



# Ambedkar's Moral Argument For Gender Justice: Rational Autonomy, Buddhist Compassion And The Ethics Of Equality

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**Abstract:** This paper reconstructs B.R. Ambedkar's moral philosophy of gender justice by examining his criticism of Hindu patriarchy, his embrace of Buddhist ethical principles and his vision for legal reform. Ambedkar denounced religious customs that subjugated women and treated such norms as moral violations against human dignity. He turned to rational humanism and Buddhist compassion to frame a moral worldview grounded in equality, liberty and public responsibility. Drawing from core texts—*Annihilation of Caste*, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and the Constituent Assembly Debates—this study uncovers a coherent ethical framework that places gender justice at the center of democratic morality. Ambedkar did not view patriarchy as a sociological byproduct but as a foundational ethical crisis in Indian civilisation. His synthesis of rational autonomy and social compassion offers a transformative moral paradigm that retains urgent relevance in modern feminist and legal discourses.

**Index Terms - Ambedkar, Gender Justice, Buddhist Ethics, Rational Autonomy, Hindu Code Bill, Women's Rights, Moral Philosophy, Social Reform.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender justice stands among the most urgent moral concerns in any society that claims democratic legitimacy. In early twentieth-century India, legal and religious institutions upheld a social order that excluded women from rights, dignity and self-determination. Hindu *Dharmashastras* denied women independent personhood and subordinated them to men across all stages of life [1, 2] (Roy, 1998; Manu, 1969). Colonial laws codified these customs into legal norms, institutionalising unequal inheritance, compulsory obedience and civic invisibility [3] (Agnes, 1999). Caste-based traditions further compounded the marginalisation of Dalit women, who bore the double burden of ritual exclusion and gender exploitation [4, 5] (Omvedt, 1995; Rege, 1998). Against this backdrop, B.R. Ambedkar emerged as one of the few Indian thinkers who framed gender inequality not as a derivative social concern but as a direct moral failure. He rejected scriptural doctrines that denied women's autonomy, condemning them as rationally indefensible and ethically illegitimate [6] (Ambedkar, 1936). For Ambedkar, patriarchy did not represent a sociocultural tradition—it reflected a civilisational crisis. He approached gender justice as a normative ethical imperative, grounded not in sentiment but in rational equality and universal human dignity.

Ambedkar's ethical framework drew from three critical sources: a historical understanding of caste and patriarchy, the moral teachings of Buddhism and constitutional principles rooted in Enlightenment rationality. He did not simply condemn the Manusmṛiti; he offered an alternative system of values that prioritised compassion, moral agency and social equality [7] (Ambedkar, 1956). His critique of Hindu law and his embrace of Buddhist ethics redefined the moral architecture of justice in postcolonial India.

As India's first Law Minister, Ambedkar also translated this moral vision into legislative proposals, most notably the Hindu Code Bill. This bill aimed to eliminate polygamy, secure equal inheritance and grant women legal autonomy over guardianship and marriage [8] (Ambedkar, 1979). When political resistance thwarted its

passage, Ambedkar resigned in protest, framing his departure as an ethical act that upheld justice over compromise [8].

This paper reconstructs the structure of Ambedkar's moral argument by analysing his philosophical writings, ethical commitments and legislative interventions. It examines the social and historical conditions that shaped his views, his critique of patriarchal texts and his ethical turn toward Buddhism. The analysis then turns to his legal vision and concludes with a discussion of Ambedkar's enduring relevance in contemporary feminist, Dalit and global human rights movements.

Ambedkar argued that no moral order can claim legitimacy while subordinating half of its members. He demanded a foundational reorientation of ethics—one that places gender justice at the heart of any project for democratic modernity. His philosophy challenges both traditional authority and liberal minimalism, offering instead a moral call to reconstruct society on the principles of equality, rationality and compassion.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Data and Sources of Data

#### 2.1.1. Primary Texts

This study uses three of Ambedkar's foundational writings to reconstruct his moral argument for gender justice: *Annihilation of Caste* [6] (Ambedkar, 1936), *The Buddha and His Dhamma* [7] (Ambedkar, 1956) and his speeches in the Constituent Assembly recorded in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4* [8] (Ambedkar, 1979). These texts outline his moral philosophy and reveal the ethical reasoning behind his legal and political actions.

*Annihilation of Caste* exposes the ethical deficiencies of Brahminical tradition and its treatment of women. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* outlines an egalitarian ethical philosophy based on compassion, autonomy and moral responsibility. His parliamentary speeches demonstrate how Ambedkar translated these philosophical commitments into legal reforms.

#### 2.1.2. Secondary Literature

To contextualise and interpret Ambedkar's moral reasoning, the study draws upon established secondary sources from feminist ethics, Buddhist moral philosophy and Dalit studies. These include:

- G. Forbes's *Women in Colonial India* [3] (Forbes, 1996), which documents the legal and cultural constraints placed on women.
- Sharmila Rege's essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently* [5] (Rege, 1998), which applies Ambedkar's insights to intersectional feminism.
- Eleanor Zelliot's *From Untouchable to Dalit* and Christophe Jaffrelot's *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* [9, 10] (Zelliot, 1992; Jaffrelot, 2005), which provide political and intellectual background.
- Peter Harvey's *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* [11] (Harvey, 2000), which illuminates the moral foundation of Buddhist compassion that Ambedkar adopted.
- Dhananjay Keer's *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* [12] (Keer, 2003), which traces the evolution of Ambedkar's moral and legal thought.

Each source contributes to the ethical interpretation of Ambedkar's work. These materials support a comprehensive understanding of how caste, gender and moral reasoning intersect in his philosophy.

### 2.2. Theoretical Framework

Ambedkar's moral vision rests on three foundational concepts: **rational autonomy**, **compassionate responsibility** and **structural justice**. This study reconstructs his ethical argument using these principles while placing them in dialogue with Kantian moral philosophy and Buddhist ethics.

Ambedkar embraced **rational autonomy** as a universal moral capacity. He rejected any tradition or custom that denied women this rational faculty [6] (Ambedkar, 1936). His insistence on reason as the basis of moral law aligns closely with Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant asserts that moral judgment must originate from autonomous rational will [13] (Kant, 1997, p. 46).

Simultaneously, Ambedkar placed compassion at the centre of ethical life. He described Buddhist compassion not as sentimental feeling but as a moral force that demands structural change [7] (Ambedkar, 1956). He affirmed the Buddha's rejection of metaphysical hierarchies and ritual exclusion, viewing Dhamma as a philosophy of interdependence and justice. Peter Harvey confirms this view in his analysis of Buddhist ethics, where moral responsibility stems from volitional action and not birth-based status [11] (Harvey, 2000, p. 62). Ambedkar rejected utilitarianism and scriptural morality alike. He did not ground justice in public consensus or religious command. Instead, he framed **moral law as the rational and compassionate transformation of society's unjust structures**. He demanded legal institutions that reflect dignity, not tradition; reason, not reverence.

This framework positions Ambedkar's philosophy as a moral challenge to Brahminical patriarchy, legal formalism and cultural conservatism. His integration of Buddhist ethics and Enlightenment rationality formulates a comprehensive moral theory—one that remains relevant to contemporary feminist ethics, intersectionality and human rights discourses.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Critique of Patriarchal Dharma and Scriptural Authority

Ambedkar directly confronted the theological basis of gender subordination in Hindu society. He treated the *Dharmashastras*, particularly the *Manusmṛiti*, not as sacred texts but as instruments of systemic oppression. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he condemned every passage that denied women their agency and rights. He wrote, "Every passage in the *Dharmashastra* that brands women as inferior must be condemned and discarded" [6] (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 33). Ambedkar understood that religious texts served to naturalise inequality by cloaking discrimination in divine authority.

He saw Hindu orthodoxy as morally inconsistent, for it privileged ritual purity over ethical reasoning. *Manusmṛiti* 9.3 declares that a woman must remain under male guardianship throughout her life [2] (Manu, 1969, p. 88). Ambedkar refuted this injunction, stating that no religion which denies rational agency to half its adherents can claim moral legitimacy [6] (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 31). In his address to the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, he refused any reform that retained caste or gender hierarchy. He declared, "Caste and gender stand as twin mechanisms of oppression. One cannot fall without the other" [6] (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 29).

He also rejected ritualistic concepts of bodily impurity, such as menstrual segregation and widowhood isolation, which disproportionately affected women [3] (Forbes, 1996, p. 131). Ambedkar stated, "A human being must be judged by one's character and conduct, never by caste or bodily function" [6] (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 36). He called for an ethical foundation grounded in dignity and rational autonomy, not purity taboos or divine hierarchy.

#### 3.2. Ethical Basis in Buddhism and Rational Autonomy

Ambedkar turned to Buddhism to reconstruct an ethical system that affirmed equality, rejected hierarchy and prioritised compassion. He did not approach Buddhism as a metaphysical doctrine but as a philosophy of moral emancipation. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar presented the Buddha as a rational reformer who dismantled the authority of Brahminical rituals and upheld women's right to spiritual progress [7] (Ambedkar, 1956, p. 10).

He celebrated the Buddha's decision to ordain women as bhikkhunis, calling it a direct affirmation of their moral agency. Ambedkar insisted that compassion in Buddhism excluded no one. "Compassion to all excludes no one—neither Dalit nor woman. It offers one universal vision of moral worth" [7] (Ambedkar, 1956, p. 16). Buddhist ethics, for him, did not support ascetic detachment but called for public responsibility and structural change.

Ambedkar integrated this Buddhist ethics with Enlightenment rationality. He argued that only reason can identify moral truths applicable to all individuals regardless of gender, caste, or status [7] (Ambedkar, 1956, p. 19). He affirmed that women possess the same moral and intellectual faculties as men. Denying women educational or civic rights contradicts both logic and justice. This view aligns with Kant's ethical theory, where reason provides the universal ground for moral law [13] (Kant, 1997, p. 46).

Ambedkar saw no conflict between compassion and reason. He wove them together to create a philosophy that justified rights through logic and urged solidarity through empathy. He framed women's rights as moral imperatives that democratic societies must institutionalise.

#### 3.3. Legal Philosophy and the Hindu Code Bill

Ambedkar carried his moral reasoning into the legislative domain as India's first Law Minister. He drafted the Hindu Code Bill to eliminate patriarchal inequalities in personal law. The bill sought to ban polygamy, secure equal inheritance rights for daughters and guarantee women's authority over child guardianship [8] (Ambedkar, 1979, pp. 654–659). He declared, "Personal law must reflect principles of justice. It cannot perpetuate gender-based disabilities in a republic that upholds equality" [8] (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 654).

Ambedkar linked these legal provisions to the ethical foundations of the Indian Constitution, particularly its guarantees of equality and dignity. In his speech to the Constituent Assembly on November 19, 1948, he declared, "A society that treats half its population as minors cannot claim moral progress. Marriage must become a contract of equals" [8] (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 658). He dismissed scriptural references offered by conservative opponents, asserting, "Scriptural verses deserve no reverence if they contradict reason and justice" [8] (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 660).

When political pressure forced dilution of key provisions, Ambedkar chose to resign. He justified his resignation as a moral protest: "To remain in a government that sacrifices justice for expediency would betray the very ideals I pledged to uphold" [8] (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 668). Though the original bill failed, many of



its principles reappeared in subsequent legislation, including the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956) [14, 15]. These laws institutionalised portions of Ambedkar's moral vision, though they remained incomplete.

### 3.4. Intersectionality and Global Resonance

Ambedkar's philosophy provided a foundation for intersectional feminist thought in India. Dalit feminists such as Sharmila Rege used Ambedkar's ethical arguments to critique both caste patriarchy and mainstream feminism [5] (Rege, 1998). Ambedkar's insistence on rational autonomy and structural compassion enabled a feminist standpoint grounded in social justice, not abstract liberalism.

Dalit women's movements adopted Ambedkar's moral language to demand rights to education, land, legal protection and representation [16] (Narayan, 2014). They did not appeal to pity or inclusion but to equality, agency and justice. Ambedkar's ethical grammar enabled these struggles to articulate a comprehensive challenge to structural injustice.

Globally, his argument resonates in societies where customary laws continue to subordinate women. His demand that cultural practices submit to universal moral scrutiny anticipates international human rights frameworks such as CEDAW (1979) [17]. His philosophy allows oppressed communities to challenge injustice without surrendering cultural identity.

Leela Gandhi describes Ambedkar's thought as part of a "transnational archive of moral resistance" [18] (Gandhi, 2006, p. 117). His synthesis of Buddhism, constitutionalism and rational ethics offers a globally relevant model for democratic justice grounded in human dignity.

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