



### REVISITING DR. AMBEDKAR'S VISION FOR LABOUR RIGHTS AND WELFARE

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#### Abstract:

*Despite the rapidly changing labour market today, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to social equity, economic justice, and labour rights are still highly relevant. His ideas about inclusive policies, fair wages, and social security continue to impact policies addressing pressing issues such as automation, the gig economy, and informal employment. This article uses the existing labour policy framework to examine Ambedkar's ideas on labour welfare and labour rights in light of changing labour market conditions. The study compares his contributions to the recent labour reforms in India, situating his vision within academic discussions of labour legislation and policy reforms. The article also assesses the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas and investigates their adaptability to new challenges such as technological disruptions and skill gaps. The article concludes by emphasising the relevance of Ambedkar's vision for labour welfare in shaping equitable policies across diverse economic contexts.*

**Keywords:** *B.R. Ambedkar, labour rights, social justice, informal employment, gig economy, economic policy*

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#### Introduction:

The current labour market trends are heavily shaped by neoliberal ideology, which prioritises free-market principles, deregulation, privatisation, and reduced state intervention. The overpowering influence of neoliberal philosophy is causing paradigm shifts in global labour market policies. The emerging ideological policy framework prioritises economic efficiency and growth over labour rights, social security, and overall worker welfare. In this context, it is necessary to revisit Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision for labour rights and labour welfare to recognise his contribution and its relevance in this evolving policy

framework.

Despite the rapidly changing labour market today, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to social equity, economic justice, and labour rights are still highly relevant. His ideas about inclusive policies, fair wages, and social security continue to impact policies addressing pressing issues such as automation, the gig economy, and informal employment. This article uses existing policy frameworks and empirical data to examine Ambedkar's ideas on labour welfare and labour rights in light of changing labour market conditions. The study compares his contributions to recent labour reforms in India, situating his vision



within academic discussions of labour legislation and policy reforms. The article also assesses the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas and investigates their adaptability to new challenges such as technological disruptions and skill gaps. The article concludes by emphasising the relevance of Ambedkar's vision for labour welfare in shaping equitable policies across diverse economic contexts.

The article is organised as follows:

- Section 1 gives the context of revisiting Dr. Ambedkar's ideas on labour rights and his vision for labour welfare.
- Section 2 outlines the role of Dr. Ambedkar in shaping the labour legislation and social security provisions in India. Additionally, it examines recent literature, highlighting the strong influence of Dr. Ambedkar's ideas on contemporary policy debates.
- Section 3 analyses the contemporary labour market challenges, including automation, the expansion of the gig economy, and the growth of informal employment.
- Section 4 deals with the recent labour reforms introduced in India.
- Section 5 compares Ambedkar's vision for labour welfare to recent labour reforms.
- Section 6 concludes by emphasising the relevance of Ambedkar's economic philosophy in addressing contemporary labour market challenges.

### Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to labour policies

According to Damodar and Waghchaure (2022), Ambedkar was a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council from 1942 to 1946, where he oversaw the Labour portfolio. He later served as a labour minister. In the first independent Indian government, he was the law minister. While holding all of these positions, he made significant contributions to labour legislation and the advancement of Indian labour (Damodar & Waghchaure, 2022).

Verma & Prasad (2024) acknowledge Dr. Ambedkar's critical role in spearheading the labour reforms through legislation such as the Factories Act (1946), the Indian Trade Unions Act (1947), and amendments to the Mines Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, effectively bridging gaps in labour welfare. They further recognise his proactive involvement in laying the foundation for enduring systems like the Employees' State Insurance and the Employees' Provident Fund, which provide essential medical insurance and retirement benefits to millions of workers in the organised sector. Paramesh and Kavitha (2024) argue that Ambedkar advocated for universal labour laws and a tripartite approach to resolving labour issues, which resonated with international organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO). According to Verma and Prasad (2024), Ambedkar emphasised the importance of fair wages, decent working conditions, and the right to organise, which not only addressed immediate challenges in India but also aligned with international norms aimed at uplifting marginalised communities. Dr. Ambedkar's vision for social equity profoundly influenced India's labour laws by embedding principles of dignity, fairness, and inclusivity into the framework of labour legislation.

His contributions are summarised as follows:

- **Legislative Reforms:** Ambedkar, as a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council and later as a labour minister, played a pivotal role in drafting laws such as the Minimum Wages Act, Factories Act, Workmen's Compensation Act, and Maternity Benefits Act, which improved working conditions across industries (Mohata, 2024).
- **Advocacy for humane working conditions and labour welfare:** He spearheaded reforms that included fair wages, shorter working hours, paid holidays, and improved welfare benefits, particularly for women and the marginalised.



- **Tripartite Approach:** Recognising the significance of a dialogue and collaborative approach, he introduced mechanisms for interaction between employees, employers, and the government to address labour issues. (Prasoon, 2025).
- **Advocacy for Political Power:** To guarantee that their interests were represented in government, Ambedkar urged workers to organise politically (Darapuri, 2023). He believed that workers and farmers could only secure their rights by gaining political power themselves. This belief led Dr. Ambedkar to found the Independent Labour Party in 1936. Dr. Ambedkar's vision for the Independent Labour Party was rooted in empathy for workers and farmers who toil tirelessly yet remain impoverished (Damodar & Waghchaure, 2022). He saw a society divided between those who exploit and those who are exploited and believed that true change could only come when the marginalised held the reins of power (Damodar & Waghchaure, 2022).
- **Prioritised data-driven policymaking:** Verma and Prasad (2024) emphasise Ambedkar's role in establishing the Labour Investigation Committee in 1944. They further mention that as the Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, he prioritised data-driven policymaking to address workers' issues comprehensively. This committee was formed to gather detailed insights into workers' conditions, including wages, employment, and housing, enabling evidence-based reforms in labour policies. (Verma & Prasad, 2024).  
Jaiswal (2018) compared Ambedkar and Jagjivan Ram as labour ministers during the 1942–52 period. She asserts that Ambedkar utilised legal frameworks to establish industrial peace while promoting labour welfare in distinct ways. Ambedkar used wartime laws and colonial ideas of

"labour welfare" to improve working conditions and make them more equal. He believed laws could uplift workers by improving their lives while ensuring efficient and peaceful production during the war (Jaiswal, 2018). Ambedkar's contributions addressed immediate labour issues and established a long-term foundation for worker welfare and social equity in India's labour policy framework. He was a visionary who transformed India's labour policies by advocating for fairness and inclusion. His support for the minimum wage and trade unions bridged the gap between global labour standards and local needs, protecting marginalised workers (Jaiswal, 2018).

Ambedkar's ideas remain relevant in contemporary policy debates. Bagde's (2020) article on "The Idea of Dalit Capitalism and Ambedkarism" examines the idea of Dalit capitalism in the context of Ambedkarism. He highlights that Dalit capitalism aims to empower Dalits economically by fostering entrepreneurship and creating wealth within the community. Some believe this reflects Ambedkar's focus on economic independence, while others argue it conflicts with his criticism of capitalism and his advocacy for state socialism. Bagde asserts that any economic model for Dalit upliftment must adhere to Ambedkarite principles of social justice, equality, and the annihilation of caste. Thus, Dalit capitalism can be a tool for progress but must remain grounded in Ambedkar's broader egalitarian ideals.

### Contemporary Labour Market Trends and Dynamism:

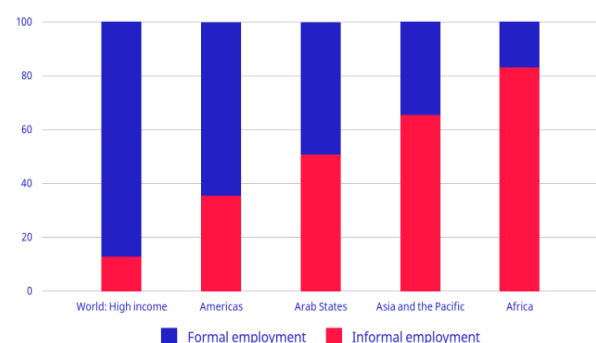
The labour market in 2025 is marked by rapid technological advancements, the rise of flexible work arrangements, and the persistence of informal employment. These dynamics are transforming local and global workforce structures, creating opportunities and challenges for both workers and employers. The recent ILO publication "India

Employment Report 2024: Youth Employment, Education, and Skills" provides an analysis of trends in the Indian labour market. The following is an overview of the current labour market trends in India.

### 1. Increasing Informality

The global labour markets are rapidly shifting towards informality. Figure 1 depicts the prevalence of informality in the global labour market for 2023. The graph shows that informality is relatively low in high-income countries but widespread in developing countries. The ILO report 2024 mentions that the Indian labour market is predominantly informal, with roughly 90% of workers working informally (ILO, 2024). This report further argues that while the percentage of regular workers has risen with the share of formal sector workers, a sizable proportion of regular workers in the formal sector remain informal. Another feature of the Indian labour market is the persistence of self-employment, which still accounts for roughly half of total employment in the country, one of the highest rates in the world (ILO, 2024).

**Figure 1 Employment by formality status, world (high-income countries) and by region, 2023 (percentage)**



Source: ILO modelled estimates.

### 2. Expansion of Gig and Platform Economy

In India, IT companies and app-based platforms like Uber and Swiggy have embraced the gig economy, promoting it as an appealing option for

millennials and women looking for flexible work arrangements (Drishti IAS, 2022). This shift has created new opportunities for economic participation and innovation, particularly for those seeking flexibility in their work schedule. On the surface, this shift has opened doors to new opportunities and innovation. Yet, for many workers, it represents a harsh reality—an extension of informal, unstable jobs that bypass labour protections. For instance, food delivery workers risk their safety to meet tight deadlines, as seen in the high-pressure environment of services like Zomato. Mehta (2020) states that for most, gig work is not a long-term solution but a temporary phase in their journey toward something more secure and fulfilling (Mehta, 2020). The gig economy offers flexibility but lacks long-term security for workers. Investing in human capital—education and skills—is crucial for adapting to future challenges posed by the growth of gig and platform work. Policymakers must address systemic shifts in labour laws and education to ensure sustainable employment models (Jadhav, 2020).

**Figure 2: Distribution of Gig Workforce in India according to sectors and skill levels (image source-Drishti IAS, 2022)**

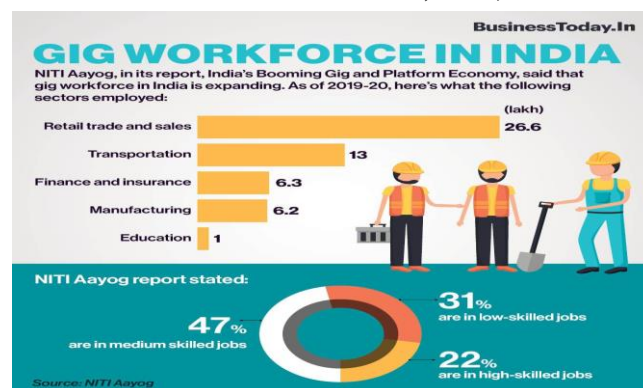


Figure 2 depicts the gig workforce in India by sector and skill level. The graph shows that in 2019-20, the retail trade and sales sector dominated



the total gig workforce, followed by transportation. The majority of workers were employed in low- to medium-skilled jobs.

### 3. Technological Advancement, automations and Skills mismatch

Automation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning are displacing routine jobs while creating demand for new skill sets (Brown & Loprest, 2018). This technological displacement and upskilling paradox imply that while some workers face obsolescence, others benefit from new opportunities. According to Qureshi (2020), the key challenge is the skills mismatch—a situation where the education system and vocational training mechanisms lag behind labour market needs. As a result, governments and institutions are increasingly promoting lifelong learning, digital literacy, and STEM-based skill development as ways to encourage adaptability (Qureshi, 2020). Hammerling (2022) lists new technological developments that have led to significant changes in the labour market. First, capital intensity over the years has been increasing, leading to lower employment intensity of the growth process. Second, the skills composition of work has been changing: while jobs requiring high skills have been increasing, those requiring low skills have been contracting, thus exacerbating the labour market inequalities (Hammerling, 2022).

### 4. Lower quality of youth employment compared with adult employment

The ILO (2024) reports that the quality and conditions of employment among youth are poorer compared to older age groups, even though more youths are now in industry and services. They are more likely to engage in self-employment, unpaid family work, and casual wage work. Furthermore, they are also more prone to participating in no-skill and low-skill informal work, which typically offers

lower wages or earnings (ILO, 2024). India also has a significant share of youths not in employment, education, or training (NEET), with the rate being much higher among young women than men. Most young women not in employment, education, or training are also out of the labour force, while the same status among men is largely attributed to unemployment (ILO, 2024).

### 5. Market segmentation by gender, location, occupation, social groups, and geographic regions.

Although the gap in earnings across gender and other social categories has declined over the years, the broad socio-economic hierarchies in access to employment, education, and earnings persist (ILO, 2024). The labour market exhibits rather high levels of inequality in terms of regions, social groups, gender, and occupation. This is a major factor behind the labour market inequalities and the overall societal inequalities.

### Recent labour reforms to address the contemporary labour market challenges:

Recent labour policy reforms in India aim to address several challenges by streamlining and modernising the country's labour laws. These reforms are centred around four key labour codes: the Code on Wages, 2019, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, the Social Security Code, 2020, and the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020. The four labour codes, introduced between 2019 and 2020, consolidate 29 existing labour-related acts into a unified framework (Rao, 2024).

- **The Industrial Relations Code, 2020:** The Code aims to streamline industrial relations, establish a more coherent legal framework for managing labour issues, and promote effective communication between employers and employees.

- **The Social Security Code, 2020:** The code aims to provide a more inclusive and streamlined social security framework for all categories of workers in India. It broadens the social security framework to encompass gig and platform workers, offering benefits such as provident funds and insurance (sankhlaco.com, 2025).
- **The Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020:** This code emphasises worker welfare by establishing standards for safety and working conditions (sankhlaco.com, 2025). The Code aims to create a unified and efficient regulatory framework that enhances the protection of workers' health and safety across all industries.
- **The Code on Wages, 2019:** This code simplifies wage structures, ensuring timely payments and establishing a legal right to minimum wages for all workers (sankhlaco.com, 2025). Its goal is to control bonus and wage payments across all industries (manufacturing, business, trade, and industry).

Labour laws in India fall under the concurrent list of the Constitution, enabling both the central and state governments to draft rules (pib.gov.in, 2024). According to a press release from the central government on December 28, 2024, all but five states and Union Territories have completed the pre-publication process, paving the way for the much-anticipated implementation of these codes this year (pib.gov.in, 2024). The four labour codes aim to simplify regulatory compliance, foster trade and investment, and enhance ease of doing business. Additionally, the codes strive to address labour market rigidities while prioritising worker welfare and rights (Rao, 2024).

Charan & Agarwal (2024) argue that while the simplification of the earlier laws is a positive step, there are concerns that the new Industrial Relations Code may restrict the ability of trade unions to

mobilise workers and engage in collective bargaining. They further mention that the prohibition of strikes and the promotion of temporary contracts under the new framework could undermine workers' rights and job security, particularly in the formal and informal sectors. Moreover, the amendments do not adequately address the needs of the informal sector, which employs 92% of India's workforce. Only 8% of workers benefit from formal job security and wages, leaving the majority vulnerable to exploitation (Charan & Agarwal, 2024). These criticisms require an examination of the recent reforms in the light of Ambedkar's vision for labour rights and social justice.

**Mapping Ambedkar's ideas and vision for Labour welfare to the recent reforms:**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision for labour rights and welfare emphasised social justice, equality, and the empowerment of marginalised communities through comprehensive labour reforms. Here's how contemporary Indian labour policy reforms align/diverge with his vision:

***Alignment with Ambedkar's Vision:***

1. **Fair Wages and Working Conditions:** Ambedkar advocated for fair wages and humane working conditions. The Code on Wages ensures timely payments and a uniform definition of wages, aligning with his emphasis on fair compensation (Verma & Prasad, 2024).
2. **Social Security and Welfare:** The Social Security Code extends benefits to gig and platform workers, reflecting Ambedkar's commitment to social security reforms. This expansion aligns with his vision of inclusive welfare systems (Paramesh & Kavitha, 2024).
3. **Tripartite Approach:** While Ambedkar championed a collaborative framework involving employers, employees, and the government, current reforms aim to simplify industrial disputes and collective bargaining processes through the



Industrial Relations Code, emphasising that tripartite dialogue will remain a core principle in Indian labour policy (Verma & Prasad, 2024).

### **Divergences from Ambedkar's Vision:**

**1. Flexibility vs. Protection:** While Ambedkar emphasised worker protections, current reforms also aim to increase flexibility for businesses, potentially at the cost of some protections. This balance between flexibility and protection is a point of divergence from his strict advocacy for worker rights (Verma & Prasad, 2024).

**2. Right to unionise and collective bargaining:**

While the reforms aim to enhance job security and provide statutory benefits, they have been criticised for undermining collective bargaining rights. Settlements made with unions are only binding on participating unions, affecting broader collective bargaining rights (<https://prsindia.org>, 2020). The higher threshold for union recognition and stricter strike regulations are seen as significant challenges for workers seeking to organise and negotiate collectively.

**3. Empowerment of Marginalised Communities:**

Ambedkar's focus on uplifting marginalised communities is echoed in contemporary efforts to address historical inequalities. However, the current reforms do not explicitly include affirmative action measures for Dalits and other marginalised groups as Ambedkar envisioned (Paramesh & Kavitha, 2024).

**4. Data-Driven Policymaking:** Ambedkar stressed the importance of data-driven policymaking. Verma and Prasad (2024) argue that while contemporary reforms aim to modernise labour laws, they do not explicitly emphasise robust data collection as a core strategy.

**5. International Labour Standards:** Ambedkar aligned Indian labour laws with international standards. Current reforms continue this trend but

face challenges in fully implementing these standards across all sectors (Paramesh & Kavitha, 2024).

### **Conclusion:**

In the context of the contemporary challenges of economic progress, with the widening income and wealth inequalities in the world. Revisiting Ambedkar's ideas on labour deserves attention. Ambedkar's vision for labour rights remains a cornerstone of equitable policymaking amidst evolving labour market challenges such as automation and informal employment. While his contributions laid a strong foundation for worker welfare in India, adapting his ideas to address emerging trends like gig work and skills mismatches is essential for ensuring their continued relevance globally.

By critically evaluating his legacy alongside contemporary reforms, this article highlights the need for inclusive policies that uphold dignity and fairness across all segments of society—a core principle in Ambedkar's economic philosophy. Contemporary Indian labour policy reforms reflect some alignment with Dr. Ambedkar's vision, particularly in areas like fair wages, social security, and tripartite collaboration. However, there are divergences in the balance between flexibility and protection, the right to unionise, collective bargaining, and the emphasis on data-driven policymaking. Overall, the reforms aim to modernise India's labour policy environment to offer flexibility for industry while retaining core principles of social justice and equality that Ambedkar championed. ISPP (2025) cites Dr. Ambedkar's economic philosophy in the following quotes, which closely align with his vision for labour rights and labour welfare.

*“The progress of any society depends on the progress of the working class. Labour is not a commodity; it is the vital force in the production process.”* (ISPP, 2025)



The quote advocates for a societal structure in which the working class is empowered as the foundation of progress, urging economic, social, and political reforms to achieve equity and justice. It will be interesting to see how far recent labour reforms will address current labour market needs while also empowering the working class.

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