglected and highly vulnerable group. Dr. Ambedkar expanded its scope by:

- Mandating paid maternity leave of six weeks before and six weeks after delivery;
- Establishing the principle of employer-funded maternity benefits; and
- Creating medical and nursing facilities within mining areas.

His concern for women workers reflected his broader philosophy of social democracy where justice extended to gender, class, and occupation alike. This model later influenced the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 in independent India.

7.4 The Coal Mines Safety (Stowing) Amendment Act, 1943

Mining was among the most hazardous industries in British India. Frequent accidents and poor safety mechanisms had made it a death trap for workers. Dr. Ambedkar's Coal Mines Safety (Stowing) Amendment Act introduced several scientific and administrative reforms, including:

- Mandatory use of stowing techniques to prevent mine collapses;
- Establishment of a Directorate of Mines Safety under the Labour Department;
- Regulation of working hours and rest periods underground; and
- Provision for compensation to families of workers killed or injured in accidents.

Dr. Ambedkar emphasized that “no nation can call itself civilized when it extracts wealth from the lives of its labourers.” His insistence on technical modernization of safety standards represented an early model of occupational health and safety management in India.

7.5 The Workmen's Compensation (Amendment) Act, 1943

Dr. Ambedkar revised the existing Workmen's Compensation Act of 1923, which had provided inadequate relief to workers injured on duty. The 1943 amendments were:

- Increased the amount of compensation payable for death and disability;
- Simplified the procedure for claims and disputes;
- Extended coverage to new categories of workers, including clerical and technical staff; and
- Introduced a schedule of occupational diseases.

Dr. Ambedkar's ambition to make industrial employment fair and compassionate was demonstrated by this action. His strategy combined administrative accuracy with compassion, an approach that would eventually impact India's Employees' Compensation Act, 1923 as amended after independence.

7.6 The Employment Exchanges (Compulsory Notification of Vacancies) Scheme, 1944

Dr. Ambedkar forecasted widespread unemployment as a result of the industrial transition and post-war demobilization. In order to solve this, he established the Employment Exchange System in 1944 through administrative measures, which were ultimately codified into law in 1948 in independent India.

This system required all major employers to notify vacancies to government exchanges, ensuring transparency in recruitment and fair access to job opportunities. It also enabled the state to collect labour-market data and plan employment policies systematically. Dr. Ambedkar saw employment as a right connected to human dignity, not merely as an economic variable.

7.7 The Labour Welfare Fund and the Tripartite Consultation System

Dr. Ambedkar developed the Labour Welfare Fund concept, which was first used in the coal and mica industries, after realizing that welfare went beyond pay. Worker housing, health care, education, and recreation were funded by this fund, which was raised through modest production or profit levies.

He also established the principle of Tripartite Consultation i.e. collaboration between the government, employers, and employees which became institutionalized later as the Indian Labour Conference (ILC). Dr. Ambedkar chaired several tripartite meetings, setting the tone for participatory industrial relations.

His speeches in the Council Proceedings (1945) reveal a consistent theme: “Industrial peace can never be legislated; it must be cultivated through justice and cooperation.”

7.8 The Dock Workers Regulation and Welfare Measures

During World War II, the number of dock workers increased dramatically due to military supplies. Dr. Ambedkar introduced welfare and safety measures for this unorganized workforce, including:

- Regulation of working hours and rest periods;
- Provision of canteens, rest shelters, and medical aid;
- Accident insurance and compensation; and
- Prohibition of child labour in dockyards.

These administrative innovations later culminated in the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1948 which is one of India’s earliest sector-specific labour welfare laws.

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7.9 Labour Research, Statistics, and Training

Dr. Ambedkar also institutionalized labour research and training. He established the Directorate General of Labour Welfare and promoted systematic data collection on wages, employment, and productivity. He advocated vocational training for industrial workers and emphasized skill development as a pillar of economic democracy.

He initiated the publication of the Labour Gazette (revamped in 1943) as an official medium to disseminate policy information and labour statistics. These initiatives laid the foundation for modern labour administration in India.

7.10 Overall Impact and Ideological Significance

By the end of his tenure in 1946, Dr. Ambedkar had transformed the Labour Department into a dynamic ministry focused on human welfare. His reforms combined economic rationality

with moral responsibility, bridging colonial structures and the aspirations of a future welfare state.

Together, his actions brought about three significant changes:

- 1. Humanization of Labour Law:** turns workers into citizens with rights rather than just tools of production.
- 2. Welfare and Efficiency Integration:** Connecting industrial development with social justice.
- 3. Institutionalization of Tripartite Dialogue:** embedding democratic values into the economic system.

Dr. Ambedkar's legislative work thus anticipated many post-independence developments, from the Factories Act (1948) to recently implemented four new labour codes. His approach ensured that the economic reconstruction of India would rest upon a foundation of dignity, equality, and security for all workers.

8. Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

Dr. Ambedkar's influence on post-independence labour law is profound. Many statutes enacted after 1947, such as the Factories Act (1948), Minimum Wages Act (1948), and Industrial Disputes Act (1947) bear his intellectual imprint. The Indian Constitution's Directive Principles institutionalized his call for social and economic justice.

In today's globalized economy, Dr. Ambedkar's vision remains strikingly relevant. The liberalization era has introduced labour flexibility, privatization, and informalization trends that risk undermining welfare principles. Dr. Ambedkar foresaw this tension and warned that democracy without economic equality would degenerate into oligarchy (Dr. Ambedkar, States and Minorities 14).

His call for state responsibility resonates strongly amidst ongoing debates about India's four new labour codes. These codes consolidate 29 existing laws but have drawn criticism for weakening collective bargaining and social security. Re-examining Dr. Ambedkar's approach can guide policymakers toward balancing economic efficiency with social equity.

Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar's idea of labour dignity remains critical in a society still marked by caste and class divides. His assertion that "labour is not a commodity" (Rodrigues 301) continues to challenge exploitative practices in both organized and unorganized sectors. Dr. Ambedkar's writings in the Labour Gazette, 1944, stressed that the progress of industry depends on the humanization of labour conditions, not their mechanization.

The Code on Wages, the Industrial Relations Code, the Social Security Code, and the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code are the four new labor codes that

were passed in 2020 and implemented recently on 21st November, 2025. They represent the most extensive restructuring of Indian labour legislation since Independence. Ambedkar's fundamental labor philosophy, which placed a strong emphasis on social insurance, controlled working conditions, statutory wage protection, and a fair framework for employer-employee relations, is reflected in these rules. These unified regulations give new life to Ambedkar's demands for a fair labor market, worker dignity, and the state's duty to guarantee welfare. The new Labour Codes continue the reforms that Ambedkar started as a Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council by aiming to strengthen occupational safety standards, rationalize industrial dispute procedures, extend social security to unorganized-sector workers, and universalize minimum wages. Despite their modern form, these rules show how Ambedkar's legislative legacy continues to influence labor administration in India in the twenty-first century and represent the socio-economic vision's lasting relevance.

9. Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's legacy as the architect of Indian labour justice transcends his legislative achievements. His socio-economic philosophy combined moral conviction with pragmatic reform, laying the intellectual groundwork for the welfare state. By connecting labour welfare with constitutional morality, Dr. Ambedkar established a vision of justice that remains indispensable to India's democracy.

Revisiting his contributions reveals that labour reform, for Dr. Ambedkar, was not merely an economic concern but a civilizational project one aimed at restoring human dignity. His principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity continue to illuminate the path toward a just and inclusive labour regime. In an age of economic restructuring and growing inequality, Dr. Ambedkar's vision offers an enduring framework for reconciling industrial growth with social justice.

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