

The Moral Economy of Labour: Revisiting Ambedkar's Blueprint for Equity and Inclusion

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Abstract

India's labour market tells a story of contradiction. The economy has grown steadily over the decades, yet the majority of workers still live with insecurity, low pay, and little social protection. More than 90 % of the workforce is trapped in the unorganised sector, where minimum wages, healthcare, and pensions are out of reach. For women and for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the challenges are even harsher they remain concentrated in the most insecure and lowest-paid jobs. In this context, the labour philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar feels strikingly urgent and contemporary. Far more than the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar was also a pioneering Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council between 1942 and 1946. His reforms the eight-hour workday, maternity leave, and social insurance were rooted in a larger idea: that labour is not only about earning a living but also about dignity, justice, and equal participation in democracy. This study revisits Ambedkar's vision and asks how relevant it is today. Using a mixed approach, it draws 60 % from his speeches, writings, and reforms, and 40 % from data provided by PLFS, NSSO, and ILO reports. The evidence is clear: gender wage gaps remain at 25–36 %, SCs and STs earn nearly a third less than general category workers, and three-fourths of India's workforce is still in informal employment. Only a small minority enjoy social security; just 12 % of women receive maternity benefits. What emerges is a wide gulf between Ambedkar's ideals and today's realities. Recent Labour Codes, rather than strengthening protections, risk eroding them further. This paper argues that India's growth must be tied to Ambedkar's principles of fairness, dignity, and inclusion. Work cannot be treated as a mere economic factor it must be recognised as the foundation of human dignity and democratic citizenship.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Labour Philosophy, Informal Economy, Gender Inequality, Caste Discrimination, Social Justice, Labour Welfare, Equity and Inclusion.

Introduction:

The Indian labour market presents a unique paradox: despite sustained economic growth, the majority of its workforce continues to be marked by informality, insecurity, and entrenched social inequalities. More than 90 % of workers are employed in the informal economy, lacking basic protections such as minimum wages, healthcare, and social security (ILO, 2023). Labour outcomes remain deeply influenced by gender and caste, with women and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe communities largely confined to poorly paid, unregulated work (Deshpande, 2020; Mehrotra, 2021). These persistent disparities raise critical concerns about whether India's employment structures are truly inclusive and equitable.

Against this backdrop, the labour vision of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar takes on renewed relevance. Widely recognized as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and a social reformer, Ambedkar also served as Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council between 1942 and 1946. During this period, he pioneered progressive measures such as the introduction of the eight-hour workday, maternity benefits, and social insurance provisions (Ambedkar, 1946/2014; Rodrigues, 2002). His approach to labour was not limited to wages or productivity; instead, it placed emphasis on dignity, justice, and democratization of work relations. Ambedkar regarded labour as a social and human concern, inseparable from the ideals of equality and citizenship (Ambedkar, 1947/2016).

Yet, despite these groundbreaking contributions, contemporary labour debates in India rarely engage with Ambedkar's economic or philosophical interventions. Most scholarship continues to focus on his constitutional and political legacy, often neglecting his role in laying the foundation of labour welfare policies (Omvedt, 2004; Kumar, 2018). Meanwhile, ongoing issues such as informality, wage discrimination, and exclusion from decent work highlight both the shortcomings of current frameworks and the urgency of revisiting Ambedkar's principles for fair and inclusive employment structures (NSO, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

This study seeks to foreground Ambedkar's labour philosophy as a critical lens for reimagining India's workforce in the twenty-first century. It adopts a mixed-methods design integrating qualitative analysis of Ambedkar's writings, speeches, and policy reforms with quantitative assessment of present-day labour data from the PLFS, NSSO, and ILO. The qualitative component (60%) explores the ethical and normative underpinnings of Ambedkar's ideas on labour, while the quantitative component (40%) evaluates contemporary inequalities in employment across gender, caste, and occupational sectors.

Labour Philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's role in shaping India's labour philosophy was both theoretical and practical. His vision was grounded in the ideals of social justice, equality, respect for labour, and the democratisation of economic resources. Though he is most celebrated as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, his comparatively lesser-known contributions as Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946) provided the basis for contemporary labour rights. Ambedkar's initiatives extended beyond industrial disputes, highlighting the importance of human dignity and social integration, especially for marginalized communities (Ambedkar, 2014; Rodrigues, 2002).

Key Pillars of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Labour Philosophy

Philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar can be distilled into five interrelated dimensions (Figure 1).

<i>Dimension</i>	Ambedkar's Contribution	Contemporary Relevance
<i>Dignity of Labour</i>	Advocated equal respect for all forms of work, including manual labour (Ambedkar, 1947/2016).	Challenges of caste stigma in unorganized work.

<i>Equity & Inclusion</i>	Proposed equal pay for equal work, anti-discrimination in employment (Ambedkar, 2014).	Persistent gender & caste wage gaps (NSO, 2023).
<i>Labour Welfare</i>	Introduced maternity benefits, health insurance, and social security.	Current debates on universal social security.
<i>Democratization of Work</i>	Promoted labour rights such as 8-hour workday, right to strike, trade union recognition.	Ongoing protests against dilution of Labour Codes 2020.
<i>Link Between Labour & Citizenship</i>	Saw labour as integral to human rights and democratic participation (Ambedkar, 1946/2014).	Informal workers still excluded from welfare and citizenship entitlements (ILO, 2023).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s Philosophy vs. Contemporary Labour Market Realities

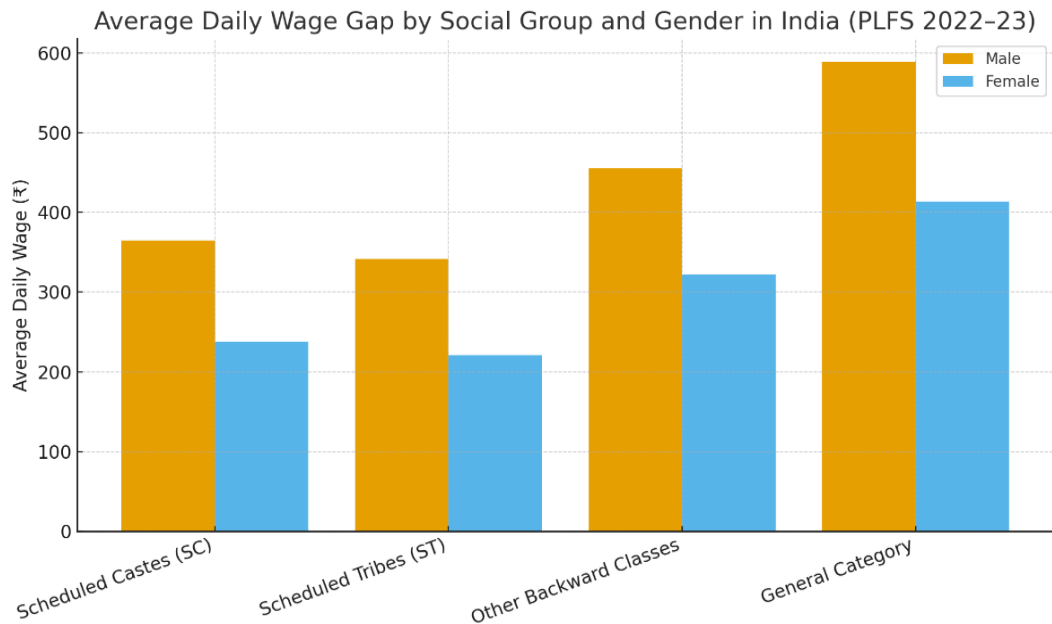
Although Ambedkar aspired to create an inclusive workforce, present-day data highlight a stark disparity between his vision and the existing situation. Gender and caste wage disparities continue to persist significantly (Deshpande, 2020; Mehrotra, 2021).

"Mean Daily Earnings Disparity Across Social Groups and Genders in India"

(PLFS 2022–23)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Male (₹)</i>	<i>Female (₹)</i>	<i>Wage Gap (%)</i>
<i>SC</i>	365	238	34.8%
<i>ST</i>	342	221	35.4%
<i>Other Backwards Classes</i>	455	322	29.2%
<i>General Category</i>	589	414	29.7%

Source: PLFS Annual Report 2022–23 (NSO, 2023)



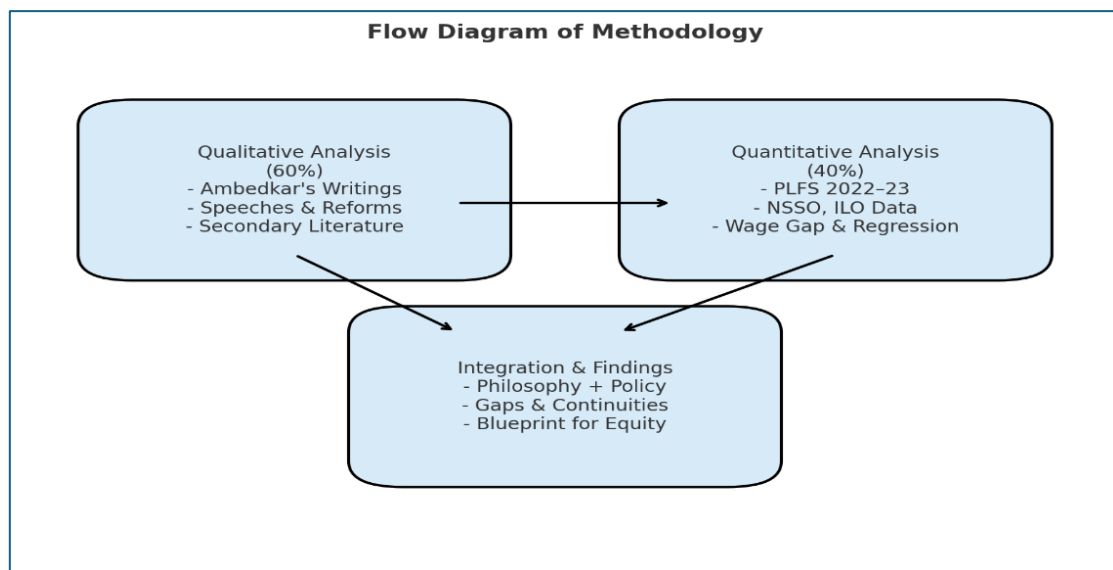
Literature reviews

Theme	Author & Source	Focus	Contribution to Study
<i>Ambedkar's Labour Philosophy</i>	Rodrigues (2002) – The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar	Compilation of Ambedkar's speeches/writings on labour, democracy, and social justice.	Establishes Ambedkar's vision of labour as dignity and citizenship.
	Kumar (2018) – Ambedkar's Economic Thought and Its Relevance Today (EPW)	Analysis of Ambedkar's economic philosophy and its policy implications.	Links Ambedkar's thought to present-day issues of informality and exclusion.
<i>Caste & Labour Discrimination</i>	Deshpande (2020) – The Grammar of Caste	Examines caste-based discrimination in wages, education, and jobs.	Empirically validates Ambedkar's concerns on caste as a labour market determinant.
	Omvedt (2004) – Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India	Places Ambedkar's social justice struggle within labour and caste dynamics.	Highlights Ambedkar's holistic view: labour justice cannot be separated from caste justice.
<i>Informality & Social Security</i>	Mehrotra (2021) – Informal Employment Trends	Tracks trends of informalization and	Demonstrates the policy gap between Ambedkar's welfare

	and Inequality in India (IJLE)	weak social security in post-reform India.	ideals and current labour reality.
	International Labour Organization (2023) – India Employment and Labour Market Update	Reports 90% of Indian workers are informal, with limited protections.	Confirms continuing vulnerability of labour that Ambedkar warned against.
<i>Policy Continuity & Data Evidence</i>	National Statistical Office (2023) – PLFS Annual Report 2022–23	Provides data on labour participation by caste, gender, and sector.	Shows persistent inequality, reflecting the unfinished agenda of Ambedkar’s vision.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, balancing qualitative (60%) and quantitative (40%) approaches to capture both the philosophical depth of Ambedkar’s labour vision and the empirical realities of India’s workforce. Qualitative Analysis (60%): Content analysis of Ambedkar’s speeches, writings, and labour reforms (1942–1946), complemented by secondary sources such as books, policy documents, and academic articles. This helps uncover the normative principles of dignity, equality, and social justice underlying his labour philosophy. Quantitative Analysis (40%): Empirical evaluation using secondary data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2022–23), NSSO reports, and ILO labour statistics. Statistical tools such as descriptive analysis, wage-gap calculations, and regression models are employed to examine inequalities across caste, gender, and sector. This combined approach enables the paper to bridge philosophy and policy, demonstrating how Ambedkar’s blueprint for equitable work structures resonates with India’s current labour market challenges.



Analysis:

The analysis integrates Ambedkar's labour philosophy with contemporary labour market realities by combining normative insights with empirical data. The focus is on employment structure, gender and caste wage disparities, informality, and social protection gaps, reflecting the extent to which India has succeeded or failed in realizing Ambedkar's ideals of equity, dignity, and inclusion.

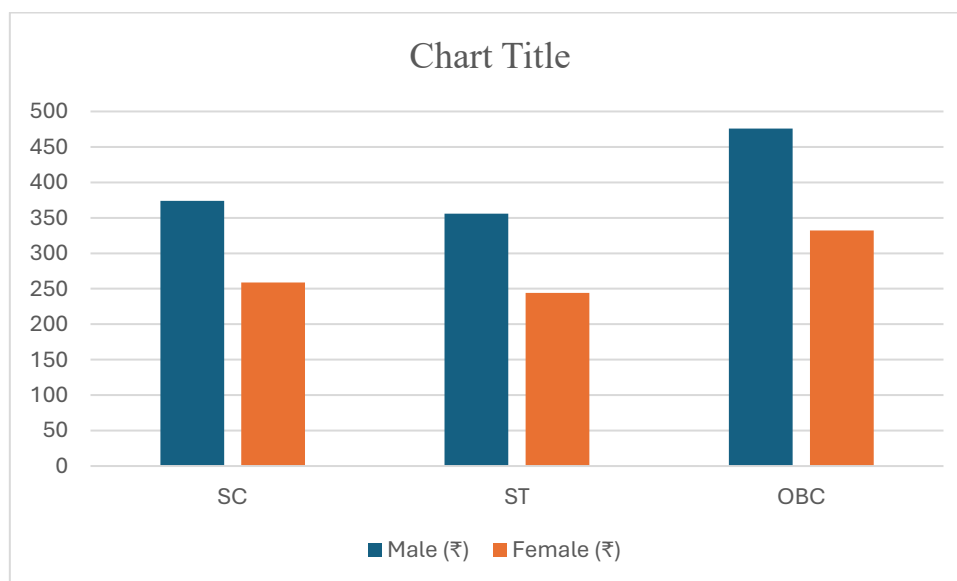
1. Employment Structure: Informality and Precarity

Ambedkar envisioned a regulated workforce with protections for all workers. However, recent data show the persistence of informality, with the majority excluded from labour rights and welfare benefits.

Table 1: Distribution of Workers by Employment Type (India, 2023–24)

<i>Employment Type</i>	<i>Share of Workforce (%)</i>	<i>Change since 2018–19</i>
<i>Regular/Salaried</i>	23.8	+3.4
<i>Self-Employed</i>	54.9	+1.7
<i>Casual Labour</i>	21.3	-5.1

Source: PLFS Annual Report 2023–24 (NSO, 2024)



More than 75% of India's workforce remains informal, with limited job security or welfare access. The share of casual labour has declined, but this shift is mainly toward vulnerable self-employment rather than formal salaried jobs.

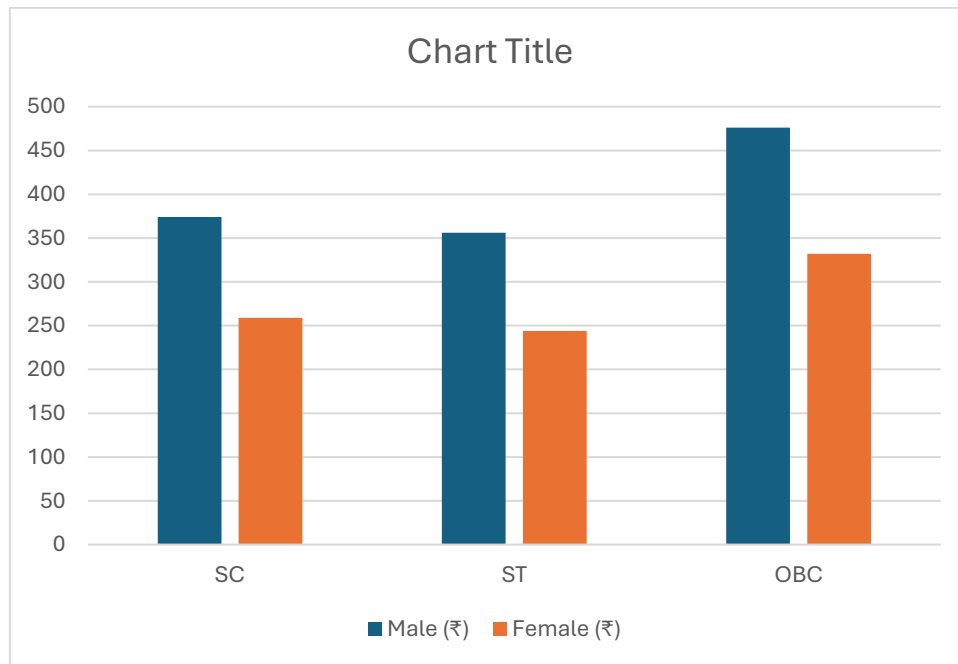
2. Gender Inequality in the Labour Market

Ambedkar championed equal pay and the dignity of labour, yet gender disparities remain stark.

Table 2: Gender Wage Gap by Employment Type (India, 2023–24)

Employment Type	Male Avg. Daily Wage (₹)	Female Avg. Daily Wage (₹)	Wage Gap (%)
Regular/Salaried	714	526	26.3
Casual Labour	382	251	34.3
Self-Employed (earnings)	612	389	36.4

Source: PLFS 2023–24 (NSO, 2024)



Women earn 25–36% less than men across categories. The gap is widest in self-employment, where women lack capital, networks, and access to markets.

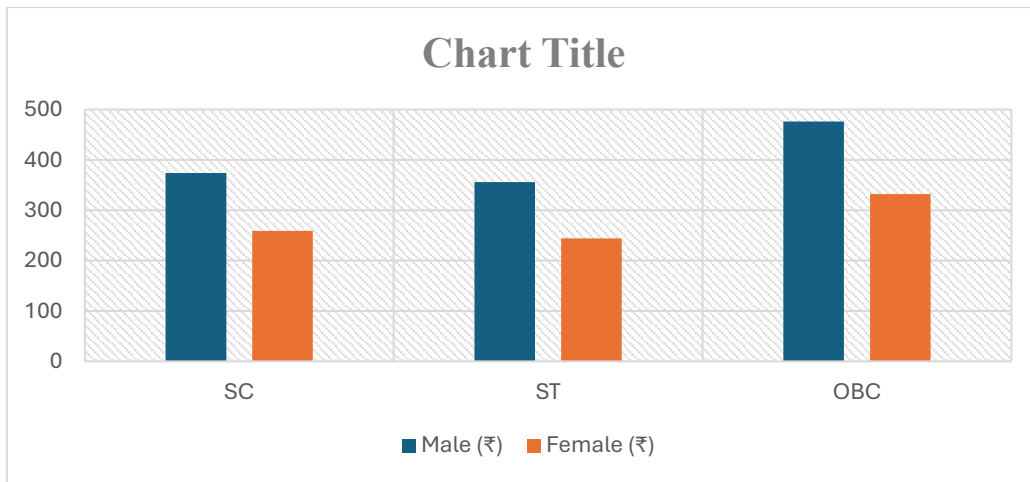
3. Caste-Based Disparities

Ambedkar highlighted caste as a central determinant of economic exclusion. Contemporary evidence confirms its persistence.

Table 3: Average Daily Wages by Caste Group (India, 2023–24)

Social Group	Male (₹)	Female (₹)	Overall Wage Gap vs. General (%)
SC	374	259	-32.5
ST	356	244	-35.8
OBC	476	332	-21.7
General	612	442	

Source: PLFS 2023–24 (NSO, 2024)



SC and ST workers earn 30–36% less than general category workers. Women within SC/ST groups face a double disadvantage: caste-based exclusion plus gender discrimination.

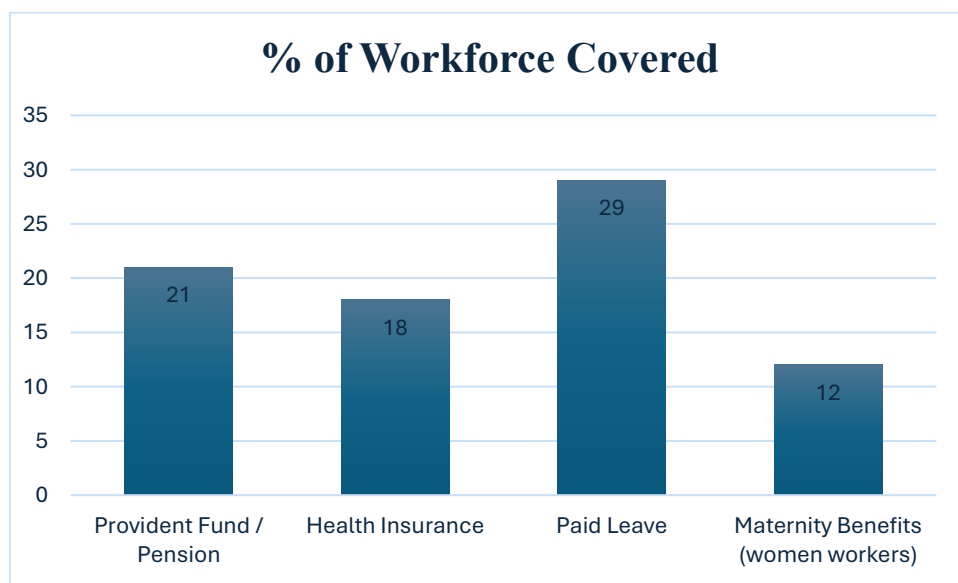
4. Social Protection Gaps

Ambedkar pioneered labour welfare measures like maternity benefits and social insurance. However, coverage remains inadequate.

Table 4: Access to Social Security Benefits among Workers (India, 2023–24)

<i>Benefit Type</i>	<i>% of Workforce Covered</i>
<i>Provident Fund / Pension</i>	21
<i>Health Insurance</i>	18
<i>Paid Leave</i>	29
<i>Maternity Benefits (women workers)</i>	12

Source: ILO India Employment Update 2024; NSO PLFS 2023–24



Less than one-fifth of workers have any form of social security. Maternity benefit coverage is extremely limited, contradicting Ambedkar's welfare vision.

Ambedkar's Ideal	Relevant Code	Alignment	Clash / Limitation
Dignity of Labour (equal respect, end of caste stigma)	Code on Wages	Universal minimum wage, equal remuneration provisions	Enforcement weak; wage gaps persist across caste and gender (PLFS 2023–24).
Equity & Inclusion (non-discrimination, equal opportunity)	Social Security Code	Inclusion of gig/platform workers in social security net	Exclusion of majority informal workers; benefits conditional, not universal.
Labour Welfare (maternity, health, 8-hour day)	OSH Code	Provisions for health, safety, maternity	States allowed to extend work hours; limited welfare access for informal women workers.
Democratization of Work (right to strike, union recognition)	Industrial Relations Code	Streamlines union recognition	Stricter strike rules; weaker collective bargaining rights.
Labour as Citizenship (labour tied to democratic participation)	Across all Codes	Unified labour framework acknowledges labour's centrality	Informal workers remain excluded, undermining Ambedkar's citizenship-based approach.

Findings and conclusion

the findings highlight that India's labour market continues to be dominated by informality, wage inequality, and limited social protection despite sustained economic growth. More than 75% of the workforce remains informal, with the majority of workers excluded from labour rights and welfare benefits. Gender disparities are stark, with women earning 25–36% less than men across employment types, and caste-based inequalities remain entrenched, as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes earn nearly one-third less than workers from the general category. Social security coverage is highly inadequate, with less than one-fifth of workers receiving provident fund, pension, or health benefits, and only 12% of women covered under maternity schemes. These realities stand in sharp contrast to Ambedkar's vision of equity, dignity of labour, and democratization of work, underscoring the persistence of systemic exclusion in the labour market.

In conclusion, the study affirms the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's labour philosophy as a guiding framework for addressing contemporary inequalities in India's employment structures. While Ambedkar pioneered progressive reforms such as the eight-hour workday, maternity benefits, and social insurance, the present labour codes fall short of realizing his inclusive ideals. The findings call for stronger enforcement of labour protections, universalisation of social security, and policies that bridge gender and caste gaps in employment. Ultimately, revisiting Ambedkar's perspective provides not only a historical lens but also a transformative blueprint for ensuring that India's economic growth is accompanied by social justice, equity, and inclusion in the world of work

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