

## Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as an aesthetic icon: Reclaiming Beauty from Brahminical Hegemony

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**How to cite this article:** P. Vijaya Kumar, Dr. J Thirumal (2023). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as an aesthetic icon: Reclaiming Beauty from Brahminical Hegemony. *Library Progress International*, 43(2), 2382-2390

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### *Abstract*

B.R. Ambedkar is widely recognized as a great jurist, political thinker, and social reformer, whose contributions to the Indian Constitution and his call for the annihilation of caste have been extensively studied. However, one dimension of his thought remains less explored, i.e., the essence of aesthetics. While numerous scholars have examined his writings on law, religion, and politics, very few have investigated how Ambedkar understood the role of beauty, art, and cultural expression in the struggle for liberation. This study argues that caste operates not only as a system of social and economic exclusion but also as an aesthetic order, regulating taste, perception, and cultural legitimacy by monopolizing the definition of beauty. Ambedkar recognized that exclusion from beauty was central to oppression and his project sought to dismantle the Brahminical monopoly over aesthetics by democratizing art and reimagining beauty through egalitarian and ethical systems of Buddhism. His strategies, from the burning of the Manusmriti to the creation of new cultural symbols and rituals, demonstrate that aesthetic reconstruction was essential to Dalit dignity. Furthermore, the flourishing of Dalit literature, theatre, visual arts, and performance in the post-Ambedkar era embodies his vision of cultural emancipation, where the voices, bodies, and imaginations of the oppressed reshape the very terms of beauty and culture. The article thus contends that Ambedkar's project of aesthetic liberation is indispensable for completing the democratic triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity, since true emancipation requires not only rights and justice but also the freedom to create, experience, and share beauty collectively.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Aesthetics, Democracy, Culture, Dalit, India, Liberation

### **Introduction**

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) occupies a central place in modern Indian intellectual and political history. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, a jurist of rare brilliance, and a truly uncompromising social reformer, he is widely appreciated for his relentless struggle against caste oppression and his advocacy of liberty, equality, and fraternity as the guiding principles of democracy. Ambedkar's life and work were inseparably tied to the emancipation of Dalits, who

are the communities historically placed at the lowest rank of the caste hierarchy, subjected to untouchability, exclusion, and various types of violence and discrimination. His writings and political activism laid the foundation for Dalit assertion in the twentieth century and continue to inspire movements for dignity and justice across India.

Caste has traditionally been studied as a system of social stratification, political exclusion, and economic exploitation. Yet, caste also operates as an aesthetic order. It regulates cultural taste, determines who may enter spaces of beauty, and decides what forms of art and literature are deemed legitimate and which are illegitimate. Brahminical dominance historically monopolized various Sanskrit texts, temple architecture, and classical art forms while excluding Dalits and other marginalized groups from participation in any social, educational or developmental institutions. Ambedkar's analysis of caste, while primarily framed in political and legal terms, implicitly contains an aesthetic critique. He recognized that exclusion from beauty was not incidental but central to oppression and it is purely an intentional act. As he declared in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), caste system "*is not merely a division of labour, it is a division of labourers<sup>1</sup>,*" extending into the spiritual and cultural life of the oppressed. To dismantle caste and any forms of discriminations and oppressions, there is a great requirement for dismantling the monopoly of aesthetics.

It is in this context that reconstructing Ambedkar's philosophy of aesthetics becomes significant. His vision sought to democratize beauty, reimagine cultural and traditional expression through an egalitarian perspective, and situate art within the broader project of social justice. By engaging with his critique of Brahminical cultural dominance and his reorientation of aesthetics through Buddhism, this study argues that Ambedkar's thought offers a radical call for cultural emancipation. Furthermore, the flourishing of Dalit literature, visual arts, and performance in the post-Ambedkar era can be seen as the living embodiment of his aesthetic vision<sup>2</sup>.

This paper therefore examines Ambedkar's aesthetics as an indispensable, though less explored, aspect of his philosophy. It suggests that the project of democratic liberation remains incomplete without cultural freedom, the right not only to access art and beauty but to reshape and redefine them in collective, egalitarian terms, and make it possible for all the communities to appreciate the beauty of being beauty, irrespective of whatever the caste they belong to.

### **Caste as an Aesthetic Order**

Caste is commonly understood as a fixed structure of hierarchy and exclusion, organizing social life through ritual purity, occupation, and endogamy, in this system, a person is born within a particular system of social stratification<sup>3</sup>. Yet beyond material relations and religious authority, caste can also be understood as an aesthetic order, a system of sensibilities, embodied practices, visual codes, and styles that govern how bodies, spaces, and related behaviours are perceived, valued, appreciated, and disciplined. By calling caste an aesthetic order, the ways in which it regulates perception, taste, and beauty can be understood, thereby naturalizing inequality and

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<sup>1</sup>[https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/section\\_4.html](https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/section_4.html)

<sup>2</sup>Das, Abhishek. "Hindu: Activism, Aesthetics and the Future."

<sup>3</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste>

legitimizing hierarchy. An “aesthetic order” is not simply about art, beauty, or taste, as commonly understood by all, but it is also about the sensory regime that structures what is seen as beautiful, pure, refined, or ugly, polluted, improper, etc. In this sense, caste functions through an aesthetic discipline:

1. Who may be seen and who must remain invisible.
2. What sounds are dignified such as Vedic chant, and what sounds are considered as noise, like that of Dalit drumming and singing.
3. Which bodies are marked as graceful and which as grotesque.

The core idea of caste is the ritual distinction between purity and pollution or impurity. This is inherently aesthetic. Some of the examples that distinguishes between pure and impure are:

1. White clothing of upper castes vs. the “dirty” labour of lower castes.
2. Sacred thread, tilak, ornaments as signs of higher status.
3. The spatial segregation of “clean” courtyards from “polluting” neighbourhoods.

Purity, according to the higher caste people, is made visible through dress, ornamentation, posture, and bodily comportment, and pollution is aesthetically coded as ugliness, dirt, disgusting and any form of disorder.

Caste also works through the way a person shows his discipline such as the way they speak, like the differences in a “refined” Sanskritized tones vs. “rough” local or village dialects. The way they cooked food (kaccha) is vulnerable to pollution, while dry food (pakka) is portable, all of these come under cuisine and etiquette. Another form is the ‘Touch’, the ultimate sensory marker, untouchability aestheticizes contact itself as defilement.

Thus, the hierarchy is not only enforced materially but reproduced through a sensorium of taste, touch, smell, and sight.

In the context of Caste and Spatial Aesthetics, it can be understood that villages and cities themselves are aesthetically arranged by caste:

1. Temple architecture where Dalits could not enter, yet their labour built the very stone of the temple throughout day and night.
2. Settlements designed with Brahmin agraharams at the centre and Dalit colonies pushed to the margins.
3. Urban modernity repeats this aesthetic, gated communities vs. informal settlements.

The space “looks right” because it conforms to a caste aesthetic of purity, order, and visibility. Aesthetics in relation with the caste system can also be studied through the Classical art forms in India, like the Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, Sanskrit drama, all of these were historically caste-bound, they are typically seen as refined and elevated. Dalit cultural expressions, such as drumming, folk theatre, singing leatherwork, were marked as vulgar or “low” and are given less respect and attention. The division was not just about labour, but about aesthetics, what counted as art and what remained craft, noise, or ritual service.

Even in today’s generations, film, fashion, and literature often reproduce caste aesthetics, like an advertise for fair skin, upper-caste markers of beauty, “standard” Hindi accents, Brahmin

protagonists as normatively universal.

The power of caste aesthetics completely lies in its invisibility. It does not merely say “you cannot”, it says “you do not look right.” A Dalit body in a Brahminical space appears out of place, aesthetically wrong, even before rules are invoked. This produces a constant sense of embarrassment, misfit, and alienation.

Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi movements have not only fought for rights but have also produced counter-aesthetics as they have endured immense suffering. Some of them that can be mentioned are:

1. Statues and memorials of Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, symbols of dignity and pride against Brahminical norms.
2. Literature and poetry that embrace Dalit experience, revaluing the so-called ugly, dirty, or low as sites of power.
3. Music and performance that reclaim drumming, folk art, and street theatre as radical forms.

This is the assertion of a new aesthetic order grounded in equality, dignity, and collective memory. This shows that they are not weak anymore and they can stand up for what is right and just.

Understanding caste as an aesthetic order reveals its deep entanglement with the way one feels, and perceives the idea of beauty, and everyday sensibilities. In this turn toward counter-aesthetics, Ambedkar and his followers thought explicitly connects dignity with the sensible world, making art a true form of instrument that has fraternity in it and a practical ethics of shared life<sup>4</sup>. It shows how hierarchy is naturalized not just through law, scripture, or economy, but through what actually “looks right,” “sounds proper,” or “feels pure.” At the same time, it also highlights the radical potential of counter-aesthetics to reimagine beauty and dignity outside caste. The struggle, then, is not only political or social but aesthetic, a battle over who gets to define the terms of the sensible world.

### **Ambedkar’s Critique of Brahminical Aesthetics**

Ambedkar was acutely aware that Brahminical hegemony extended beyond ritual purity and into the domain of cultural life. The temple, for example, was not merely a place for worshipping but a repository of artistic production that encompasses sculpture, music, architecture, and ritual performance. Yet Dalits were systematically excluded from these spaces. The prohibition on temple entry was therefore not only a theological ban but an aesthetic exclusion, denying Dalits the right to participate in, or even witness, collective beauty. In this way, Brahminism restricted the very possibility of experiencing and sharing aesthetic life as a common human inheritance.

Similarly, Sanskrit literature was canonized as the pinnacle of cultural refinement. Its classical poetics, metrics, and metaphysical themes were celebrated as “high culture,” while the oral traditions, folk songs, and expressive practices of Dalits and other marginalized groups were dismissed as crude, vulgar or like something that lacks standard. This dualism of “refined” versus “base” aesthetics was nothing sort of neutral judgment but a structural mechanism of exclusion. By monopolizing the definition of beauty, Brahminism transformed aesthetics into yet another

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<sup>4</sup>Siddika, Sadia, and Md Al Amin Rari. "Dr. BR Ambedkar's Vision of Caste Abolition and the Role of Art." *Ambedkarite Perspectives in Contemporary India: Pathways to Equality and Justice*: 198.

weapon of caste hierarchy.

Ambedkar's critique, though articulated in the mid-twentieth century, resonates strikingly with later theoretical ideas. In exposing how cultural forms themselves become sites of domination, he anticipated what Pierre Bourdieu would later describe as "*cultural capital*," a useful concept that is non-economic in nature like knowledge, skills, dispositions, and cultural goods that shape social advantage. It exists in three forms: embodied (habits, dispositions), objectified (books, art, instruments), and institutionalized (educational qualifications)<sup>5</sup>. It is also considered as the ways in which privileged groups reproduce social power not only through material resources but also through control over symbolic and aesthetic norms. For Ambedkar, the problem was not simply that Dalits were deprived of access to art and literature, but that beauty itself had been defined in a term that mainly focusses on upper-caste, what was marked as "pure" or "beautiful" was inseparable from what was sanctioned as "upper-caste" during that time. In this light, his project to recast religion and ethics through Buddhism, and to relocate dignity from ritual purity to human equality, becomes an aesthetic revolution as much as a political one. Scholarship on Ambedkar's inheritances further clarifies how his critique extends into the symbolic order, insisting that the sensible and the just must be reconciled in a democratic culture<sup>6</sup>.

### **Reconstructing Aesthetics: Education, Rituals, and Symbols**

Ambedkar's vision of aesthetics was not confined to mere abstract theorization but extended into material practices, collective rituals, and symbolic forms that sought to reconstruct cultural life and develop their education on egalitarian grounds. For him, liberation was not only a matter of constitutional rights or economic equality, but also of creating new forms and systems of beauty, dignity, education and collective identity that could replace the humiliations and discriminations they have been facing throughout their lives which was imposed by the higher caste. This reconstruction of aesthetics can be observed in his involvements in promoting education, public rituals, and the symbolic reordering of cultural space.

One of the earliest and most powerful examples of this reconstruction was the burning of the Manusmriti (one of the legal texts among the various Dharmasastras of Hindu culture<sup>7</sup>) in 1927 at Mahad. This act dramatized the rejection of oppressive texts and their aesthetic authority. By setting the scripture ablaze in a public ritual, Ambedkar transformed protest into a symbolic performance that dismantled the sacred aura of Brahminical law and replaced it with a new collective aesthetic of defiance and dignity. This act demonstrated how cultural emancipation required the unmaking of old symbols before new ones could be built.

If the burning of Manusmriti represented the destruction of oppressive aesthetics, Ambedkar's composition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957) represented the constructive counterpart. Written as a counter-scripture, this text offered a rational, egalitarian, and ethical vision that redefined beauty in terms of justice, compassion, and human flourishing. The book also played a

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<sup>5</sup>Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Forms of Capital*. 1986. Edited by John G. Richardson, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 241–258.

<sup>6</sup>Kumar, Aishwary. "Ambedkar's inheritances." *Modern Intellectual History* 7.2 (2010): 391-415.

<sup>7</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manusmriti>

significant role in the process of uplifting and in liberating the Dalit community<sup>8</sup>. Unlike Brahminical texts, which restricted access and monopolized meaning, Ambedkar's Buddhist scripture was designed to be democratic and universally accessible, embodying an aesthetic of openness rather than hierarchy.

After Ambedkar's death, the aesthetic reconstruction of Dalit identity found new expression in the proliferation of Ambedkar statues all across India. These statues, often situated at the heart of villages, towns, and universities, function as visible assertions of dignity and self-respect. They not only reclaim public space from invisibility but also embody an ongoing aesthetic revolution by transforming the material landscape into a gallery of liberation. Each statue of that time, whether in modest form or monumental scale, affirms the collective presence of the marginalized and turns public space into a beautiful site of memory, pride, and resistance.

Here, Ambedkar's iconography becomes an epitome of democratic visibility, the raised finger, the blue suit, the Constitution held in hand, and the deliberate placement of statues in civic nodes. As visual-culture analysis shows, these images do not merely commemorate because they teach and organize public attention, becoming a people's "design language" for equality. In this way, symbolic form works as a systematic method by translating ethics into everyday seeing<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the emergent arena of Dalit theatre demonstrates how performance becomes a living school of Ambedkarite values, the stage enacts humiliation and resistance, turns pain into collective learning, and rehearses a public capable of fraternity. In this theatre, aesthetics is praxis, a means of solidarity-building and self-respect<sup>10</sup>.

### **Dalit cultural emancipation and Ambedkar's Legacy**

Ambedkar's aesthetic philosophy continues to shape the right course of Dalit cultural production in a very systematic and an enduring way. For him, emancipation was never merely political or economic, because it required a transformation of cultural life, of how oppressed communities expressed themselves and claimed dignity through art, literature, and ritual. The aesthetic domain thus became a site of struggle, resistance, rethinking and reimagination.

The emergence of Dalit literature in the mid-twentieth century marks one of the most striking examples of this aesthetic revolution. Beginning with many famous writers such as Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal, Dalit literature constituted a radical rupture from Sanskritic, Brahminical models of beauty and order. Instead of polished Sanskrit poetics, Dalit writers turned to the raw immediacy of the street, the chawl, the slum, and the labouring body. Their work redefined beauty not in abstraction but in terms of lived suffering, their extreme pain, resilience, struggles and the uncompromising assertion of humanity.

A powerful illustration of this shift can be seen in the reception of Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Hindu*, which critics discuss as a deliberate re-engineering of narrative technique to centre Dalit life-

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<sup>8</sup>Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. *The Buddha and his dhamma: A critical edition*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Mascarenhas, Arun. "The Iconography of Dr. BR Ambedkar: The Symbolic Means in Visual and Design Culture."

<sup>10</sup>Naskar, Shubhendu Shekhar. *Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre: Perspectives on Caste, Class and Gender*. Springer Nature, 2025.

worlds<sup>11</sup>. The work avoids sentimentalization and insists on representing exploitation, desire, and aspiration within the concrete geographies of the basti and the shop floor. In doing so, it not only widens what counts as literature but also tests democracy by asking whether the most stigmatized experiences can shape the nation's aesthetic common sense.

This cultural insurgency did not stop with the written word. Music, theatre, and visual art became equally powerful vehicles of liberation. Protest songs and street theatre, especially in Maharashtra and later across India, blurred the line between political activism and artistic performance. Such performance traditions worked as mobile schools of Ambedkarite values, joining pedagogy with pleasure and turning public squares into classrooms of equality. Dalit theatre in particular has served as a crucible of political education, its dramaturgies refusing the hierarchy of "high" vs. "low" art and staging the dignity of labour as beauty<sup>12</sup>.

Visual art, too, became a vital medium for articulating counter-aesthetics. Dalit artists have persistently re-appropriated Ambedkar's image, some of them were, his iconic blue suit, raised finger, or presence with the Constitution, as a recurring symbol of dignity, law, and modernity. Alongside this, the use of Buddhist motifs, the wheel of dhamma, the stupa, the Bodhi tree, symbolized a reclamation of cultural pasts that had been denied or suppressed. By fusing and uniting all these with folk traditions of storytelling, mural-making, and iconography, Dalit visual culture created a new grammar of beauty rooted in assertion rather than subjugation. Here the line between art and institution thins, as iconography becomes constitutional literacy, and beauty becomes a habit of equality<sup>13</sup>.

Such practices embody Ambedkar's enduring insight, that liberation must include not only the right to vote, to work, and to live with dignity, but also the right to create and experience beauty collectively. In fact, Dalit cultural production insists that aesthetic freedom is inseparable from political freedom. By focussing on the voices, bodies, and imaginations of the oppressed, it destabilizes dominant notions of culture itself. What was once marginal becomes central, and what was once considered "polluted" is transformed into a new site of creativity and power. And this truly changed the lives of Dalit community.

In this sense, the cultural legacy of Ambedkar is not constant but continuously unfolding. Each poem, song, mural, or play carries forward his unfinished project of emancipation, making art itself a form of social revolution. Dalit cultural emancipation, therefore, is not only an aesthetic movement but also an ethical and political one: a living testament to Ambedkar's conviction that equality must resonate in every sphere of life, including the realm of beauty, imagination, and art.

### **Conclusion: Aesthetic Liberation as Democratic Completion**

Ambedkar's philosophy compels everyone to see that the struggle against caste is not only legal or economic but also aesthetic. Caste sustains itself by regulating perception, defining what counts

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<sup>11</sup>Das, Abhishek. "Hindu: Activism, Aesthetics and the Future."

<sup>12</sup>Naskar, Shubhendu Shekhar. *Aesthetics of Dalit Theatre: Perspectives on Caste, Class and Gender*. Springer Nature, 2025

<sup>13</sup>Mascarenhas, Arun. "The Iconography of Dr. BR Ambedkar: The Symbolic Means in Visual and Design Culture." \_\_\_\_\_

as beauty, and excluding the marginalized from cultural life. By exposing this Brahminical monopoly over aesthetics, Ambedkar revealed how oppression extends beyond material deprivation into the very structures of sense and taste. His struggles were therefore radical, as they aimed to democratize beauty, reclaim art as a shared human inheritance, and reimagine culture through the egalitarian ethics of Buddhism.

The burning of the Manusmriti, the writing of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and the creation of new cultural symbols all demonstrate that aesthetic practices were central to his project of liberation. Ambedkar understood that freedom required not only dismantling discriminatory institutions but also creating new forms of collective joy, dignity, and representation. Statues, literature, theatre, and visual culture produced in the tradition shaped by Ambedkar's vision, his legacy, and core ideas are not peripheral but essential extensions of his democratic vision. They testify that emancipation must include the right to participate in beauty, to reshape cultural life, and to affirm dignity through creativity.

The everyday practices of the followers of Ambedkar further extend this vision. As people improved their living conditions, they began embedding Ambedkar and Buddhist imagery into their homes, book shelves, fabrics, tiles, nameplates, postures and small businesses. The blue flag, raised high as a symbol of resistance, and the Dhamma chakra, embraced as a national emblem, demonstrate how collective aesthetics continue to sustain dignity and hope. Through such acts, beauty itself is democratized, and is no longer the monopoly of caste elites but the shared inheritance of the oppressed.

Therefore, aesthetic liberation is not an ornament to Ambedkar's political thought but its necessary completion. Without democratizing beauty, fraternity remains hollow, without cultural freedom, equality is incomplete. The future task, then, is to nurture, protect and expand this aesthetic revolution, one should not work only in resisting oppressive cultural codes but also actively involved in creating new symbols, art, and practices that embody equality, fraternity, and dignity. Only then can democracy in India be truly completed, when every household, every street, and every public space reflects the collective joy of a liberated imagination.

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