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Ambedkar Jayanti at 135: The Constitution Architect and His Unfinished Agenda

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WHY IN NEWS

April 14, 2026 marks the **135th birth anniversary of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956)** — principal architect of the Indian Constitution, economist, jurist, social reformer, and the foremost leader of India’s anti-caste movement. Observed nationally as a gazetted holiday, the day carries special resonance in 2026 as it coincides with Baisakhi and prompts reflection on how much of Ambedkar’s social-justice agenda remains unfinished.

AMBEDKAR — LIFE IN BRIEF

Early Years and Education

- **Born:** April 14, 1891, at Mhow (Madhya Pradesh) into a Mahar family classified as “untouchable” under the caste system
- **Elphinstone College, Bombay** (BA 1912) — first Dalit to graduate from Elphinstone
- **Columbia University** (MA 1915; PhD 1927 — *The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution*)
- **London School of Economics** (MSc 1921; DSc 1923) — the first Indian to obtain a DSc from LSE
- **Gray’s Inn, London** — called to the Bar, 1923

Political Career — Selected Milestones

YEAR	EVENT
1919	Testified before the Southborough Committee on constitutional reforms — argued for separate electorates for untouchables
1924	Founded Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha — welfare organisation for the “outcaste”
1927	Mahad Satyagraha — asserted Dalits’ right to draw water from Chavdar Tank
1930	Led Kalaram Temple entry movement (Nashik)
1930-32	Represented untouchables at all three Round Table Conferences (London)
1932	Poona Pact with Gandhi — compromise on communal award (reserved seats instead of separate electorates)
1936	Published Annihilation of Caste (originally an undelivered speech)
1946-50	Chairman, Drafting Committee of the Constitution
1947-51	First Law Minister of independent India
1956	Converted to Buddhism (Oct 14, Nagpur) — Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din ; died Dec 6, 1956

THE CONSTITUTION — AMBEDKAR’S DRAFTING ROLE

The **Drafting Committee** of the Constituent Assembly (constituted August 29, 1947) had seven members. Ambedkar was elected Chairman. The Constitution was adopted on **November 26, 1949** and came into force on **January 26, 1950**.

Ambedkar's Key Constitutional Contributions

DOMAIN	CONTRIBUTION
Fundamental Rights	Article 14 (equality); Article 15 (non-discrimination); Article 17 (abolition of untouchability); Article 25 (religious freedom including entry of all Hindus into Hindu temples)
Directive Principles	Article 38 (social justice); Article 46 (educational and economic interests of SCs/STs)
Special Provisions	Articles 330-342 — reservations; SC/ST Commissions (originally single Commissioner under Article 338)
Federal Structure	Asymmetric federalism — strong Centre but with distinctive state rights; Article 356 “safeguards” (though Ambedkar hoped it would remain a “dead letter”)
Constitutional Morality	Ambedkar’s most-cited phrase — that sustaining the Constitution required a social culture beyond the legal text itself

The “Constitutional Morality” Concept

In his final speech to the Constituent Assembly (November 25, 1949), Ambedkar warned:

“Constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realise that our people have yet to learn it. Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic.”

The phrase has been invoked by the Supreme Court in landmark cases — **Navtej Singh Johar v. UoI (2018)** (Section 377 reading down); **Indian Young Lawyers Association v. Kerala (2018)** (Sabarimala); **NCT Delhi v. UoI (2018)** (Delhi LG powers).

ECONOMIC THOUGHT — THE FORGOTTEN DIMENSION

Ambedkar is popularly remembered as a social reformer, but his economic contributions shaped several modern Indian institutions.

Monetary Economics

- **PhD thesis (1927): *The Problem of the Rupee*** — argued that India’s currency should follow a **gold exchange standard** rather than silver or gold standard
- His analysis of **fiscal federalism** and provincial finance informed the **Hilton Young Commission (1926)** that led to the **Reserve Bank of India’s establishment (1935)**

Labour and Industrial Policy

As Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-46):

- **Employee Provident Fund (EPF)** conceptualised — implemented post-independence as the Employees' Provident Funds Act, 1952
- **Employees' State Insurance (ESI)** framework laid down — Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948
- **8-hour working day** for factory workers institutionalised in India (earlier was 12-14 hours)
- **Minimum wage** framework preceded the Minimum Wages Act, 1948
- **Maternity benefits** for working women — preceded the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961

Water and Power Policy

- Played key role in conceiving the **Damodar Valley Project** (inspired by the Tennessee Valley Authority model)
- Advocated the **Central Water Commission's** establishment
- His blueprint for river-valley planning influenced the **Bhakra-Nangal** and **Sone River** projects

AMBEDKAR VS GANDHI — A STRUCTURAL DISAGREEMENT

The Ambedkar-Gandhi disagreement is often mischaracterised as personal. It was, in fact, structural and remains unresolved.

DIMENSION	GANDHI	AMBEDKAR
Caste system	Reform from within Hinduism; caste as duty-based division; "Harijan" framing	Annihilate caste entirely ; caste inseparable from Hinduism; "untouchable" was the polemic term
Village republics	Gram Swaraj — self-sufficient villages as the ideal polity	Villages as "sinks of localism, ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism" — urged urbanisation and industrialisation
Political representation	Reserved seats within joint electorates	Separate electorates for Depressed Classes (Communal Award, 1932)
Religion	Hinduism reformed	Conversion to Buddhism (1956, with ~500,000 followers at Nagpur) as escape from caste
Economic model	Decentralised cottage industries; opposition to heavy industry	State-led industrialisation; public-sector core; economic planning

The **Poona Pact (1932)** — where Ambedkar relented on separate electorates in exchange for reserved seats — remains debated: did Ambedkar compromise or did Gandhi’s fast-unto-death coerce the Dalit community’s weaker bargaining hand?

ANNIHILATION OF CASTE (1936)

Annihilation of Caste was originally written as a speech for the **Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal** (Lahore) in 1936. The organisers withdrew the invitation when Ambedkar refused to modify passages criticising Hindu scriptures. Ambedkar published the undelivered text at his own expense.

Central Arguments

- ① Caste is not division of labour — it is **division of labourers**. Unlike other societies where economic classes can change profession with changing circumstances, caste is hereditary and endogamous
- ② **Inter-caste marriage** is the only real solvent of caste — not charity, not education, not political representation
- ③ Caste cannot be reformed within Hinduism because it has **Shastric sanction** (Manusmriti, etc.). Therefore Hinduism itself must be destroyed if caste is to end
- ④ The “**graded inequality**” of caste — where every caste has someone below to oppress — makes collective resistance impossible

Gandhi’s response (in *Harijan*) defended the varna system as “division of labour” if not of labourers. Ambedkar’s rejoinder, published as *A Reply to the Mahatma*, remains one of Indian political theory’s sharpest texts.

THE UNFINISHED AGENDA — 2026 CONTEXT

On Ambedkar’s 135th anniversary, what remains unfinished from his project?

Constitutional Gaps

AMBEDKAR'S CONCERN	STATUS IN 2026
Reservation with representation	Implemented for SC/ST (Articles 330-332); OBC reservation came later (1990, Mandal Commission); economic reservation (2019, EWS) added a new axis
Minority protection	Articles 25-30 in place; religious minorities' rights increasingly contested
Land reform	Partially implemented — zamindari abolition (1950s) succeeded; ceiling laws uneven; Ambedkar's State Socialism proposal (state ownership of key industries + land) rejected by the Assembly
Manual scavenging	Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers Act, 2013 — but enforcement remains weak; hundreds of sewer deaths annually

Social Indicators (2026)

- **Hate crimes against SCs/STs:** Continue to be reported at ~50,000 cases/year (NCRB)
- **Inter-caste marriage rate:** ~5.8% of all marriages (NFHS-5, 2019-21) — Ambedkar's "real solvent" still marginal
- **Educational gap:** SC/ST gross enrolment ratio in higher education (AISHE 2022-23) has risen to ~24% (from ~8% in 2001) but still below the 27.9% national average

LANDMARK JUDICIAL INVOCATIONS OF AMBEDKAR

CASE	YEAR	USE OF AMBEDKAR
Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala	1973	Cited Ambedkar on Constitution's basic structure
Indra Sawhney v. Union of India	1992	Ambedkar's vision of reservations as "special provision" for social justice
Navtej Singh Johar v. UoI	2018	Constitutional morality — reading down Section 377 IPC
Indian Young Lawyers Association v. Kerala	2018	Sabarimala — constitutional morality over religious practice
Sabarimala Review (2019)	2019	Re-invoked Ambedkar's warning against "religion untested by reason"
State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh	2024	Sub-classification of SC/ST reservations; invoked Ambedkar's "graded inequality" framework

AMBEDKAR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH BUDDHISM

On **October 14, 1956** at Nagpur, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism with approximately **500,000 followers** – the **Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din** (Turning of the Wheel of Dharma).

Why Buddhism?

Ambedkar rejected Hinduism's caste sanction but also did not choose Christianity or Islam. His reasons:

- 1 **Indigenous origin** – Buddhism is born in India; does not carry “foreign faith” criticism
- 2 **Rational tradition** – Buddhism's focus on reason, empirical experience, and rejection of scriptural authority aligned with his modernity
- 3 **Anti-caste at core** – The Sangha originally admitted all regardless of varna; Ashoka's edicts explicitly against hierarchical discrimination
- 4 **Non-theistic** – Ambedkar's Buddhism (articulated in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 1957) de-emphasised metaphysics, focused on ethics and social reform

His Buddhism is called **Navayana** (“new vehicle”) – distinguishing it from Theravada and Mahayana traditions. It is particularly strong among **Mahar** converts in Maharashtra and has spread to other SC communities across India.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 — Modern History	Ambedkar’s political career; Mahad Satyagraha; Poona Pact; Round Table Conferences; Dalit movement
GS1 — Culture	Buddhism revival; Navayana; Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din
GS2 — Polity	Constituent Assembly drafting; Articles 14, 15, 17, 25, 46, 330-342; Constitutional Morality; reservations jurisprudence
GS2 — Social Justice	Reservation debates; State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh (2024); manual scavenging; SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989
GS3 — Economics	<i>The Problem of the Rupee</i> ; RBI establishment (1935); EPF/ESI; 8-hour day; labour law reforms
GS4 — Ethics	Ambedkar’s <i>Annihilation of Caste</i> ; constitutional morality; moral vs legal duties
Prelims	Born: April 14, 1891, Mhow · Drafting Committee Chairman (7 members) · Converted to Buddhism: Oct 14, 1956, Nagpur · Died: Dec 6, 1956 · <i>Annihilation of Caste</i> (1936) · <i>The Buddha and His Dhamma</i> (1957)
Interview	“What part of Ambedkar’s agenda remains most unfinished in 2026 — representation, economic justice, or social reform?”

Born: April 14, 1891, Mhow (MP) · Died: Dec 6, 1956 · Education: Elphinstone, Columbia (PhD 1927), LSE (DSc 1923), Gray’s Inn · Key roles: Chairman, Drafting Committee; India’s 1st Law Minister · Key works: Annihilation of Caste (1936); The Problem of the Rupee (1923); The Buddha and His Dhamma (1957) · Key events: Mahad Satyagraha (1927); Poona Pact (1932); Buddhism conversion (Oct 14, 1956, Nagpur — Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Din) · Constitutional articles drafted: 14, 15, 17, 25, 38, 46, 330-342 · Economic contributions: RBI establishment (1935), EPF, ESI, 8-hour day, minimum wage · Gandhi vs Ambedkar: reformism vs annihilation of caste · Key concept: Constitutional Morality · Navayana Buddhism · GS1: Modern History; GS2: Polity + Social Justice; GS3: Labour Economics; GS4: Ethics.

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