

Existence, Caste, and Freedom: A Comparative Study of Jean-Paul Sartre and B. R. Ambedkar

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Abstract: *In order to investigate the connection between existence, caste, and freedom, this essay compares Jean-Paul Sartre and B. R. Ambedkar. It contends that whereas existentialist philosophy portrays freedom as a universal and essential aspect of human existence, this assertion is constrained when considered in light of societal inequity based on caste. The study starts by examining Sartre's notion of existential freedom, specifically his focus on personal responsibility, choice, and the notion that people form their own essence via activity. It then looks at Ambedkar's criticism of the caste system, emphasizing how social hierarchy, systemic injustice, and cultural norms limit underprivileged populations' access to freedom. By discussing these two viewpoints, the study shows that freedom must be based on social reality and historical circumstances rather than being solely individual or abstract. The research also reveals that Ambedkar emphasizes the significance of social transformation and collective emancipation, whereas Sartre emphasizes individual activity. The essay makes the case for a synthesis that reinterprets freedom as a relational and context-dependent idea that is influenced by both structural limitations and individual behavior. It comes to the conclusion that, particularly in civilizations characterized by caste-based discrimination, a meaningful conception of freedom necessitates addressing both real challenges of inequality and philosophical questions of existence.*

Keywords: *Existentialism, Caste, Freedom, Jean-Paul Sartre, B. R. Ambedkar, Social Justice, Agency, Structural Inequality.*

1 | INTRODUCTION:

Modern philosophy has focused on existence and freedom, although its meaning changes in different social and historical settings. A comparison between Jean-Paul Sartre and B. R. Ambedkar offers a rich

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64

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framework for studying freedom as a philosophical concept and a social reality. Ambedkar's philosophy highlights caste's structural limits, suggesting that freedom cannot be defined without confronting social inequity, unlike Sartre's existentialism. Combining these approaches lets us critically assess whether freedom is universal or socially conditioned. Jean-Paul Sartre's existential theory holds that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 22), meaning that humans construct themselves by their decisions. Sartre believed that people are "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943/2003, p. 439) because they must continually select and take responsibility for their actions. This perspective makes freedom an ontological need for human existence. Sartre's statement assumes a level of autonomy that may not be attainable to everybody, especially those living under societal oppression. His abstract definition of freedom presents an essential question: can people actually be free when their social conditions drastically limit their choices?

B. R. Ambedkar's thought provides a critical correction. Ambedkar contends that social institutions shape human life in the context of caste-based discrimination in India. He calls the caste system "not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 83), emphasizing how it restricts freedom. Ambedkar shows that social institutions that deny excluded people equality and dignity limit freedom, unlike Sartre's emphasis on individual choice. Untouchable people have little self-determination, making the existential claim of universal freedom impossible to support. In addition, Ambedkar links freedom to social justice and collective transformation. According to Ambedkar (1949/1994, p. 38), political democracy cannot survive without social democracy, which is built on "liberty, equality and fraternity". This perspective emphasizes that freedom requires institutional and cultural transformation, shifting the focus from individual existence to social conditions. Unlike Sartre's individualistic approach, Ambedkar emphasizes structural renovation for true freedom. Existentialism emphasizes personal agency, whereas Ambedkar believed that social context shapes agency. Sartre and Ambedkar share fundamental similarities. Both thinkers reject deterministic interpretations of human nature and advocate human activity to shape the world. Sartre's emphasis on responsibility matches Ambedkar's appeal for social reform and community action. In social justice, freedom is both an individual and a community objective, thus Ambedkar places responsibility within this framework. This implies that existential freedom must be redefined in light of social reality, especially in unequal societies.

This parallel is even more relevant given current caste and identity conflicts. Modern India's caste-based discrimination shows that freedom is not guaranteed. According to Gopal Guru, caste still shapes the "experience of humiliation" in everyday life (Guru, 2009, p. 12), demonstrating that social oppression remains a key impediment to freedom. This supports Ambedkar's claim that freedom is incomplete without addressing structural injustices. Finally, Sartre and Ambedkar's discussion illuminates the link between existence, caste, and freedom. Sartre presents a philosophical theory of human freedom, but Ambedkar bases it in social oppression, showing its limitations. This study explores this issue by suggesting that freedom is both an existential condition and a social achievement formed by equality and justice fights.

2 | ONTOLOGY OF FREEDOM: EXISTENTIALISM AND THE PRIMACY OF CHOICE

Existentialist philosophy bases its ontology of freedom on the premise that humans are defined by their choice. Sartre believed that freedom is the condition of human existence, not a trait. Sartre's famous argument that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 22) shows that human nature does not drive our behavior. Instead, people must choose their identity. Freedom is central to being human, according to this ontological view. Freedom is not extrinsic to the self but fundamental to human reality. Sartre adds that people are "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943/2003, p. 439). It underlines that freedom is inherent; even not choosing is a decision. Freedom empowers and burdens since it involves complete accountability for actions. Sartre denies any determinism, including religious, biological, and societal explanations that fix human behavior. He believes humans are perpetually changing through

their choices. This choice primacy emphasizes the individual's role in creating meaning and worth in an indifferent universe. However, existentialist emphasis on choice generates major philosophical problems concerning freedom's conditions. Critics say Sartre's view of freedom's universality ignores social and historical restrictions. The notion that everyone can choose may not hold in settings of substantial inequality. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of abstract freedom by focusing on caste discrimination is particularly clear.

According to Ambedkar, the primacy of choice cannot be fully grasped without understanding human existence's structural conditions. One cannot define themselves independently of social classifications in a caste-based society. On p. 83, Ambedkar claims that caste is "not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers" that limits mobility and imposes set duties. This structural constraint directly opposes the existentialist argument that people can freely create their essence. The bottom of the caste structure has few alternatives, making freedom unequal and uneven. This contradiction aside, Sartre's ontology of freedom affirms agency even in constricted settings, making it important. His emphasis on accountability shows that circumstances do not define people. In a more socially grounded interpretation, freedom is a capacity within boundaries rather than an absolute requirement. Existentialism provides a philosophical underpinning for resistance, where people challenge those who limit their choices. Sartre's later writings displays a growing grasp of social context. He recognizes that freedom is always located within historical conditions that shape but do not dictate human conduct. This move allows existentialist and structural inequality-focused social theories like Ambedkar's to communicate. Thus, the ontology of freedom must be understood in connection to both human decision and the social reality in which it is made.

Sartre also emphasizes "bad faith," where people blame others for their acts and deny their freedom. This emphasizes existentialism's ethical aspect, because authenticity demands freedom and responsibility. In systemic oppression, ill faith must be rethought. Social constraints may limit choice, therefore lack of freedom cannot always be attributed to individual denial. This emphasizes the necessity to combine existentialist ideas with a more sophisticated view of society. In conclusion, existentialism's ontology of freedom, which emphasizes choice, provides a powerful framework for comprehending human life. When seen in light of Ambedkar's critique of caste, freedom is not abstract or universal. It must be seen as an ontological possibility and a social actuality. This synthesis shows how individual agency and structural constraints are interrelated, providing a more complete view of freedom.

3 | CASTE AS STRUCTURAL UNFREEDOM: AMBEDKAR'S CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL HIERARCHY

As one of the most powerful critics of social hierarchy in modern political philosophy, B. R. Ambedkar views caste as structural unfreedom. Ambedkar saw caste as a profoundly ingrained social structure that limits freedom, equality, and dignity to a vast portion of society. Ambedkar argues that institutionalized social power shapes and limits freedom, unlike philosophical systems that view freedom as an intrinsic human state. His analysis shows that caste is a sort of structural unfreedom, limiting people's choices and possibilities from birth. The famous Ambedkar quote that caste is "not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 83) illustrates this structural constraint. Caste-based societies allocate jobs based on birth and expect people to follow them. This approach limits economic mobility and perpetuates social inequality by assigning purity and pollution to groups. Thus, Dalits and other lower-class people are denied basic rights and opportunities. Freedom becomes an illusion in such a situation. Ambedkar underlines that social norms and cultural practices that legitimate inequity support caste. He claims that caste is a system of "graded inequality" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 101) that rigidly and self-perpetuates, placing each group above another. This graded structure prevents collective resistance because each group wants to keep its position rather than challenge the system. Caste dominance is complex, as power is allocated in a way that splits solidarity and perpetuates

separation. Thus, caste is both an oppressive institution and a self-sustaining mechanism through internalized ideas and social actions.

Ambedkar also criticized caste's theological basis, particularly Hindu scriptures' legitimization of social hierarchy. He claims that caste is morally binding since it is founded in religious thought. Ambedkar illustrates that structural unfreedom is intellectual and material by combining caste and religion. Being ingrained in society's values makes it harder to challenge. He calls for the "annihilation of caste" to overthrow the entire social order, not only change it.

Ambedkar's approach emphasizes social constraints, unlike existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre claims that people can define themselves through their acts, while Ambedkar shows that not everyone can. Caste hierarchy limits choices for caste-bound people. Agency is not wholly absent, but external factors limit it. Ambedkar's view challenges the universality of existential freedom by suggesting that it must be interpreted in connection to society.

However, Ambedkar does not rule out freedom. He redefines freedom as a social achievement, not an individual one. He believes true independence involves "liberty, equality and fraternity" (Ambedkar, 1949/1994, p. 38). These concepts underpin social democracy, which Ambedkar believes is necessary for human dignity. This definition of freedom includes conditions that allow people to live with dignity and self-respect. Ambedkar also stressed education, political involvement, and social transformation to show the significance of active effort in overcoming structural unfreedom. He empowers marginalized populations to fight the system and claim their rights to improve their lives. This view coincides with social justice theories that emphasize addressing structural disparities for meaningful freedom. In conclusion, Ambedkar's critique of caste illuminates unfreedom as a structural condition in social, economic, and cultural institutions. By showing the limits of individualistic freedom, he emphasizes collaborative change and social fairness. Caste's graduated inequality limits chances and influences life. Rethinking freedom in cultures with deep social hierarchies requires understanding caste as structural unfreedom.

4 | INDIVIDUAL AGENCY VS COLLECTIVE EMANCIPATION:

Freedom disputes, especially between Jean-Paul Sartre and B. R. Ambedkar, center on the conflict between individual agency and collective emancipation. Sartre emphasizes individual autonomy and choice, while Ambedkar emphasizes collective struggle to transcend systemic oppression. This discrepancy represents two different views on how to obtain freedom in unequal society. Existentialism, according to Sartre, emphasizes individual agency. His famous argument that humans are "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943/2003, p. 439) implies that people are accountable for their acts. One must choose and identify oneself even in challenging situations. Sartre believed that agency is unavoidable and that freedom is choosing. This perspective emphasizes personal responsibility and authenticity, where people must follow their principles rather than external influences. Freedom is a personal success based on self-awareness and choice. Sartre's emphasis on individual agency has been attacked for ignoring societal factors that limit human choices. Ambedkar's caste analysis highlights this weakness. Caste-based societies restrict individual freedom. Ambedkar claims that caste limits human existence, making it hard to transcend duties. His statement that caste is "a system of graded inequality" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 101) illustrates that some groups are privileged while others are excluded. Such a setting makes individual agency seem inadequate.

Thus, Ambedkar emphasizes community emancipation over individual freedom. He believes social systems must change to obtain actual freedom. He advocated social democracy based on "liberty, equality and fraternity" (Ambedkar, 1949/1994, p. 38) to promote shared and common freedom. Ambedkar believed emancipation meant abolishing caste and establishing dignity for all. This demands political action, social reform, and organized fight. Ambedkar emphasizes community actions over

personal choice in reaching freedom, unlike Sartre. Ambedkar acknowledges individual agency. He inspires people to fight oppression and unjust societal norms. His renowned “educate, agitate, organize” slogan emphasizes the need of personal knowledge and action in communal conflict. Thus, individual agency and communal emancipation are linked. Individual activities fuel collective movements, which enable individual freedom. This agency-emancipation relationship can also be interpreted through social theory. Marx believes that humans shape history based on existing conditions, rather than their own will (Marx, 1852/1978, p. 595). This shows that agency is structurally constrained, connecting Sartre and Ambedkar. Individuals can act, but social and historical factors mold them. This perspective balances freedom by valuing individual initiative and community struggle. The conflict between individual and collective freedom also affects modern civilization. In inequality-ridden environments, human agency can overshadow systemic change. Ignoring individual responsibility can also harm communal movements. A Sartre-Ambedkar synthesis emphasizes that freedom needs personal and communal change. In conclusion, the argument between individual agency and collective liberation shows the philosophical and social complexity of freedom. Sartre's existentialism emphasizes individual choice, while Ambedkar's caste critique emphasizes social struggle. They provide a more complete view of freedom, viewing agency and liberation as complementary. This integrated viewpoint is necessary to fight inequality and envision a more equitable and inclusive society.

5 | TOWARD A SYNTHESIS: REIMAGINING FREEDOM IN CONTEXT

Moving beyond abstract individualism and structural determinism is necessary to comprehend freedom in modern society. Reimagining freedom as an existential condition and a social reality through Jean-Paul Sartre and B. R. Ambedkar's concepts is beneficial. Sartre stresses individual choice and responsibility, while Ambedkar stresses caste restraints and societal change. Using these viewpoints, we can create a more contextualized and inclusive freedom notion. Sartre's existentialism holds that humans are always free since they can choose and act. He claimed that people are “condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1943/2003, p. 439), demonstrating that agency is inevitable even in difficult situations. This realization is crucial because it proves people are not passive victims. When compared to Ambedkar's critique of caste, this argument shows that freedom is not fairly distributed. Ambedkar shows that caste limits human choice by assigning set positions and denying possibilities. His observation that caste is “a system of graded inequality” (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 101) shows that freedom must be defined within social hierarchy. A combination of these viewpoints implies that freedom is neither individual nor structure-dependent. Consider it a relational and contextual process. People have agency, but their social conditions shape it. According to Karl Marx (1852/1978, p. 595), individuals shape their own history, but not under their own control. This perspective reconciles Sartre with Ambedkar by emphasizing human agency and structural restrictions.

Reimagining freedom in context entails moving from abstract autonomy to concrete life situations. Ambedkar believed freedom is only meaningful when accompanied by social justice—equality, dignity, and resources. In his vision of “liberty, equality and fraternity” (Ambedkar, 1949/1994, p. 38), freedom must be collective and inclusive. This supports Sartre's emphasis on individual responsibility by providing the circumstances for meaningful exercise. This synthesis emphasizes resistance and transformation. Ambedkar argues for organized attempts to overthrow oppressive structures, while Sartre encourages personal responsibility. They argue that freedom is personal and political. To exert their agency, individuals must also fight collectively to change structures that limit it. This dual approach makes freedom more dynamic by connecting personal and social dimensions. Ethics is also essential to this new system. Sartre's authenticity requires freedom and responsibility, while Ambedkar's social justice requires equality and human dignity. Combining these viewpoints creates an ethical worldview where freedom is about self-realization and others' well-being. This relational view of freedom undermines individualism and encourages inclusivity. Rethinking freedom in context affects caste, inequality, and democratic issues today. It invites us to think beyond freedom as the lack of constraint to

include social and institutional forces that influence human life. Freedom requires the removal of structural barriers and the creation of enabling conditions for all in unequal societies. Finally, Sartre and Ambedkar's theories help us rethink freedom as multidimensional and context-dependent. It is neither universal nor strictly social. Instead, individual agency and societal evolution create freedom. Recognizing this dynamic helps us create a more realistic and inclusive definition of freedom that encompasses both intellectual and social aspects of human existence.

6 | CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, a more profound and grounded knowledge of existence, caste, and freedom can be gained by comparing Jean-Paul Sartre with B. R. Ambedkar. According to Sartre's existentialism, people are in charge of directing their own lives by making deliberate decisions, and freedom is a basic requirement of human existence. This viewpoint is significant because it highlights human agency and the moral obligation of behavior. However, this concept's shortcomings are evident when it is considered within the framework of a caste-based society. Ambedkar's analysis demonstrates that understanding freedom requires taking into account the systemic injustices that influence human existence. People find it difficult to enjoy true freedom since the caste system limits opportunities, dignity, and social mobility. His criticism emphasizes that freedom is a societal condition that depends on justice and equality rather than just an individual issue. In this way, Ambedkar grounds Sartre's abstract concept of freedom in experienced reality, which is a crucial correction. The comparison also shows that both thinkers offer insightful perspectives. Sartre reminds us that people are not entirely shaped by their surroundings and that agency is crucial even in trying circumstances. Ambedkar, on the other hand, demonstrates that collective struggle and institutional change are necessary to support agency. When taken as a whole, they imply that freedom is both a social accomplishment and an ontological possibility. As a result, freedom should be viewed as a relational, dynamic term that is influenced by both societal circumstances and human behavior. We can only progress toward a more inclusive and significant conception of freedom that tackles the realities of caste and inequality by fusing intellectual contemplation with social change.

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