



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Ambedkar's Vision Of *Dharma* In A Modern Secular Nation

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Abstract: This paper examines B. R. Ambedkar's reconception of *dharma* as a secular duty within a modern republic. It rejects the ritual- and caste-based prescriptions of Vedic orthodoxy and reframes *dharma* as universal principles grounded in reason, human dignity and social justice. Drawing on Ambedkar's Riddles in Hinduism [1], Annihilation of Caste [2], Buddha and His Dhamma [3], and his Constituent Assembly speeches [4], it traces his critique of ritual *dharma*, adoption of Buddhist rationalism and constitutional embedding of secular *dharma*. This study uncovers how Ambedkar's vision supplies a robust ethical foundation for a pluralistic state committed to equality and justice.

Index Terms - Ambedkar; Ambedkarite *Dharma*; Secular *Dharma*; Constitutional *Dharma*; Social Justice

I. INTRODUCTION

Dharma has served as moral guide and social regulator within South Asian traditions, yet its ritualistic and hierarchical dimensions conflict with modern secular values [5]. Scholars have noted how ancient prescriptions anchored authority in birth and caste, yielding systemic inequality and social injustice [6], [7]. Ambedkar confronted this tension by redefining *dharma* not as hereditary rites or caste duties but as a universal code of ethical conduct rooted in reason and human dignity [1], [3]. He rejected scriptural sanction for social stratification and championed a constitutional structure that assigns moral responsibility to each citizen, regardless of birth or creed. His embrace of Buddhist rationalism and central role in drafting the Indian Constitution illustrate how he embedded secular *dharma* within the republic's highest law. This paper traces his intellectual journey through three phases. First, it examines his rigorous critique of Vedic orthodoxy and caste-prescribed *dharma* in the early works Riddles in Hinduism [1] and Annihilation of Caste [2]. Second, it analyses his reinterpretation of Buddhism as a rational religion in Buddha and His Dhamma [3], where he distils core ethical principles and equates them with secular *dharma*. Third, it explores his constitutional interventions (1947–1950) wherein he translated these ethical principles into fundamental rights and directive principles, thus operationalising *dharma* at state level [4]. Finally, the study assesses contemporary implications for India's ongoing struggles against caste discrimination, gender inequality and environmental crisis, and considers how Ambedkar's model may inform global discussions on pluralism and secular ethics.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This inquiry adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in textual analysis. It proceeds through systematic examination of primary sources and corroborates findings with secondary literature.

1. Textual Close Reading: Each primary text—*Riddles in Hinduism* [1], *Annihilation of Caste* [2], *Buddha and His Dhamma* [3] and Constituent Assembly Debates [4]—underwent multiple close readings. Key passages received thematic coding to identify recurring ethical imperatives, critiques of ritual and proposals for social reform.

2. Comparative Ethical Analysis: The study maps Ambedkar's ethical proposals onto Western moral theories, specifically Kantian autonomy [9] and Rawlsian justice [10], to highlight convergences and divergences.

Contextual Corroboration: Secondary works—Jaffrelot [6], Keer [7], Zelliot [8]—provide historical and biographical context that clarifies Ambedkar's motivations and social impact. Where primary texts reference contemporary events (e.g., the Nagpur conversion in 1956), corroboration from historical scholarship ensures accuracy.

3. Synthesis and Interpretation: Findings from textual and comparative analyses coalesce into an account of how Ambedkar constructs a secular *dharma*. This synthesis reveals both theoretical innovations and practical applications within constitutional law. Through this method, the paper delivers a coherent narrative that aligns historical context, ethical theory and legal architecture into a unified study of secular *dharma*.

1. Data and Sources of Data

1.1. Primary Texts

Ambedkar, B. R., *Riddles in Hinduism*, Government Press, 1929 [1]. Ambedkar, B. R., *Annihilation of Caste*, Thacker & Co., 1936 [2]. Ambedkar, B. R., *Buddha and His Dhamma*, Education Dept., Government of Maharashtra, 1956 [3]. Ambedkar, B. R., in Jain, A. (Ed.), *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 4, Government of Maharashtra, 1979 [4].

1.2. Secondary Literature

Jaffrelot, C., *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System*, Columbia University Press, 2005 [6]. Keer, D., *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 3rd ed., Popular Prakashan, 2003 [7]. Zelliot, E., *Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement: The Final Phase, 1936–1956*, Manohar, 1992 [8]. Doniger, W., *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Penguin, 2011 [5]. Oliver, P., *Law Texts in Translation*, 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2012 [11]. Sen, A., *Development as Freedom*, Knopf, 2002 [12]. Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S., *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*, Oxford University Press, 2010 [13].

2. Theoretical framework

This study situates Ambedkar's secular *dharma* within a hybrid moral model that integrates: **Buddhist Rationalism:** Prioritises reason and social welfare, extracted from the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path [3]. **Kantian Deontology:** Upholds autonomy and universalizability, as expressed in the categorical imperative [9]. **Rawlsian Justice:** Focuses on fairness for the least advantaged through principles of justice as fairness [10].

Ambedkar aligns with Kant on respecting persons as ends, yet he critiques Kant for insufficient concern for socioeconomic conditions. He embraces Rawls's difference principle to ensure material equality. He merges these views with Buddhist compassionate ethics to produce a *dharma* that demands both moral agency and collective welfare. This framework guides analysis of how secular *dharma* manifests in constitutional law.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Critique of Ritual *Dharma*

Ambedkar saw ritual *dharma* as the foundation of Brahmanical hegemony. He held that texts such as the *Manusmṛiti* did not emerge from divine revelation but reflected deliberate attempts to ossify privilege under religious sanction. These texts, rather than fostering spiritual liberation, served the interests of a priestly class intent on codifying inequality. In *Riddles in Hinduism*, Ambedkar deconstructed these texts with an unrelenting logical clarity. He called attention to their internal inconsistencies, highlighting their shifting and contradictory rules regarding caste obligations, punishment and social roles.

In Ambedkar's reading, *Manusmṛiti*'s version of *dharma* established a hierarchy that robbed individuals of moral agency. For example, *Sudras* were denied the right to study the Vedas, to possess property in some contexts, or even to accumulate merit through religious ritual. *Dharma*, as prescribed, became an

instrument of exclusion. “The purpose of these dharmashastras”, Ambedkar wrote, “was not to instruct in ethics, but to ensure obedience and subservience” [1, p. 45].

Ambedkar's critique also focused on the epistemic basis of such *dharma*. He did not merely denounce the content of the scriptures; he rejected the very idea that religious authority ought to command moral authority. The source of moral obligation, for him, lay not in scriptural decree but in rational reflection and human solidarity. This philosophical stance echoed Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, yet Ambedkar took the idea further. Unlike Kant, who abstracted duty from context, Ambedkar insisted that duty could not remain meaningful without attending to the realities of social power and institutional oppression.

Ambedkar charged ritual with an anti-humanist bias. The elaborate rules of purity and pollution, for instance, operated to degrade those who fell outside Brahmanical norms. Untouchability was not a religious accident—it was an institutional outcome of ritual *dharma*. By exposing how religious injunctions justified systemic violence and social humiliation, Ambedkar performed a critical inversion: he transformed *dharma* from a metaphysical category into a site of political struggle.

B. Reframing Dharma as Secular Duty

Ambedkar reconceived *dharma* not as a ritual or inherited obligation, but as a moral ideal rooted in reason, ethical universality and social justice. He found a profound alternative in the *Dhamma* of the Buddha, which he interpreted as a rational, human-centred philosophy rather than a religion dependent on metaphysical speculation. His *Dhamma*, he wrote, “is not a religion in the sense in which the term is understood. It is a way of life based on principles of righteousness” [3, p. 45].

He declared this form of *dharma* as entirely secular in its foundation. It did not require belief in an afterlife, nor did it draw its authority from supernatural command. Instead, it mandated actions based on empathy, equality and social interdependence. Non-violence (*ahimsā*), generosity (*dāna*), truthfulness (*satya*) and right livelihood (*samyak ājīva*) emerged as core duties for every citizen, irrespective of religious affiliation. He understood these principles not as optional virtues but as moral imperatives necessary for the survival of democracy.

Ambedkar's secular *dharma* does not deny spiritual longing but insists that spirituality must align with justice. He famously warned that democracy without associated moral principles would dissolve into majoritarianism or authoritarianism. In *Buddha and His Dhamma*, he outlined how a society governed by secular *dharma* would enable peaceful coexistence among diverse communities. It would guarantee the dignity of the individual, especially the most vulnerable, by anchoring morality not in fear of divine punishment but in the practical necessity of compassion and mutual respect.

Ambedkar's use of the term “*dhamma*” rather than “religion” was deliberate. *Dhamma* represented a collective moral order that emphasised reciprocal obligation rather than hierarchical submission. It spoke to both inner transformation and social reformation. “The purpose of *dhamma*”, Ambedkar stated, “is to reconstruct society on the basis of equality and fraternity” [3, p. 58]. He believed such a conception of *dharma* could uphold constitutional values better than any imported Western moral theory or traditional Indian orthodoxy.

C. Constitutional Embedding of Dharma

Ambedkar's ethical transformation of *dharma* reached its institutional zenith through his work on the Indian Constitution. He viewed the Constitution not merely as a legal document but as an ethical blueprint for a just society. Through its provisions, he sought to translate the abstract ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty into enforceable rights and duties. His vision of secular *dharma* materialised in three crucial domains: fundamental rights, directive principles of state policy and the moral responsibilities of the citizen [4].

The Constitution enshrined individual dignity through Articles 14 to 17, which guarantee equality before the law and prohibit untouchability. These provisions struck directly at the heart of caste-based *dharma* [4]. Ambedkar believed that a state must not only forbid social discrimination but must affirmatively dismantle its structural roots. The Constitution, therefore, did not merely negate ritual *dharma*; it replaced it with a new moral order rooted in justice and rational obligation [2], [4].

Ambedkar's commitment to social democracy manifested in the directive principles. Although not legally enforceable, they served as moral beacons. Articles 38, 39, and 46 laid the groundwork for what Ambedkar called “a just social order”, obligating the state to reduce inequality, protect labour and uplift disadvantaged groups [4], [6]. In these provisions, secular *dharma* becomes civic ethics. The state no longer relies on metaphysical justifications but on rational principles aimed at collective welfare [4], [10].

Ambedkar also introduced constitutional morality as a foundational ideal. During the Constituent Assembly debates, he insisted that the success of democracy would depend not merely on institutions but on the moral

conduct of those who operate them [4]. Constitutional morality demanded allegiance to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity—not in abstraction, but as governing norms in everyday political behaviour [4], [6]. *Dharma*, redefined in this way, required citizens and leaders alike to transcend communal loyalties and embody a universal ethical disposition [3], [4].

This constitutional embedding of *dharma* reflected a philosophical departure from both the Hindu shastras and Western liberalism. Unlike Hindu texts, the Constitution placed no moral authority in divine revelation or inherited status [1], [2]. Unlike certain Western liberal traditions, it did not isolate individual liberty from collective responsibility [9], [10]. Ambedkar fused the Buddhist ethos of ethical interdependence with modern constitutionalism, crafting a framework where *dharma* served both the soul of the nation and the conscience of the citizen [3], [4].

D. Contemporary Implications of Ambedkar's *Dharma*

Ambedkar's reconceptualisation of *dharma* continues to resonate in contemporary India, where struggles against caste discrimination, gender inequality, religious violence and environmental degradation remain urgent [6], [13]. His vision offers not only a critique of regressive practices but a roadmap for ethical renewal [3], [4].

Caste remains a deep structural problem despite constitutional safeguards. Practices of manual scavenging, residential segregation and exclusion from education and employment still persist in various forms [6], [13]. In this context, Ambedkar's secular *dharma* calls for more than legal enforcement. It demands moral awakening. Social justice, in his terms, cannot occur without a shift in ethical consciousness. Public discourse must move beyond tokenism to address how caste shapes daily interactions, institutional behaviour and cultural norms [2], [6], [8]. Ambedkar's writings underscore that legal reform, absent ethical transformation, will not suffice [2], [4].

Gender inequality also reveals the need for Ambedkar's *dharma*. He opposed Manusmṛiti not only for its casteism but also for its patriarchal injunctions [1], [2]. He saw the subjugation of women as part of the same ritual order that sanctioned caste. His vision of secular *dharma* affirmed the autonomy of women as moral agents, not as dependents or bearers of family honour [3], [6], [8]. His insistence on equal rights in marriage, property and education remains foundational for feminist struggles in India today [2], [4], [7].

Religious violence in postcolonial India underscores the necessity of Ambedkar's interreligious ethic. He warned against majoritarian moralities that weaponise religion against minorities [3], [4], [6]. His model of *dharma* rejects theological supremacy and grounds morality in mutual respect, civic responsibility and rational dialogue [3], [10]. In a society increasingly polarised by religious identity, Ambedkar's secular *dharma* remains the strongest antidote to communalism [4], [6].

Ambedkar's ethical vision also bears relevance to environmental concerns. Although he did not write explicitly on ecology, his principle of compassion and social interdependence supports ecological ethics [3]. The Buddhist ideal of right livelihood, which he integrated into secular *dharma*, requires sustainable engagement with nature [3], [10]. A society that regards all beings as interconnected must protect the earth not out of fear of divine punishment but out of rational care for future generations [3].

Internationally, Ambedkar's reinterpretation of *dharma* aligns with efforts to construct global ethics grounded in human rights, dignity and pluralism [4], [10], [12]. His work offers a non-Western, non-theological model of public morality suited to multi-religious, multicultural societies. As scholars and activists grapple with the ethics of coexistence in a fractured world, Ambedkar's *dharma* proposes a middle path—neither religious absolutism nor moral relativism, but an ethics of shared humanity anchored in reason and justice [3], [4], [10].

III. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank the library staff at Suri Vidyasagar College for assistance in accessing archival materials.

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