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Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to welfare labour with special reference to industrial workers

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Abstract

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar made seminal contributions to labour welfare in India, with particular emphasis on the protection and empowerment of industrial workers. As a distinguished economist, jurist, and social reformer, his labour philosophy was deeply rooted in social justice, equality, and human dignity. Serving as the Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-1946), Ambedkar initiated progressive labour reforms aimed at improving working conditions, reducing working hours, and ensuring paid holidays—measures that later received international recognition through the International Labour Organization. He played a decisive role in shaping key labour legislations such as the Industrial Disputes Act, Factories Act, Minimum Wages Act, and Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act, which collectively strengthened workers' rights, wage security, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Ambedkar also strongly advocated for trade union recognition and collective bargaining, recognizing them as essential tools against industrial exploitation. His vision of labour welfare extended beyond legislation to include social security, healthcare, education, and housing for workers. As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar embedded labour welfare within its framework through Articles 23, 24, 39, and 43, addressing forced labour, child labour, wage equality, and living wages. Overall, Ambedkar's contributions laid the foundation for a humane, equitable, and rights-based labour system in India, particularly benefiting marginalized industrial workers.

Keywords: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, labour welfare, industrial workers, labour rights, social justice, worker protection

Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a visionary economist, legal scholar, and social reformer, made remarkable contributions to the welfare of laborers, particularly industrial workers. His dedication to worker rights was rooted in his broader fight for social justice and equality. As a key architect of modern India's labor policies, Ambedkar sought to protect workers from exploitation and ensure their economic security. His approach combined legal, economic, and social reforms that emphasized the importance of dignity, fairness, and justice for all workers, particularly marginalized groups like Dalits. One of Ambedkar's major contributions was his work in the Labour Department of the Government of India, where he served as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council between 1942 and 1946. During this time, he championed several reforms that significantly improved the working conditions of industrial workers. He played a pivotal role in advocating for labor laws that were both progressive and humane. For instance, he demanded holidays with pay and a reduction in working hours, which was a revolutionary idea for that time. His efforts were recognized globally, as seen in the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopting a resolution on these demands in 1945. Ambedkar was also instrumental in pushing forward key labor legislations that form the backbone of India's labor rights framework. The Industrial Disputes Act, the Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act, the Minimum Wages Act, and the Factories Act are all legislative milestones that were achieved during his tenure. These laws were primarily focused on improving working conditions, ensuring fair wages, and providing legal mechanisms to resolve industrial disputes. His keen interest in the welfare of industrial workers was evident in the way these acts were formulated, with specific provisions that protected workers from unfair practices and safeguarded their rights in the workplace.

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One of Ambedkar's standout contributions to labor welfare was his focus on the recognition of trade unions. He moved the Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill in the Legislative Assembly, which sought to make the recognition of trade unions compulsory. This was a significant move as it gave workers the right to organize and collectively bargain for their rights, thus strengthening their position against employers. Ambedkar understood that the ability of workers to organize and negotiate as a collective was essential for ensuring fair treatment and justice in the industrial sector. In addition to legislative reforms, Ambedkar was deeply committed to the idea of social security for workers. He believed that a just society must provide for the basic needs of its citizens, particularly those in vulnerable positions like laborers. His vision of social security went beyond mere economic sustenance—it included access to healthcare, housing, and education for workers and their families. His advocacy for the welfare state laid the foundation for many of the social security measures that exist in India today. Ambedkar's labor policies were not just about legal and economic reforms; they were also rooted in his belief in social justice. He was particularly concerned with the plight of Dalit laborers, who often faced the dual oppression of economic exploitation and caste-based discrimination. His emphasis on equality and dignity for all workers, regardless of their social background, was a crucial aspect of his labor reforms. He fought against the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies that dehumanized Dalit laborers and sought to uplift them through both legal protections and social reforms.

Labour Welfare and Rights in the Constitution

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to labor welfare and rights within the Indian Constitution were transformative. His efforts to include specific provisions that protect workers from exploitation, ensure wage equality, and promote decent working conditions laid the foundation for modern labor rights in India. Through Articles 23, 24, 39, and 43, Ambedkar's vision for social and economic justice is enshrined in the country's legal framework, ensuring that labor welfare remains a key focus in the ongoing pursuit of equality and dignity for all citizens. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, was deeply committed to ensuring that the rights of laborers and workers were enshrined within the legal framework of the newly independent nation. As an economist, social reformer, and legal scholar, Ambedkar was acutely aware of the widespread exploitation of laborers in India, especially those belonging to marginalized and vulnerable sections of society, such as Dalits. His efforts to address these inequalities and improve the conditions of workers are reflected in various provisions of the Indian Constitution, which safeguard labor welfare and workers' rights. Ambedkar's approach to labor rights was not limited to temporary measures or short-term reforms. Instead, he sought to build a long-lasting legal framework that would guarantee labor rights and ensure social justice. He recognized that labor issues were closely linked to the broader challenges of social and economic inequality, which required structural changes in law and policy. His contributions in this area continue to influence labor rights in India to this day.

Ambedkar was determined to eliminate the long-standing practice of forced labor, which was particularly prevalent in

the agricultural sector, where bonded labor and other forms of exploitation were rampant. Article 23 of the Constitution directly addresses this issue by prohibiting any form of forced labor or human trafficking. This article ensures that no individual can be coerced into working under oppressive conditions, a provision that has been critical in protecting vulnerable workers from exploitation and modern-day slavery. The inclusion of this article reflects Ambedkar's commitment to abolishing the systemic oppression that had historically subjugated large sections of Indian society. Ambedkar was also concerned with the exploitation of child labor, particularly in hazardous industries where children were often forced to work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. Article 24 of the Constitution prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 in factories, mines, or other hazardous occupations. By incorporating this provision, Ambedkar sought to protect children from physical and psychological harm while emphasizing the importance of education and a healthy upbringing for the future of the nation. This article has since served as the legal basis for numerous child labor reforms in India.

Ambedkar strongly believed in gender equality and was an advocate for fair wages for all workers, regardless of gender. Article 39 of the Constitution, which forms part of the Directive Principles of State Policy, calls for equal pay for equal work for both men and women. This provision underscores the importance of wage equality and economic justice, a principle that Ambedkar championed throughout his career. He recognized that women workers, especially those from marginalized communities, were often paid significantly less than their male counterparts, and sought to address this injustice through constitutional safeguards. The Directive Principles of State Policy, though non-justiciable, provide a moral and ethical framework for the governance of the country. Ambedkar played a crucial role in shaping these principles, which reflect his vision of a socially just and equitable society. Article 43 of the Constitution states that the State shall endeavor to secure for all workers a living wage and decent conditions of work. This article emphasizes Ambedkar's belief in the necessity of economic security for workers and his commitment to ensuring that laborers could live with dignity. It reflects his broader vision of creating a welfare state that prioritized the well-being of its citizens, particularly the working class.

Labor Laws and Protections

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to labor laws and protections were instrumental in shaping the modern labor landscape in India. As the first Labour Minister of India, he advocated for workers' rights, particularly those of industrial laborers, and helped to enact laws that improved working conditions, ensured fair wages, and provided legal protections. His support for collective bargaining, his role in shaping the Minimum Wages Act, and his contributions to the Factory Act and Workmen's Compensation Act reflect his commitment to creating a more just and equitable society for workers. Ambedkar's legacy as a champion of labor welfare continues to influence labor laws and policies in India, ensuring that workers are protected from exploitation and treated with dignity. Although the Indian Trade Unions Act was enacted before Ambedkar's tenure as Labour Minister, his advocacy for the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively significantly advanced the cause of labor unionization. The Indian Trade Unions Act,

1926, gave legal recognition to trade unions and allowed workers to form unions to negotiate with employers over wages, working conditions, and other labor-related matters. Ambedkar's strong belief in collective bargaining reflected his understanding that workers, especially industrial laborers, were vulnerable to exploitation by employers if they did not have the right to organize.

Ambedkar supported the amendment of this law during his tenure as Labour Minister, moving the Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill in the Legislative Assembly, which aimed to make the recognition of trade unions compulsory. This move strengthened the position of labor unions and workers, giving them greater bargaining power and legal recognition, further protecting their rights. One of Ambedkar's most lasting contributions to labor welfare was his advocacy for minimum wage legislation. The Minimum Wages Act, enacted in 1948, was a critical law that provided a legal floor for wages across various industries, ensuring that laborers were not paid less than a certain amount. The Act aimed to prevent the exploitation of workers, particularly industrial laborers, who were often subjected to low wages and harsh working conditions. Ambedkar's push for the Minimum Wages Act was driven by his belief that workers should be paid fairly for their labor, allowing them to live with dignity and financial security. By advocating for a legal minimum wage, Ambedkar addressed the deep economic inequalities faced by industrial workers, many of whom came from marginalized communities. The Act served as a tool to combat poverty and exploitation, and it continues to be a cornerstone of India's labor law framework.

The Factory Act, 1948, was another significant labor law that Ambedkar had a hand in shaping. This Act introduced regulations that improved the working conditions of factory laborers, addressing issues related to health, safety, and welfare. Ambedkar played a key role in drafting provisions that limited working hours, ensured paid leave, and mandated fair wages for workers. The Act also required employers to provide safe working environments, which was a crucial measure in industries where hazardous conditions often led to injury and illness among workers. Ambedkar's contributions to the Factory Act underscored his belief that workers should not only receive fair compensation but also work in environments that were safe and conducive to their well-being. His efforts helped to establish a legal framework that regulated factory operations, protecting workers from exploitation and ensuring that their rights were safeguarded. While the Workmen's Compensation Act was enacted in 1923, before Ambedkar's time in the Labour Department, he was a vocal supporter of expanding and strengthening its provisions. The Act provided compensation to workers who suffered injuries or accidents during their employment, ensuring that they and their families were financially supported in the event of workplace accidents. Ambedkar's focus was on ensuring that this law was effectively implemented and that workers were fairly compensated for injuries sustained at work. He believed that industrial workers, who often faced dangerous working conditions, deserved legal protections that guaranteed compensation in the event of injury or death. By advocating for the strengthening of the Workmen's Compensation Act, Ambedkar ensured that workers had access to justice and economic security, even in difficult circumstances.

Social Security for Workers

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a staunch advocate for social security measures and welfare schemes for workers in India, particularly those engaged in industrial labor. His contributions to labor welfare were not limited to securing better working conditions but extended to ensuring that workers had social and economic security during and after their employment. As a leader dedicated to fighting for the rights of marginalized groups, Ambedkar's focus on labor welfare helped create a more just and equitable society, where workers had legal protections and access to essential services. One of Ambedkar's key achievements in this area was his role in the introduction of various social security schemes, including the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Scheme and the Provident Fund Scheme. These programs aimed to provide financial protection and healthcare benefits to workers, addressing their needs during sickness, disability, maternity, and retirement. By advocating for such reforms, Ambedkar laid the foundation for the modern welfare state in India.

The Employees' State Insurance (ESI) Scheme is one of the most significant social security measures introduced in India during Ambedkar's tenure. This scheme was designed to provide comprehensive health insurance and social security benefits to workers. It covered medical care, sickness benefits, maternity benefits, and financial protection in case of disability or death due to employment-related injuries. Ambedkar's deep commitment to the welfare of laborers was evident in his push for such measures, recognizing that economic security and healthcare were fundamental rights of workers. The ESI Scheme provided a safety net for industrial workers, many of whom were employed in hazardous environments. It ensured that workers and their families had access to medical care and financial assistance during times of illness or injury, reducing the financial burden on low-wage workers and improving their quality of life. Ambedkar's vision of welfare economics was central to the development of this scheme. He believed that the state had a responsibility to provide for the health and well-being of its citizens, particularly those who contributed to the economy through labor. The ESI Scheme was a reflection of this belief, and it continues to be a cornerstone of India's social security framework.

Another major contribution of Dr. Ambedkar to labor welfare was his role in the introduction of the Provident Fund Scheme. This scheme was designed to provide financial security for workers after retirement, ensuring that they had savings to rely on in their later years. Ambedkar understood that many industrial workers faced the threat of poverty after retirement, especially those who had spent their working lives in low-wage, physically demanding jobs. The Provident Fund Scheme allowed workers to save a portion of their income during their employment, with contributions from both the worker and the employer. These savings could then be accessed by the worker after retirement or in the event of certain emergencies. Ambedkar's push for this scheme was motivated by his desire to protect workers from post-retirement poverty and ensure that they could live with dignity even after their working years were over. By advocating for the Provident Fund, Ambedkar addressed one of the most pressing issues facing workers at the time: the lack of financial security in old age. The scheme provided a safety net for industrial workers, allowing them to retire without fear of destitution.

It also reflected Ambedkar's broader vision of social and economic justice, where workers' rights were protected not just during their employment but throughout their lives.

In addition to advocating for social security measures, Dr. Ambedkar was also instrumental in improving the working conditions of industrial laborers. One of his most significant achievements in this area was the reduction of the workday to eight hours. Before Ambedkar's intervention, industrial workers often faced oppressive working hours that could stretch much longer, leading to exhaustion, poor health, and diminished quality of life. Ambedkar's efforts to reduce the workday to eight hours were a landmark achievement in labor rights. By limiting working hours, he ensured that industrial workers had a more humane and regulated workday, allowing them time for rest, family, and personal well-being. This reform was a significant step toward improving the quality of life for workers and promoting a more balanced and sustainable approach to labor. Furthermore, Ambedkar was a strong advocate for the right to strike, recognizing the importance of collective action in labor movements. He believed that workers should have the ability to organize and protest against unfair labor practices, including poor working conditions, low wages, and exploitation by employers. The right to strike was a critical tool for workers to negotiate better terms of employment and hold employers accountable for violations of labor rights. Ambedkar's support for the right to strike was rooted in his broader commitment to justice and equality. He understood that without the power to organize and take collective action, workers would remain vulnerable to exploitation. By advocating for this right, he helped to empower laborers and strengthen their position in the workplace.

Role in International Labour Organization (ILO) and Empowerment of Dalit and Marginalized Workers

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to labor welfare were wide-ranging and deeply impactful, both at the national and international levels. His work at the International Labour Organization (ILO) helped to elevate the status of Indian laborers on the global stage, ensuring that India's labor policies were aligned with international standards. Ambedkar's advocacy for paid holidays, reduced working hours, and fair working conditions at the ILO reflected his commitment to improving the lives of industrial workers across the world. Domestically, Ambedkar's efforts to empower Dalit and marginalized workers were transformative. By advocating for the abolition of the caste system, promoting education and economic upliftment, and fighting for labor laws that protected workers' rights, Ambedkar sought to create a more just and equitable society. His work ensured that Dalit laborers, who had long been subjected to exploitation and discrimination, could enjoy the same rights and protections as other workers.

Ambedkar's legacy as a champion of labor welfare continues to influence labor policies in India, particularly those aimed at improving the lives of marginalized and disadvantaged workers. His vision of social justice, equality, and dignity for all workers remains a guiding principle in the ongoing struggle for labor rights in India and beyond. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's dedication to labor welfare was not confined to India; it extended to the global stage through his involvement with the International Labour Organization (ILO). His work emphasized aligning India's labor policies

with international standards and advocating for workers' rights across the world. Furthermore, Ambedkar's contributions were particularly significant for marginalized groups, especially Dalits, who faced not only economic exploitation but also deep-rooted social discrimination. His efforts to uplift these marginalized laborers through education, social reforms, and the abolition of the caste system were intertwined with his larger vision of labor welfare and equality.

As India's first Labour Minister during British rule and a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, Dr. Ambedkar represented India at the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO, founded in 1919, was a global body focused on setting international labor standards and promoting social justice by ensuring fair working conditions for all workers. Ambedkar's role at the ILO was pivotal in advocating for workers' rights on an international platform, ensuring that India's labor policies were aligned with global best practices.

Ambedkar was a strong voice for Indian workers, particularly industrial laborers, at the ILO. His participation in the ILO reflected his broader commitment to improving labor conditions, not just domestically, but globally. He advocated for policies that emphasized the welfare of laborers, pushing for the inclusion of provisions that protected workers from exploitation, secured fair wages, and ensured safe working environments. One of Ambedkar's notable achievements during his tenure was his advocacy for paid holidays and the reduction of working hours. His efforts contributed to the passage of a resolution by the ILO in 1945 that mandated paid holidays for workers, a significant victory for labor rights at the international level. By securing this provision, Ambedkar ensured that Indian workers benefited from the same labor protections that were being implemented globally. Ambedkar's work at the ILO highlighted his vision of labor welfare as a universal right, transcending national boundaries. He understood that global cooperation and adherence to international labor standards were essential for the protection and empowerment of workers, particularly in developing countries like India. His efforts at the ILO helped to elevate the status of Indian laborers on the global stage and contributed to the development of labor policies that were fair, just, and in line with international norms.

Dr. Ambedkar's contributions to labor welfare were deeply rooted in his commitment to social justice and the upliftment of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits. As a Dalit himself, Ambedkar was acutely aware of the economic exploitation and social discrimination that Dalit laborers faced in India. Many Dalits were relegated to the most menial, degrading, and exploitative forms of labor, often without any legal or social protections. Ambedkar recognized that true labor reform in India could not be achieved without addressing the systemic social inequalities that perpetuated the exploitation of Dalit laborers. His push for the abolition of the caste system and his tireless advocacy for the empowerment of Dalits were intrinsically linked to his labor reforms. Ambedkar believed that improving the socio-economic conditions of Dalits was essential for creating a just and equitable labor system. One of Ambedkar's key strategies for empowering Dalit and marginalized workers was through education. He championed education as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty and social oppression that many Dalits were trapped

in. By advocating for access to education for Dalits, Ambedkar sought to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to secure better employment opportunities, thereby improving their socio-economic status.

In addition to education, Ambedkar fought for economic upliftment and social reforms that would provide Dalits with the tools to challenge the entrenched caste-based hierarchies that dominated Indian society. His work in labor reform was focused on ensuring that Dalits had access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal protections against exploitation. Ambedkar's efforts were aimed at creating a level playing field where Dalit workers could compete on equal terms with other workers, free from the shackles of caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar's advocacy for the abolition of the caste system was also a key aspect of his labor reforms. He believed that the caste system, which relegated Dalits to the lowest rungs of the social and economic ladder, was one of the main barriers to achieving labor justice in India. By advocating for the dismantling of this system, Ambedkar sought to create a society where all workers, regardless of their caste or social background, had equal opportunities for economic and social advancement. Ambedkar's work in labor reform was particularly significant for Dalit laborers, many of whom were engaged in the most hazardous and exploitative forms of industrial labor. His advocacy for labor laws that protected workers' rights, such as the Minimum Wages Act and the Factory Act, directly benefited Dalit workers, who were often the most vulnerable to exploitation. By ensuring that these workers had access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal protections, Ambedkar helped to improve the lives of millions of Dalits who were trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation.

Women Workers and Labor Rights in a Broader Economic Vision

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contribution to labor welfare extended beyond the protection of male industrial workers to include women in the labor force. His commitment to social and economic justice led him to advocate for women's rights in the workplace, ensuring that their contributions were valued and their welfare safeguarded. Furthermore, Ambedkar's broader economic vision as an economist emphasized the role of labor rights in national economic development, advocating for state intervention to ensure that laborers received a fair share of economic growth. Ambedkar was a strong advocate for women's rights, particularly in the industrial sector. His approach to labor reforms was inclusive, recognizing that the welfare of women workers was essential to achieving social and economic justice. At a time when women were often relegated to lower-paying and more exploitative jobs, Ambedkar championed several key labor rights that specifically benefited women in the workplace.

One of his most significant contributions was his advocacy for *equal pay for equal work*. Ambedkar understood that women were often paid less than men for doing the same work, and he sought to rectify this injustice by pushing for wage equality. His efforts were rooted in his broader vision of a fair and just society, where everyone, regardless of gender, had access to equal opportunities and compensation. In addition to wage equality, Ambedkar was also a proponent of *maternity benefits* for working women. He

believed that women should not be penalized for their reproductive roles and that the state had a responsibility to provide social security measures to support women during pregnancy and childbirth. His advocacy for maternity benefits laid the groundwork for later policies that ensured women had access to paid maternity leave and other essential health benefits.

Ambedkar's focus on the welfare of women workers also extended to their safety and working conditions. He advocated for laws that protected women from exploitation and unsafe working environments, particularly in industries where they were often subjected to harsh conditions. His efforts helped to improve the overall welfare of women in the labor force, ensuring that they were not only protected but also empowered to contribute to the nation's economic growth. Ambedkar's vision for labor reform was not limited to men; he recognized that the struggle for social and economic justice had to include women as well. His advocacy for women's rights in the workplace was a critical part of his broader labor reforms, which sought to create a more equitable and just society for all workers, regardless of gender.

As an economist, Dr. Ambedkar's vision for labor rights was closely tied to his broader understanding of economic development. He believed that labor welfare was not just a matter of social justice but also essential for the economic progress of the nation. In his view, a nation could not achieve true economic growth unless its labor force was fairly compensated and provided with the necessary social protections. Ambedkar was a strong proponent of *economic planning* and state intervention in key industries. He believed that industrialization was essential for India's economic development and that the state had a responsibility to ensure that the benefits of industrialization were equitably distributed among all sections of society, including laborers. He saw the state as a crucial actor in ensuring that workers received fair wages, safe working conditions, and social security benefits. One of Ambedkar's key economic beliefs was that laborers should have a fair share in the economic growth of the nation. He understood that without proper labor protections and rights, economic growth would only benefit a small segment of society, leaving laborers and workers behind. His push for minimum wage laws, fair working conditions, and social security measures was driven by his belief that the state had a duty to protect its workers and ensure that they benefited from the country's economic progress.

Ambedkar's economic vision also emphasized the importance of state control of key industries. He believed that certain industries, particularly those related to infrastructure and essential services, should be under state control to prevent exploitation and ensure that their benefits were shared by the entire population. This belief was closely tied to his labor reforms, as he understood that state-controlled industries could better ensure the protection and welfare of workers. In addition to state control, Ambedkar was also a strong advocate for *industrialization* as a means of economic development. He believed that industrialization was essential for creating jobs and improving the overall economic conditions of the country. However, he also understood that industrialization could lead to the exploitation of laborers if proper protections were not in place. His labor reforms, therefore, were designed to ensure that industrialization benefited workers rather than

exploiting them. Ambedkar's broader economic vision was one that sought to balance economic growth with social justice. He believed that labor rights were essential for creating a fair and just society and that the state had a responsibility to intervene in the economy to protect workers and ensure that they received a fair share of the nation's wealth. His contributions to labor welfare, therefore, were not just about protecting workers from exploitation; they were also about ensuring that laborers were active participants in the nation's economic growth.

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