

Socio-Economic Vulnerability of Daily-Wage Workers in India: Dr Ambedkar Labour Justice Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines the socio-economic vulnerability of daily-wage workers in India through an Ambedkarian labour justice perspective. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020, the study synthesizes evidence on economic insecurity, employment instability, occupational risks, social protection gaps, and inequalities related to caste, gender, and migration. The findings demonstrate that worker vulnerability is multidimensional and structurally embedded. Drawing on Ambedkar's principles of equality, dignity of labour, economic justice, and social security, the study proposes an Ambedkarian Labour Justice Framework for more inclusive labour governance. The study argues for a shift from employment generation towards employment with dignity, security, equality, and rights in India.

Keywords: Daily-Wage Workers; Socio-Economic Vulnerability; Ambedkarian Labour Justice; Informal Employment; Social Security; Labour Governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

India's labour market is characterized by a large informal workforce, including daily-wage and casual workers who often experience irregular employment, low wages, limited social security and weak bargaining power (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). Informal workers are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks because their employment frequently lacks stable contracts, adequate social protection and effective access to labour rights (ILO, 2024). The socio-economic vulnerability of daily-wage workers is multidimensional and extends beyond income insecurity. It includes employment instability, occupational hazards, inadequate social security, poor working conditions and limited access to welfare benefits. These vulnerabilities are further shaped by caste, gender, migration, education and rural–urban location. Research indicates that informal and casual workers continue to experience significant wage and employment inequalities in India (ILO, 2022; Ananian & Dellaferrera, 2024). In this context, the labour philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provides an important theoretical perspective. Ambedkar viewed labour rights as closely connected with social justice, equality, dignity, fair wages, social security and economic democracy. His contribution to labour welfare included concerns related to working hours, wages, working conditions, social security and women's labour rights (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2015). An Ambedkarian perspective therefore enables contemporary labour vulnerability to be examined not merely as an economic problem but as an issue of social inequality, dignity and justice.

Despite extensive research on informal employment and worker vulnerability, existing literature remains fragmented across economic, social and occupational dimensions. Moreover, relatively limited research systematically examines contemporary daily-wage workers through an Ambedkarian labour perspective. The present study addresses this gap through a systematic review of secondary literature and evidence on the socio-economic vulnerability of daily-wage workers in India. The study particularly examines economic insecurity, employment instability, social protection, occupational vulnerability, caste, gender and migration, and interprets these dimensions through Ambedkar's principles of equality, dignity of labour, social security and economic justice. The review ultimately seeks to develop an Ambedkarian framework for more inclusive and socially just labour governance in India.

Research Questions; ¹What are the major dimensions of socio-economic vulnerability among daily-wage workers in India?, ²What economic and social factors contribute to their vulnerability? ³How do caste, gender, migration and location influence their vulnerability? ⁴To what extent do existing labour and social-security mechanisms address these challenges? ⁵How can Ambedkar's labour philosophy provide a framework for addressing the vulnerability of daily-wage workers?

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Daily-Wage and Informal Workers; Daily-wage workers generally depend on short-term or irregular employment and are often characterized by limited employment security, uncertain earnings and weak access to formal labour protections. In India, casual workers constitute an important segment of the informal labour market and continue to experience substantial wage disparities compared with regular workers (ILO, 2018).

2.2 Socio-Economic Vulnerability; Socio-economic vulnerability refers to the exposure of workers and households to economic, social and employment-related risks combined with limited capacity to cope with such risks. For daily-wage workers, vulnerability is reflected through low and irregular wages, employment insecurity, inadequate social protection, unsafe working conditions and limited bargaining power (ILO, 2019).

2.3 Dimensions of Vulnerability; In this review, the vulnerability of daily-wage workers is conceptualized through five major dimensions:

- Economic vulnerability – low wages, irregular income and poverty.
- Employment vulnerability – temporary employment, job insecurity and lack of contracts.
- Social vulnerability – caste, gender, migration and social exclusion.
- Occupational vulnerability – unsafe workplaces, excessive working hours and occupational risks.
- Social-security vulnerability – inadequate access to healthcare, insurance, pensions and other welfare provisions.

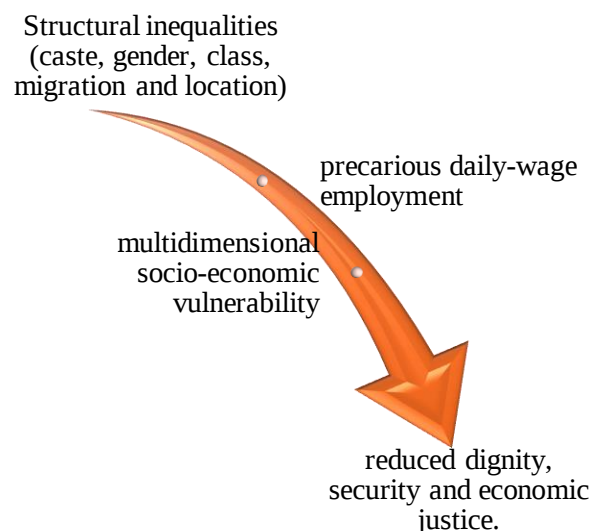
Evidence from India shows persistent wage inequality among casual workers, with particularly disadvantaged outcomes for women and workers in informal employment (ILO, 2018).

2.4 Ambedkarian Labour Perspective; The theoretical foundation of this study is based on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's understanding of labour, equality and social justice. His labour philosophy emphasized that economic development should be accompanied by workers' rights, social security, fair working conditions and human dignity. Ambedkar's approach is therefore useful for interpreting labour vulnerability not simply as an issue of inadequate income but as a consequence of structural inequality and unequal access to social and economic rights.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes Ambedkarian Labour Justice through four interconnected principles: equality, dignity of labour, economic justice and social security. These principles provide a normative framework for evaluating whether existing labour institutions adequately protect India's daily-wage workforce.

2.5 Conceptual Proposition

The study proposes that:



3. AMBEDKAR'S LABOUR PHILOSOPHY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to labour policy represents an important dimension of his broader philosophy of social justice, equality and human dignity. His understanding of labour was not limited to employment and wages; he emphasized the need for institutional mechanisms that protect workers from exploitation and ensure decent conditions of work. During his association with labour administration, Ambedkar contributed to reforms concerning working hours, wages, employment conditions, social insurance and workers' welfare (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2015).

3.1 Dignity of Labour

For Ambedkar, labour was closely associated with human dignity and social equality. Workers should not be treated merely as economic inputs but as individuals entitled to dignity and protection. This principle remains relevant to contemporary daily-wage workers who frequently experience insecure employment, poor working conditions and limited bargaining power (ILO, 2024).

3.2 Economic Justice and Fair Wages; Ambedkar recognized adequate remuneration as an essential component of economic justice. Contemporary evidence continues to show substantial wage inequality between regular and casual workers in India, demonstrating the continuing relevance of fair-wage principles (ILO, 2018). Fair remuneration is therefore central to reducing poverty and improving the socio-economic security of daily-wage workers.

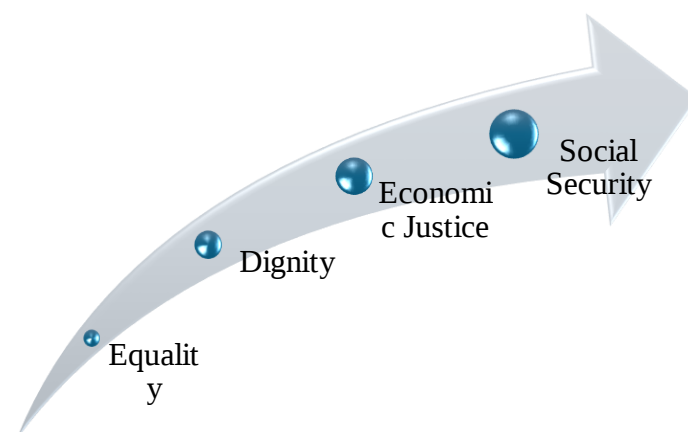
3.3 Social Security; Ambedkar's labour vision emphasized institutional protection against economic and social risks. Social security—including health protection, maternity benefits, accident compensation and income support—is particularly important for workers whose employment is irregular and who lack employer-based protection. The continuing expansion of social-security mechanisms for informal workers demonstrates the contemporary importance of this principle (ILO, 2024).

3.4 Equality and Caste-Based Labour Inequality; An important feature of Ambedkar's perspective was his understanding of the relationship between caste and economic inequality. Caste-based occupational structures can restrict occupational mobility and reproduce unequal access to economic opportunities. Contemporary research similarly identifies caste and social identity as important factors influencing labour-market outcomes in India (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

3.5 Gender and Labour Rights; Ambedkar also recognized the importance of women's economic participation and protection at the workplace. His labour interventions included concerns relating to maternity protection and women's working conditions (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2015). This remains relevant because women engaged in informal and casual employment continue to face lower wages, occupational segregation and weaker social protection (ILO, 2022).

3.6 Contemporary Relevance; Ambedkar's labour philosophy provides a valuable framework for analysing contemporary daily-wage employment because it connects economic security with social equality and human dignity. Therefore, reducing worker vulnerability requires more than employment creation; it requires fair wages, social protection, safe working conditions, equal opportunity and effective labour rights.

Thus, the present review adopts an Ambedkarian Labour Justice Framework, represented by four core principles:



These principles are subsequently used to interpret the evidence on the socio-economic vulnerability of daily-wage workers in India.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on secondary data and follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic identification, screening and synthesis of relevant literature (Page et al., 2021). Relevant studies were searched through Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald, JSTOR and Google Scholar, along with reports from the Government of India, MoSPI, Ministry of Labour and Employment and ILO. Keywords included “daily-wage workers,” “casual workers,” “informal workers,” “socio-economic vulnerability,” “labour rights,” “social security,” “Ambedkar,” and “India.” Studies focusing on Indian daily-wage, casual and informal workers were included, while duplicate and irrelevant studies were excluded. The selected literature was thematically analysed across economic, employment, social, occupational and social-security dimensions and interpreted through an Ambedkarian framework of equality, dignity, economic justice and social security (Page et al., 2021).

5. RESULTS AND SYSTEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

The systematic review reveals that the socio-economic vulnerability of India's daily-wage workers is not merely a problem of low income; it is a multidimensional outcome of insecure employment, weak social protection and persistent structural inequalities. Daily-wage workers remain concentrated in precarious segments of the labour market, where irregular earnings, limited bargaining power and inadequate institutional protection reinforce one another (ILO, 2019, 2024).

5.1 Multidimensional Economic and Employment Vulnerability

Economic insecurity is one of the most prominent characteristics of daily-wage employment. Irregular work, low and uncertain wages and limited savings reduce workers' capacity to withstand illness, unemployment and other economic shocks. Evidence indicates that casual and informal workers experience significant wage disadvantages, with women and socially disadvantaged groups facing additional labour-market inequalities (ILO, 2018, 2022). Employment insecurity further intensifies this vulnerability. Temporary work arrangements, absence of written contracts and weak bargaining power transfer a substantial proportion of employment risks from employers to workers (ILO, 2019). Thus, employment itself does not necessarily guarantee economic security or a dignified livelihood.

5.2 Social-Security and Occupational Vulnerability

Limited access to social protection represents another major challenge. Daily-wage workers may have inadequate access to healthcare, insurance, pensions, maternity benefits and accident protection, leaving households highly exposed to social and economic shocks (ILO, 2024). Occupational vulnerability is equally significant. Workers in construction, agriculture and other informal occupations may face hazardous working environments, long working hours and inadequate occupational safety mechanisms (ILO, 2019). Consequently, workplace insecurity can extend into household-level economic insecurity when illness or injury interrupts income.

5.3 Caste, Gender and Migration

The literature further demonstrates that vulnerability is unequally distributed. Caste can influence occupational mobility and access to economic opportunities, while women workers frequently experience lower remuneration, occupational segregation and weaker social protection (Thorat & Newman, 2010; ILO, 2022). Migration can create an additional layer of vulnerability. Migrant workers may encounter insecure employment, inadequate housing and difficulties accessing welfare and social-security provisions. The COVID-19 pandemic particularly exposed the structural weaknesses faced by India's migrant and informal workforce (ILO, 2020).

5.4 Synthesis through an Ambedkarian Lens

The evidence suggests that the vulnerability of daily-wage workers is structural, cumulative and interconnected. Economic insecurity interacts with caste, gender, migration, occupational risk and limited social protection, producing a cycle of disadvantage. From an Ambedkarian perspective, these conditions cannot be understood only as labour-market deficiencies. They represent broader questions of equality, dignity, economic justice and social security. Ambedkar's labour philosophy therefore provides a valuable normative lens through which contemporary worker vulnerability can be critically examined.

The framework demonstrates that structural inequalities generate precarious employment, precarious employment produces multidimensional vulnerability, and Ambedkarian labour justice provides a normative pathway towards equality, dignity, economic security and inclusive labour governance.

5.5 Key Synthesis

The overall evidence can therefore be summarized as: “Employment without security may provide livelihood, but it does not necessarily provide dignity or social justice.” This finding provides the foundation for the subsequent discussion of

policy mechanisms and the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's labour philosophy for building a more inclusive and socially just labour system in India.

6. DISCUSSION: AN AMBEDKARIAN INTERPRETATION OF LABOUR VULNERABILITY

The findings indicate that the vulnerability of daily-wage workers in India is multidimensional and structurally embedded. Low wages, irregular employment, weak social protection and occupational insecurity interact with caste, gender and migration-related disadvantages (ILO, 2019, 2024). Therefore, worker vulnerability cannot be adequately addressed through income enhancement alone. From an Ambedkarian perspective, economic inequality and social inequality are closely interconnected. Ambedkar emphasized that political and economic reforms cannot achieve meaningful justice when social hierarchies continue to restrict equality and human dignity (Ambedkar, 1936). This perspective is particularly relevant to daily-wage workers whose employment opportunities and occupational mobility may be influenced by social identity and structural disadvantage (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

The findings also highlight the importance of dignity of labour. Employment should provide not only income but also safe working conditions, reasonable protection and recognition of workers' rights. Contemporary evidence on informal employment demonstrates that workers outside formal employment arrangements often remain inadequately protected against economic and occupational risks (ILO, 2024). Similarly, social security represents a central component of labour justice. For workers with irregular employment, access to healthcare, insurance, pensions and income protection can significantly reduce vulnerability to economic shocks. However, gaps in coverage and accessibility continue to challenge informal workers (ILO, 2024).

The review further demonstrates that vulnerability is intersectional. Women, migrants and socially disadvantaged workers may experience multiple forms of disadvantage simultaneously. Consequently, labour policies based on a uniform conception of the worker may fail to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups.

6.1 Ambedkarian Labour Justice Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes four interconnected pillars of Ambedkarian labour justice:

Principle	Contemporary Labour Concern	Required Response
Equality	Caste and gender inequalities	Equal opportunity and non-discrimination
Dignity of Labour	Unsafe and insecure work	Decent and safe working conditions
Economic Justice	Low and irregular wages	Fair and timely remuneration
Social Security	Limited welfare protection	Universal and accessible social protection

Thus, the review suggests that addressing daily-wage workers' vulnerability requires a shift from “employment creation” to “employment with dignity, security and justice.” Such a shift is consistent with the broader objective of inclusive and decent work promoted by contemporary labour policy (ILO, 2024). Overall, an Ambedkarian approach contributes a justice-oriented perspective to the existing literature by connecting labour-market vulnerability with structural inequality, human dignity and social citizenship. It therefore provides a useful theoretical foundation for developing more inclusive labour policies for India's daily-wage workforce.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The review suggests that reducing the vulnerability of daily-wage workers requires a rights-based and multidimensional labour-policy approach rather than employment generation alone (ILO, 2024). First, effective implementation of minimum wages and timely wage payments is essential for improving economic security (ILO, 2018). Second, informal workers should have universal and portable social protection, including healthcare, accident insurance, pensions and maternity benefits, particularly for migrant workers (ILO, 2020). Third, stronger occupational health and safety mechanisms are required in sectors such as construction, agriculture and manufacturing (ILO, 2019). Labour policies should also address caste- and gender-based inequalities through equal opportunities, non-discrimination and improved access to decent employment (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Finally, strengthening worker representation and collective bargaining can improve the bargaining power of daily-wage workers. Thus, an Ambedkarian labour-policy approach should be built around five principles:

Such an approach can promote dignity, economic justice and inclusive labour governance for India's daily-wage workforce (ILO, 2024).

9. Conclusion

The systematic review demonstrates that the socio-economic vulnerability of daily-wage workers in India is multidimensional and structurally rooted. Low and irregular wages, employment insecurity, inadequate social protection and occupational risks are further intensified by caste, gender and migration-related inequalities (ILO, 2019, 2024). An Ambedkarian perspective provides a valuable framework for understanding these challenges through the principles of equality, dignity of labour, economic justice and social security. The review therefore argues that labour policy should move beyond employment generation towards employment with dignity, security and rights. Strengthening wage protection, universal social security, occupational safety, equality and worker participation can contribute to a more inclusive labour market. Ultimately, addressing the vulnerability of India's daily-wage workforce requires a shift from mere employment to socially just and dignified employment, reflecting the enduring relevance of Ambedkar's labour philosophy.

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