



DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S VISION FOR WATER POLICY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is widely celebrated as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and champion of social justice. However, his transformative contributions to India's water and power policy remain underappreciated in mainstream discourse. This paper explores Ambedkar's key role in shaping India's national water management framework and his vision for inclusive economic, infrastructural and sustainable development. As a visionary economist, social reformer, and statesman, Ambedkar championed policies that laid the groundwork for multipurpose river valley projects, state-led economic planning, and centralized control of natural resources. His efforts in institutional development, policy formulation, and technological foresight significantly advanced the principles of equity and sustainability in water governance. This study examines Dr. Ambedkar as a foundational figure in India's water policy landscape, whose legacy continues to influence the nation's approach to resource management and social equity.

Keywords: *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, water policy, river valley projects, water governance, resource management, social justice, nation-building.*

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Introduction: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is rightly celebrated as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and an excellent advocate for social justice. However, his profound contributions to economic planning and water policy remain relatively underexplored. A trained economist with advanced degrees from Columbia University and the London School of Economics, Ambedkar brought a modern, empirical, and scientific perspective to policy-making.

Ambedkar as an Economist: While Ambedkar is widely recognized for his legal and social reform work, his identity as an economist of global calibre remains relatively obscured. His scholarly credentials were formidable. He earned his M.A. degree for his thesis on "Ancient Indian Commerce," an M.Sc. from the London School of Economics for his study on "Provincial Finance in British India," and a D.Sc. for his dissertation titled "The Problem of the Rupee." His economic thinking extended to crucial areas such as



land reform, industrialization, monetary policy, and economic planning. As a professor of economics at Sydenham College in Mumbai, Ambedkar engaged deeply with the structural economic problems and developmental challenges of colonial India. Influenced by renowned economists such as Edwin R.A. Seligman and Edwin Cannon, his academic training shaped his policy orientation toward systemic reform. His works—including the landmark publication *The Problem of the Rupee* and his 1918 essay on *Small Holdings in India*—highlight his analytical depth and long-term economic vision. Ambedkar also contributed memoranda, legislative speeches, and evidence to commissions that had significant economic content, reinforcing his stature as an economic thinker.

This paper aims to critically examine Ambedkar's overlooked yet transformative role in shaping India's early water policy and sustainable development agenda. Between 1942 and 1946, as a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council overseeing Labour, Irrigation, and Power, Ambedkar laid the institutional and conceptual foundations for integrated water resource management. His policies, centered around multipurpose river valley development and hydroelectric infrastructure, emphasized water as not merely an economic resource but a catalyst for national growth, equity, and modernization. Through an analysis of his policy initiatives during British rule and his legal foresight post-Independence, this paper argues that Ambedkar should be recognized not only as a social reformer and legal visionary but also as a pioneering environmental and developmental thinker. His contributions were not only confined to policy documents but were visible in practical initiatives that aimed to build the foundations of an integrated national water framework. His scientific and modern approach was rooted in an understanding of engineering, economics, and social upliftment.

Policy Vision in Colonial India: During colonial rule, water resources were fragmented, with little coordination across territories. Ambedkar, recognizing the developmental and strategic importance of water, advocated for a unified national approach. As the executive in charge of Labour, Irrigation, and Power, he called for integrated planning to utilize water not only for irrigation but also for hydroelectric power, inland navigation, and urban development. He was among the earliest Indian leaders to propose a National Power Grid and a centralized water authority—concepts that foreshadowed later national planning models. His proposals envisioned state-led development that balanced economic growth with equitable access and ecological sustainability.

Infrastructure and Institutional Development (1942–1946): Ambedkar's tenure in the Viceroy's Executive Council was marked by significant policy advancements in water and power sectors. Some of his key institutional and policy initiatives include: Establishment of the Central Waterways, Irrigation and Navigation Commission (CWINC), which later evolved into the Central Water Commission (CWC). Creation of the Central Electricity Authority, to ensure coordinated energy planning. Promotion of multipurpose river valley projects, drawing inspiration from the Tennessee Valley Authority model in the United States.

Multipurpose River Valley Projects: Ambedkar envisioned water as not just an economic resource but a tool for national development, social equity, and modernization. His policy initiatives reflected a commitment to scientific planning, inclusive governance, and long-term sustainability—principles that continue to resonate in contemporary environmental discourse. He strongly believed that water should be developed as a national asset. India's rivers were central to national development.



Multipurpose river valley projects, according to him, should serve irrigation, navigation, flood control, drainage, soil conservation, and electricity generation purposes.

He played a crucial role in initiating major projects such as: Damodar Valley Project (Bihar and Bengal) Hirakud Dam (Orissa) Bhakra-Nangal Project (Punjab and Haryana) Sone River Valley Development. Thus, his vision included comprehensive and multipurpose use of water resources as a tool to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency, boost transport infrastructure for poverty alleviation, modernization and improve overall living standards.

Framework for Inter-State Water Governance: Ambedkar foresaw the challenges posed by shared river systems and advocated for a strong legal and constitutional framework. His contributions led to the inclusion of Article 262 in the Indian Constitution, empowering Parliament to resolve inter-state water disputes. Additionally, Entry 56 of the Union List allowed for central regulation of inter-state rivers and valleys. These provisions facilitated the creation of water dispute tribunals—such as those for the Cauvery and Krishna rivers—and have become essential instruments in maintaining federal balance and resolving conflicts.

Social Equity and Access to Water- Ambedkar's commitment to social justice extended into the realm of water access. His leadership in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, where Dalits asserted their right to access public water sources, marked a historic moment in civil rights history. He consistently advocated for the provision of drinking water and sanitation in marginalized areas, urban slums, and industrial labour colonies. He called for public investment in water schemes for marginalized areas, recognizing that water scarcity disproportionately affects the poor. His water policy thus became an

instrument not only for development but for dignity, equity, and empowerment.

Sustainable Development and Contemporary Relevance: Dr. Ambedkar was the first to initiate planning of India's water resources at a national level. He viewed rivers as the natural wealth of the country and argued that their systematic development was crucial for sustainable national growth. He also promoted inland navigation, a neglected area of infrastructure development. Improved water transport, in his view, could economically and socially connect remote areas. Dr. Ambedkar consistently emphasized economic planning for poor and oppressed populations. By integrating landless laborers into irrigation development, he ensured that water policy served as an instrument of social justice as well as economic progress. He believed that rights are ultimately protected not only by laws but also by the moral conscience of society. His vision for democracy extended into a socially inclusive development strategy—especially through equitable distribution of natural resources like water.

Ambedkar's vision resonates strongly with present-day challenges such as water scarcity, pollution, and climate change. His emphasis on institutional capacity, scientific planning, and equitable access aligns with modern principles of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation. Contemporary government initiatives like the Jal Shakti Abhiyan, Atal Bhujal Yojana, and Namami Gange Programme would benefit from incorporating Ambedkar's vision of inclusive governance, regional coordination, and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions to water policy and sustainable development, though overshadowed by his constitutional legacy, were no less visionary. Between 1942 and 1946, he laid the



institutional and conceptual foundations for India's integrated water governance framework. His advocacy for multipurpose river valley projects, legal mechanisms for inter-state cooperation, and water equity made him a pioneer in modern environmental planning.

Ambedkar saw water as a symbol of dignity, a driver of development, and a collective national resource. His legacy remains vital in guiding India's ongoing efforts toward inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social justice. His role in shaping India's water policy, advocating for centralized economic planning, and introducing landmark labour legislation marks him as a visionary nation-builder. His holistic, future-oriented vision for utilizing water as a catalyst for development remains relevant in today's debates on federalism, sustainability, and equity in resource distribution.

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