



## AMBEDKAR'S ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY AND INDIA'S CURRENT LABOUR PRECARITY: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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### Abstract

Ambedkar often argued that political democracy can't stand on its own unless people also have a fair chance to live with economic security. For him, that meant having steady work, real access to opportunities, and breaking the old caste-linked barriers that kept certain groups stuck in the same kinds of jobs for generations. When we look at India's labour situation today, it's hard not to see how far we are from that idea. Most workers are still in some form of informal employment, and the rapid rise of gig and platform work has brought flexibility but very little in terms of protection. Wage gaps continue to widen, and caste still shapes who gets stable work and who doesn't.

This paper tries to make sense of how these current conditions measure up to Ambedkar's idea of economic democracy. Using labour surveys, recent regulations on platform work, and policy debates, it traces where this precarity comes from and how it connects with existing social hierarchies. By placing Ambedkar's economic thinking next to today's labour realities, the study argues that ignoring job insecurity, unequal access to resources, and caste-based economic disadvantages puts political democracy at risk in the long run. The paper ends by offering some policy directions inspired by Ambedkar's ideas, especially around stronger labour rights, wider social security, and fairer economic participation.

**Key Words:** Ambedkar, Democracy, Economic Policy, labour conditions.

### 1. Introduction

Ambedkar never saw democracy as something that begins and ends with voting. For him, it was a way for people to live with dignity, and that kind of dignity needed more than a set of political rights on paper. He kept reminding us that political democracy becomes shaky if it isn't backed by economic democracy—where people have steady work, a fair chance to grow, and protection from the economic forces that can trap them (Ambedkar, 1947). In other words, a society that gives someone the right to vote but denies them the means to stand on their own feet is sitting on fragile ground. His point that equality must travel “from the ballot to the workplace” feels even clearer today, especially when India's labour world is shifting so quickly.

Over the past few decades, the labour market has slipped deeper into informality and short-term work. App-based delivery jobs, ride-hail driving, and other forms of gig work have become more common, but they rarely come with any real protection. At the same time, unions have lost the strength they once had, and the gap between people's skills and the jobs available keeps widening (International Labour Organization, 2023). What sits underneath these trends is a much bigger problem: economic inequality is rising while workers' ability to negotiate or resist unfair conditions is shrinking. Ambedkar warned repeatedly that when wealth and power gather in a few hands, democracy loses its substance because ordinary people stop having genuine control over their own lives.

This isn't just an economic issue; it is a democratic one. When workers live with unstable incomes, no social safety net, and little say in their day-to-day work, their political freedoms also weaken. Precarity numbs people—it makes it harder to speak up, push back, or take part in public life. Ambedkar feared exactly this kind of hollowing-out of democracy, where institutions remain in place but inequalities quietly erode their meaning. In today's world of digital labour, temporary contracts, and disappearing worker protections, his concerns sound uncannily contemporary.

If India allows economic insecurity to deepen, then the constitutional promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity risks turning into something symbolic rather than lived. That is why returning to Ambedkar's idea of economic democracy isn't a theoretical exercise. It's a practical lens we need if we want to understand—and eventually address—the roots of India's ongoing labour crisis.



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## 2. Key Principles of Ambedkar's Economic Thought

Ambedkar never treated economics as a separate, technical field. For him, it was tied directly to the struggle for social equality. He saw economic arrangements as one of the main places where caste actually lives and reproduces itself. In his view, exploitation didn't survive only through cultural beliefs or social prejudices; it survived because certain groups controlled land, capital, and the kinds of work people could access. This is why he insisted that economic democracy had to come before a genuine political democracy could take shape (Ambedkar, 1947). Without stable jobs, fair wages, or some kind of social security, he believed that democratic rights lose their substance and begin to look symbolic. Ambedkar also knew that caste was built into India's economic structure, so any discussion about labour rights that ignored caste discrimination was, in his eyes, incomplete.

A large part of his criticism was directed at unchecked capitalism and the tendency of markets to leave marginalized communities behind. Through his speeches and writings—especially when he was involved in drafting the Constitution—Ambedkar argued that markets simply cannot correct caste-based inequalities on their own. Left to themselves, they often reinforce existing hierarchies. This is why he pushed for an active state that didn't just regulate but also intervened where necessary (Zelliot, 2004). His support for state ownership in key industries and land reforms wasn't about ideology as much as it was about practicality: he understood that dominant groups would continue to monopolize resources unless the state deliberately redistributed access. His emphasis on labour protections, guaranteed welfare, and fair working conditions came from this broader commitment to making economic rights as meaningful as civil liberties.

Another idea central to Ambedkar's economic thought was that *equal opportunity* cannot be reduced to just opening doors. It only matters when people have the resources and conditions needed to walk through those doors. That meant access to education, skill development, public-sector jobs, and the right to organize collectively (Rodrigues, 2002). Ambedkar saw unions not merely as bargaining platforms but as places where workers—especially those from marginalized communities—could build confidence and collective strength. He was firm in his belief that economic justice cannot rely on isolated individual effort when the entire system is stacked unevenly; it needs collective safeguards and institutional reform.

Above all, Ambedkar treated dignity as the foundation of any economic system worth having. His lifelong fight against degrading and dangerous occupations, especially manual scavenging, shows how seriously he took this. He believed a society loses its moral right to call itself democratic if any group is forced into humiliating work because of their caste (Omvedt, 2016). For him, achieving economic democracy meant much more than improving incomes. It meant creating work that allowed people to stand upright, ensuring security for workers and their families, and giving individuals real autonomy over their economic choices. Even today, this moral dimension of labour is often pushed to the background, but it remains one of the strongest and most enduring parts of Ambedkar's economic philosophy.

## 3. India's Contemporary Labour Scenario

India's labour market is in a strange position right now. On one hand, the economy is growing and new sectors are popping up; on the other hand, the kind of work most people can actually access is getting more insecure. More than 90 percent of workers are still in the informal sector, and that usually means no written contracts, no fixed wages, and almost no form of social protection (International Labour Organization, 2023). This isn't a new problem, but the way informality looks today has changed a lot. Earlier, informal work was mostly tied to agriculture or small workshops. Now it includes gig jobs, flexible service work, delivery platforms, and short-term project roles that cycle in and out. These shifts have created a sharper divide between the few who have stable employment and the many who survive on unpredictable, day-to-day income.

The gig economy is often advertised as a sign of technological progress, but for many workers the experience is quite harsh. Delivery riders, cab drivers, warehouse workers, and online freelancers earn money that can change drastically from one day to the next. Companies avoid treating them as employees by calling them "partners" or "independent contractors," which means they don't have to offer provident fund benefits, insurance, or paid leave (Rani & Furrer, 2021). All the risks—fuel prices, vehicle repairs, the physical strain—fall directly on the workers themselves. This runs counter to Ambedkar's idea that labour rights should be rooted in dignity. In his view, no form of work should trap a person in insecurity.



Another noticeable trend is the erosion of job security in both the public and private sectors. Permanent posts are steadily being replaced by contract-based appointments that can be renewed—or cancelled—every few months. This naturally weakens workers’ bargaining power. Trade unions, which once played a strong role in amplifying worker voices, have also lost ground. With fewer organized spaces to express their concerns, many workers feel isolated and hesitant to challenge unfair practices (Shaw, 2019). Ambedkar believed that collective action was essential for countering inequality. But the shrinking influence of unions has made collective resistance harder.

Caste still plays a powerful role in shaping who ends up in what kind of work. Even today, Dalits and Adivasis are heavily concentrated in the roughest, lowest-paying jobs—sanitation, waste collection, construction, and mining. Meanwhile, upper-caste groups occupy a large share of stable government posts and skilled private-sector positions (Thorat & Newman, 2010). This pattern clearly shows that the link between caste and occupation hasn’t been broken. In many workplaces, hiring depends on networks and unwritten preferences that quietly keep marginalized communities out.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed all of this more bluntly than anything else in recent years. When the lockdown happened, millions of migrant workers suddenly found themselves without income, shelter, or transport. Many walked for days—sometimes hundreds of kilometres—to return to their home villages. The crisis made it painfully obvious how much the economy relies on insecure, low-wage labour while offering almost no protection during emergencies (Srivastava, 2021). Ambedkar had warned about exactly this imbalance: a system where workers are crucial but remain unprotected.

All these trends point in the same direction. India’s labour market is drifting further away from the kind of economic democracy Ambedkar argued for. Precarity is no longer the exception; it has started becoming the norm. Without steady jobs, real social security, and the ability for workers to speak up collectively, the gap between political democracy and people’s everyday economic reality will only grow wider.

**Table 1. Share of Informal Workforce in India**

Indicator	Statistic	Source
Share of India’s workforce in the informal sector	90%+	International Labour Organization (2023)
Workers with written job contracts	Very low (<10%)	ILO (2023)
Share of workforce with any form of social security	Less than 20%	ILO (2023)

This table makes it clear just how widespread informality is in India’s labour market. If more than 90 percent of workers are outside the formal system and fewer than one in five have any kind of social security, then stable work is clearly not the norm. Even the basic protection of a written contract reaches less than 10 percent of workers. Without contracts, people are more exposed to sudden job loss, unsafe conditions, and wage disputes. Ambedkar argued that democracy needs a foundation of economic security; this level of informality shows how far we still are from that idea. What should be basic protections have become rare privileges.

**Table 2. Gig & Platform Worker Conditions**

Indicator	Statistic / Fact	Source
Legal status of most gig workers	Classified as independent contractors, not employees	Rani & Furrer (2021)
Access to PF, paid leave, employee insurance	No, because companies avoid employee classification	Rani & Furrer (2021)
Responsibility for fuel, maintenance, and work-related risks	Fully borne by workers	Rani & Furrer (2021)

The second table highlights how gig and platform companies structure their operations in a way that keeps responsibility off their shoulders. They call their workers “partners” or “independent contractors,” and that one label allows them to avoid basic duties like providing paid leave, safety nets, or provident fund benefits. Meanwhile, the workers themselves take on nearly every cost and risk—fuel, repairs, illness, injuries. The arrangement is advertised as flexible, but for the workers living it, insecurity is built into the job. Ambedkar believed labour rights should expand with new forms of work, not shrink. Gig work shows what happens when the law doesn’t keep pace: workers fall through the cracks.



**Table 3. Caste and Labour Market Inequality**

Indicator	Finding	Source
Representation of Dalits & Adivasis	Overrepresented in hazardous, low-pay sectors such as sanitation, construction, waste work	Thorat & Newman (2010)
Representation of upper-caste groups	Dominant in public-sector and skilled private-sector jobs	Thorat & Newman (2010)
Occupational mobility	Limited for marginalized castes due to network-based hiring and discrimination	Thorat & Newman (2010)

This table shows that caste still shapes the labour market in ways that are impossible to ignore. Dalits and Adivasis continue to end up in the hardest, most dangerous, and lowest-paid jobs—sanitation, waste handling, construction, and similar sectors. On the other hand, upper-caste groups dominate the more secure and skilled positions, especially in the public sector. Even when opportunities exist, mobility is limited because hiring often depends on informal networks that tend to exclude marginalized groups. This pattern runs directly against Ambedkar’s goal of breaking the old link between caste and occupation. It shows that economic equality can’t be achieved without confronting the social structures behind it.

**Table 4. Vulnerabilities Exposed During COVID-19**

Indicator	Observation	Source
Migrant labour crisis	Millions stranded without wages, food, or transport	Srivastava (2021)
Long-distance return migration	Workers forced to walk hundreds of kilometers to native villages	Srivastava (2021)
Social protection coverage	Exposed as weak and inadequate for informal and migrant workers	Srivastava (2021)

The pandemic exposed weaknesses in India’s labour system that had been building up for years. When the country shut down, millions of migrant workers suddenly had no income, no food, and nowhere to stay. Many were forced to walk incredible distances to get home. Their situation showed how invisible they are in formal systems—they contribute to the economy every day but remain outside most protections. The collapse of social support at the exact moment they needed it most revealed a failure Ambedkar had long warned about: a state that does not safeguard its most vulnerable people weakens its own democratic foundations.

#### 4. Points of Divergence

Ambedkar’s idea of economic democracy was built on a simple but powerful belief: work should give people dignity, stability, and a sense of equality. Without these, political democracy becomes hollow. When we look at recent labour data in India, however, the gap between Ambedkar’s expectations and the actual situation becomes hard to ignore.

- **Persistent Economic Inequality and the Grip of Informal Employment:** A striking feature of India’s labour market is how dominant informal work still is. Close to 90 percent of the workforce remains outside formal employment, and that usually means no job security, little protection, and an income that can change from month to month. Ambedkar argued long ago that these basic safeguards—social security, fair wages, and predictable work—were necessary foundations for real democracy (Ambedkar, 1947). Instead, only a small slice of workers enjoy stable, protected jobs. The majority continue to operate in an economy that doesn’t guarantee them even the essentials.
- **Growing Precarity in the Gig and Platform Economy:** Gig work is expanding fast, and it’s often portrayed as a symbol of a modern, flexible economy. But the reality is far more uneven. Many gig workers are labelled as “independent contractors,” a classification that allows companies to avoid offering benefits like insurance, paid leave, or provident fund contributions. Projections suggest India could have 23.5 million gig workers by 2029–30, which means a huge share of the workforce may end up working without formal rights or protections. Their incomes swing widely from week to week, and support systems are nearly absent. This model of employment contradicts Ambedkar’s call for a state that actively protects and supports workers, especially those most vulnerable to exploitation.



- **Weakening of Unions and Collective Bargaining:** Union strength has declined across many sectors, and that decline has consequences. Trade union density among salaried and wage workers has fallen to about 13.4 percent, and even where unions exist, they often represent only a small portion of the workforce. As workplaces rely more on contract labour and gig-style arrangements, workers have fewer ways to organize or push back against unfair conditions. Ambedkar saw collective action as essential to counter structural inequalities, but today, many workers find themselves negotiating alone in workplaces where they hold little bargaining power.
- **Continued Caste-Based Segregation in the Labour Market:** Caste still plays a major role in determining who does what kind of work. Dalits and Adivasis remain heavily concentrated in the hardest, lowest-paid, and least secure occupations—sanitation, waste collection, construction, and other hazardous jobs. Meanwhile, upper-caste and privileged groups dominate stable, skilled, or higher-status roles across different sectors. This kind of occupational immobility shows that legal equality alone has not shifted long-standing social and economic hierarchies. Ambedkar wanted to break the connection between caste and occupation, but the patterns in today’s labour market reveal how persistent and deeply rooted these inequalities remain.

**Table 5: Divergences: Ambedkar’s Ideal vs Current Reality**

Divergence / Issue	Relevant Data / Indicator	What This Means for Ambedkar’s Ideal
Informal employment dominates labour market	~ 90% of workforce employed informally across India (WIEGO)	Majority lack secure jobs, social protection — economic democracy remains elusive
Surge of gig / platform-based labour	Gig workforce projected to reach 23.5 million by 2029-30 (NITI AAYOG)	Many work without employee rights or job security — gap from Ambedkar’s labour protection principle
Low participation in trade unions	Union density among wage/salaried workers ~ 13.4% (Counterview)	Collective bargaining weakened; workers’ agency and voice severely limited
Caste-linked occupational segregation and inequality	Overrepresentation of marginalized castes in informal/low-pay jobs; privileged castes dominate secure roles (WIEGO)	Structural caste-based economic exclusion persists — contradicts Ambedkar’s vision of social + economic equality

The gap between Ambedkar’s ideals and India’s current labour conditions becomes much clearer when you look at what actually happens on the ground. Real-life cases show how easily people slip into insecurity because of caste, lack of protection, or the absence of state safeguards. These everyday realities highlight exactly the kind of vulnerability Ambedkar hoped democratic institutions would prevent.

**Case 1: Gig-Economy Workers — Flexibility but No Safety Net:** If you take a closer look at app-based delivery workers in large cities, the promise of the gig economy starts to look very thin. The work is marketed as flexible—pick your own hours, quick onboarding, and easy entry. But most delivery workers say something very different on the ground. Many end up making barely ₹300–₹400 a day *after* paying for fuel, even though they work 10–12 hours at a stretch (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

The NITI Aayog report (2022) projects that India may have 23.5 million gig workers by 2029–30, yet the vast majority of them remain outside basic protections like minimum wages, provident fund, paid leave, or insurance. And whenever a worker gets injured while delivering food, the platform often avoids responsibility by saying the worker is an “independent partner,” not an employee. Ambedkar believed work should never be built on insecurity or dependence. Gig work today—high risk, little security—mirrors some of the old exploitative structures, just wrapped in a digital layer.

**Case 2: Manual Scavenging — A Direct Violation of Dignity:** Few examples contradict Ambedkar’s vision as starkly as manual scavenging. Even though the practice is banned, government records still show over 58,000 people engaged in this work in 2018–19, with activists saying the real number is much higher (National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, 2020).



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This is more than a policy failure. It is a direct violation of human dignity. Ambedkar repeatedly argued that a society cannot claim to be democratic if any group is forced into degrading work because of caste. Manual scavenging continues to operate on exactly that principle: caste determines who does the dangerous, dehumanizing labour and who gets to avoid it. This is a clear sign that economic democracy has not reached the people who need it the most.

**Case 3: Migrant Workers During the COVID-19 Crisis — A System Exposed:** The COVID-19 lockdown exposed just how fragile India's labour system really is. When the country shut down, almost 10 million migrant workers suddenly had no wages, no transport, and no shelter (Srivastava, 2021). Many were forced to walk unbelievably long distances—hundreds of kilometres—to reach home. This wasn't just a humanitarian crisis. It revealed a deeper structural truth: the economy relies on millions of informal and migrant workers who are practically invisible in formal policy frameworks. Since most had no contracts or social protection, the moment their work stopped, their lives collapsed. Ambedkar believed the state should act as a protector of the most vulnerable. The migrant crisis showed that, for many workers, the state's protective net simply wasn't there.

**Case 4: Contract Workers in Manufacturing — Two Classes of Labour:** In manufacturing, construction, and logistics, contract labour has quietly become the norm. Current labour reports show that 30–35% of industrial workers are hired through contractors instead of being taken on as permanent employees (ILO, 2023). These workers usually earn less, work longer hours, and rarely get benefits like ESI, PF, or paid leave. In automobile plants in Tamil Nadu and Haryana, contract workers often earn 40–50% less than permanent employees doing the *exact same tasks* (Shaw, 2019). This two-tier arrangement goes directly against the idea of equal opportunity. Ambedkar held a firm view that democracy cannot survive if a small group enjoys secure, dignified work while the majority performs identical labour under worse conditions. Contract labour makes that inequality sharper and more permanent.

**Case 5: Caste and Hazardous Work — Inequality That Refuses to Disappear:** Recent surveys remind us that caste still strongly influences who ends up in the worst forms of work. Dalits and Adivasis are heavily overrepresented in dangerous, low-paid jobs like mining, sanitation, waste collection, and construction (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Some figures make this even clearer:

- Over 70% of sanitation workers in many Indian cities are Dalits (NCSK, 2020).
- Adivasis make up a large share of workers in stone quarries and mines, which are among the most hazardous workplaces in the country.

This pattern shows that, even today, caste acts like an invisible force allocating labour. Ambedkar wanted to break the hereditary link between caste and occupation. These numbers show how stubborn and deeply rooted that link remains.

## 5. Towards an Ambedkarite Labour Policy

If you look closely at Ambedkar's economic ideas, one pattern becomes obvious: he never trusted the market to look after workers on its own. He believed the state had both a moral duty and a constitutional responsibility to step in whenever inequality threatened people's dignity. Bringing that vision into today's labour environment isn't possible through small tweaks; the scale of insecurity demands a much more coherent and deliberate approach.

A good starting point is universal and portable social security. Ambedkar argued that people need basic economic stability before they can participate meaningfully in public life (Ambedkar, 1947). Yet, even now, more than 90 percent of workers don't have access to provident fund benefits, maternity protections, or health insurance (International Labour Organization, 2023). Building a social security system that covers gig workers, migrants, contract labourers, and informal workers would move India closer to the kind of economic citizenship Ambedkar imagined. This would involve mandatory accident insurance, pension rights, minimum leave entitlements, and income protection for workers hit by sudden crises.

Another major task is to modernize labour protections so that gig and platform workers are recognised as workers—not "partners" or "independent entrepreneurs." According to NITI Aayog (2022), India could have 23.5 million gig workers by 2029–30, which is too large a segment to leave unprotected. Ambedkar would have been deeply critical of a system that uses clever legal classifications to deny workers basic rights. Extending minimum wages, safety standards, collective



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bargaining rights, and dispute-resolution mechanisms to gig workers is essential if India wants labour law to match the realities of the digital economy.

Labour policy also needs to become caste-sensitive, because economic exclusion and social hierarchy are deeply intertwined. Ambedkar consistently stressed that labour reforms that pretend caste doesn't matter will fail. Breaking caste-based occupational patterns requires deliberate action: strong anti-discrimination rules in hiring, affirmative action in private-sector recruitment, large-scale skill development for marginalized communities, and the complete elimination of manual scavenging—not just on paper, but in everyday practice (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

A fourth area that needs attention is the public sector's shrinking role in providing secure and dignified work. Ambedkar supported public ownership in strategic industries precisely because unchecked markets tend to concentrate wealth and power. Today, rapid privatization has chipped away at stable employment and reduced the state's regulatory capacity (Shaw, 2019). A more Ambedkarite approach would strengthen public-sector employment, expand public works, and invest in areas like healthcare, education, local infrastructure, and social services—sectors that generate meaningful, long-term jobs.

Reviving collective bargaining and worker organization is crucial. Ambedkar always believed that individual workers have very little leverage on their own; solidarity is what creates the possibility of fairness. With trade union density falling to around 13 percent among salaried workers (Counterview, 2018), India needs fresh legal frameworks that support new types of worker associations—gig-worker unions, migrant-worker collectives, and sector-based councils. Strengthening labour tribunals and preventing retaliation against those who organize would help restore workers' voices in a system that increasingly sidelines them.

## Conclusion

For Ambedkar, democracy was never just about the right to vote. He believed political democracy could not survive if people lived with constant economic insecurity. Today's labour market shows exactly why he insisted on that connection. With more than 90 percent of workers in informal jobs, millions in gig and contract work without real protection, and marginalized communities still locked into hazardous and caste-dependent occupations, the gap between constitutional promises and daily life remains worryingly wide.

The examples examined throughout this paper—delivery workers juggling unstable earnings, manual scavengers forced into degrading work, migrant labourers stranded during the COVID-19 lockdown, and contract workers earning half the wages of permanent staff for the same work—all point to forms of precarity Ambedkar would have immediately recognized as structural injustice. These aren't random or isolated problems; they reveal an economic order that has not yet embraced the democratic principles the Constitution stands for.

Revisiting Ambedkar's economic thinking isn't an exercise in nostalgia. It matters because he offered one of the clearest and most practical frameworks for building a society where liberty, equality, and dignity work together rather than pull apart. His insistence on universal social security, an active and accountable state, strong labour rights, and the complete dismantling of caste-based inequality speaks directly to the challenges India faces today. If India truly wants its democracy to endure—not just symbolically, but in people's lived experience—it must rebuild the economic foundations that allow everyone to work, live, and participate with dignity.

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