



## Philosophical perspectives on social equality and justice: Indian context

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### Abstract

The discussion of social equality and justice holds a dominant place in the Western as well as the Indian philosophical traditions. The concept of justice in India has been changing with the foundations of ancient ethical teachings, religious customs, colonial experience, nationalism, constitutionalism, and modern social movements. In this review paper, the key views of social equality and justice on the Indian context are critically discussed within the background of major philosophical perspectives. It addresses classical traditions in Dharma, Buddhist ethics, Bhakti traditions and Islamic traditions; contemporary reformist and nationalist theories; transformative theories of B. R. Ambedkar, M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and modern theorists like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The article emphasizes the Indian philosophical thinking approaches towards caste, gender, poverty, minority rights and constitutional morality. It concludes that Indian justice debates are a combination of distributive, recognitional, and capability-based approaches, which are based on constitutional democracy and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Social equality, justice, Indian philosophy, caste, constitutional morality, capability approach.

### Introduction

Democratic societies are based on social equality and justice. These notions are closely connected to historical caste-religion-gender-economic inequality structures in India. In contrast to the purely abstract liberal theories, Indian views on justice are usually entrenched in the social realities and movements of reform.

Justice, social, economic and political, equality of status and opportunity are clearly guaranteed in the Preamble of the Constitution of India. Nevertheless, the philosophical origins of these ideals date back to constitutional democracy and go back to ancient and medieval traditions. This review paper will observe the development and modern applicability of the philosophical approaches to social equality and justice in the Indian context.

### Classical Foundations: Dharma and Social Order

According to ancient Indian philosophies, justice was mainly characterized by the idea of Dharma which acts as a moral and social duty that maintains a balance in the cosmic and sociological order (Radhakrishnan, 1927) [8]. The hierarchical social orders, the varna system in particular, are outlined in the canonical sources, such as the Vedas and the Dharmashastras. The structures were also designed as a functioning social order, but they eventually became fixed in the inflexible caste orders.

Ritualism and caste discrimination is challenged by Buddhism philosophy especially the doctrine behind the teachings of Gautama Buddha. The Buddhist argument that highlights compassion (*karuṇa*) and moral equality (universal) is one of the early reproaches of hierarchical injustice (Ambedkar, 1957/2011) [2]. Simultaneously, Jainism and the Bhakti movements predict spiritual equality and piety in the place of birth-based stratifications.

As a result, there are justificatory and critical strands of classical Indian thinking about the issue of inequality.

### Medieval and Reformist Traditions

The Bhakti movement (e.g., Kabir, Basavanna, and Guru Nanak) promoted egalitarian spirituality, rejecting caste orthodoxy and ritual exclusivity. These movements democratized religious access and challenged social stratification.

Islamic political thought in medieval India also introduced concepts of justice (*adl*) and welfare governance. Though embedded in theological frameworks, these traditions contributed to pluralistic understandings of moral equality.

### Colonial Modernity and Social Reform

Colonial rule intensified debates on social justice. Social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule critiqued Brahmanical dominance and advocated education for lower castes and women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy challenged practices like sati and campaigned for women's rights.

These reformers reframed justice as social transformation rather than mere moral duty. They linked equality to education, rationality, and institutional reform (Omvedt, 2004) [7].

### Gandhi and Moral Justice

Mahatma Gandhi conceptualized justice through nonviolence (*ahimsa*), trusteeship, and moral self-restraint. He opposed untouchability and called the oppressed "Harijans," advocating reform within Hindu society (Gandhi, 1932/2009) [9].

However, critics argue that Gandhi's approach emphasized moral persuasion over structural annihilation of caste. His model of village republics prioritized decentralized democracy and ethical transformation.

### Ambedkar and Radical Equality

B. R. Ambedkar is often considered to be the greatest philosopher of social justice in the modern India. In his book *Annihilation of Caste* (1936/2014) [1], he argued that the caste system is a stratification of inequality, which is incompatible with democratic values.

As the leading architect of the Constitution of India, Ambedkar formalised affirmative action (reservations) and legal protection of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. His ideas were based on the ideas of Buddhist ethics and the Enlightenment and underlined the principles of constitutional morality, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The view of distributive justice as proposed by Ambedkar which includes redistribution and representation is combined with recognition based justice which includes dignity and social respect.

### **Nehruvian Socialism and Welfare Justice**

Jawaharlal Nehru was the champion of a kind of democratic socialism, which had anticipated the state-planned development, industrialization, and scientific approach to social development. His theoretical model identified ideas of justice with economic modernization and actions that were taken to reduce poverty. After independence, welfare programs such as land reform programs, growth of the public sector and access to education represented such distributive mind-set. However, structural inequalities still persisted.

### **Contemporary Perspectives: Capability and Recognition**

The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen redefines justice by the extension of substantive freedoms (Sen, 2009) <sup>[9]</sup>. Unlike a resource-centred paradigm, Sen looks at the issue of justice by measuring the realisable opportunities of people to live valued lives. Martha Nussbaum (2011) <sup>[6]</sup> has outlined a basic catalogue of human capabilities, which includes education, bodily integrity and political participation. In Indian context, the capability approach has significantly influenced the policies of human development and the rights based laws. The recognition theory has also become eminent particularly in relation to the matters of caste discrimination, gender injustice and the minority rights. The modernist version is endorsing an intersectional approach that incorporates caste, class, and gender analysis (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **Constitutional Morality and Social Justice**

The concept of justice is reflected in the Indian Constitution in the form of a complete set of Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles of State Policy, and affirmative action. The Articles 14-18 outline the provisions of equality before the law and expressly prohibit the act of untouchability. The constitutional morality as envisioned by Ambedkar presupposes that one would be bound to democracies that override the popular majoritarian inclinations (Austin, 1999) <sup>[3]</sup>. The judicial activism and the public interest litigation have widened the criteria of jurisprudence on social justice significantly.

### **Key Debates in the Indian Context**

Caste vs. Class: Whether economic redistribution alone can eliminate caste-based inequality.

- Affirmative Action: Debates over merit, social justice, and extension to new groups.
- Gender Justice: Feminist critiques of patriarchal norms within personal laws.
- Minority Rights: Balancing secularism with religious pluralism.
- Globalization and Inequality: Market reforms and social welfare tensions.

Indian justice discourse thus integrates distributive, recognitional, and capability-based dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

The philosophical approach to social equality and justice in India demonstrates that there is an interactive dynamic relationship between tradition, reform, constitutionalism and global theory. Since the idea of Dharma via the constitutional morality of Ambedkar to the capabilities framework of Sen, Indian thinking proves justice to be not just distributive, but also transformative and the centrality of dignity.

In India, the quest to achieve social equality requires the subversion of the caste structures, the guaranteeing of gender equality, the broadening of education accessibility, and the strengthening of democratic structures. The combination of normative philosophy and constitutional practice in this way is a unique input in the world discourse of justice.

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