



Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: Architect of Indian Labour Reforms and Pioneer of Workers' Social Security

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Abstract

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a pivotal figure in India's socio-political landscape, was instrumental in shaping modern labour reforms. This study examines his transformative contributions as a Labour Member of the Government of India, focusing on his vision for equitable and inclusive labour policies. Dr. Ambedkar introduced a structured tripartite approach to labour welfare, fostering collaboration between employers, employees, and the government. Key milestones during his tenure include amendments to existing laws, such as the Factories Act and Mines Act, to ensure reduced working hours, paid holidays, and improved welfare provisions for workers, especially women. He championed social security reforms, laying the groundwork for systems addressing maternity benefits, compensation for industrial accidents, and sickness insurance. Initiatives like the establishment of creches and pithead baths underscored his commitment to enhancing workplace conditions. Dr. Ambedkar also prioritized data-driven policymaking, forming the Labour Investigation Committee to gather comprehensive insights into workers' conditions. Furthermore, his advocacy for minimum wage legislation and trade union recognition reflects his dedication to protecting unorganized and marginalized labour sectors. Influenced by global developments in social insurance, his policies bridged international labour standards and local needs, fostering a framework for sustainable labour relations in post-colonial India. This Article highlights how Dr. Ambedkar's reforms not only addressed immediate challenges but also laid a lasting foundation for worker welfare and social equity in India's labour ecosystem.

Keywords: *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Labour Reform, Social Security, Uniformity, Working Hour*

Introduction

Labour reforms have always been at the heart of socio-economic transformation, promoting equity and driving sustainable development. In the context of India, this critical evolution owes much to the visionary leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkarⁱ, whose tenure as the Labour Minister in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946) marked a turning point in the nation's approach to workers' rights and welfare. His foresight laid the foundation for modern labour policies, championing both social security and economic justice.ⁱⁱ

Dr. Ambedkar's tenure was characterized by a dual focus on combating capitalist exploitation and dismantling caste-based discrimination, a dynamic interplay that remains relevant even today. He introduced key legislations such as the Factories Act (1946), the Indian Trade Unions Act (1947), and amendments to the Mines Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, addressing critical gaps in labour welfare. Beyond legislation, he established enduring frameworks like the Employees' State Insurance and the Employees' Provident Fund, which continue to serve millions of workers, offering medical insurance and retirement benefits.ⁱⁱⁱ

His holistic approach to labour welfare reflected not only a commitment to improving working conditions but also a deeper mission to challenge structural inequities. Dr. Ambedkar urged the working class to unite against the entwined forces of capitalism and Brahminism, which he argued perpetuated economic and social injustices. His call for a cultural revolution to dismantle caste-based hierarchies underlined his belief that true progress could only be achieved by addressing both economic and social dimensions of inequality.

This Article delves into the historical and legislative milestones achieved during Dr. Ambedkar's tenure, analyzing their relevance and enduring impact on India's labour landscape. By examining his contributions, the research aims to underscore his legacy as a reformer who not only shaped labour policies but also redefined the very principles of justice and equality in the Indian context.

Research Methodology

The research adopts a **doctrinal methodology**, focusing on the analysis of primary and secondary legal sources such as statutes, legal commentaries, and scholarly articles. This method enables a detailed examination of the legislative framework and academic perspectives on labour welfare policies and social security laws. The study relies on credible databases, government reports, and publications to ensure accuracy and depth. All references and citations are formatted according to the *7th Edition of the APA citation style*, maintaining consistency and adherence to academic standards.

The Origin of Slavery and the Labour System in India

The history of labour, working conditions, and slavery is deeply rooted in various cultures and regions, including India. To understand this history, we need to look at how labour practices evolved, how work became organised, and how socio-economic structures shaped the workforce over time.^{iv}

In ancient civilisations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, organized labour was closely tied to agriculture. Peasants worked the land under the control of rulers or landowners, and slavery existed in different forms. Enslaved individuals were used for a range of tasks, from farming to construction and domestic chores. Similarly, in ancient Greece and Rome, slavery played a central role in society, with enslaved people working in agriculture, mining, and as household servants. Free labour also existed, with craftsmen, artisans, and other workers involved in various trades.^v

In medieval Europe, feudalism dominated, where serfs worked on land owned by landlords in exchange for protection. This system made labourers dependent on the land. The Age of Exploration and Colonization expanded the transatlantic slave trade, forcibly bringing millions of Africans to the Americas to work on plantations, deepening the global reliance on slavery.

In India, the varna and caste systems played a significant role in defining work and labour roles. These systems assigned specific occupations and responsibilities to different groups, often dictating the nature of labour. Under British colonial rule, these social structures were further entrenched, and new economic policies, such as cash crop cultivation, led to changes in

agricultural practices and labour exploitation. Forced labour, particularly in industries like agriculture and infrastructure, became widespread during this period.^{vi}

After India gained independence, the country began to undergo significant economic and industrial changes. The government introduced labour laws to protect workers' rights, and unions were formalized to advocate for better working conditions. The industrialization and growth of the economy led to more organized labour forces and the establishment of legal frameworks to improve worker welfare.

In the era of globalization, India saw shifts in its labour landscape. Urbanization, technological progress, and the changing global economy have all affected how work is organized and carried out. Issues like informal labour, worker exploitation, and the need for continued labour reforms are still critical topics today.

Understanding the history of labour, workers, and slavery helps us better understand how the workforce has developed over time, both globally and in India. The legacy of these historical practices continues to shape labour policies and working conditions in the present day.

The Need for Uniformity in Labour Legislation

On Friday, August 7, 1942, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Labour Member of the Government of India, delivered a speech at the Joint Labour Conference in New Delhi. He expressed his gratitude for the presence and participation of those attending the conference, acknowledging the importance of their cooperation for the success of the event.^{vii}

Dr. Ambedkar began by outlining the significance of this fourth Labour Conference, highlighting two special features that set it apart from previous ones. First, unlike past conferences, this one was designed with permanency in mind, with the goal of establishing a standing committee that would be ready to function when needed. Second, the composition of the conference had changed. While earlier conferences had been limited to government representatives, this one marked the first time that both employers and employees were directly included, creating a truly tripartite forum. This shift was particularly important to Ambedkar, as it addressed the long-standing demand for an Industrial Council, as suggested by the Witley Commission, which had not been realized until then.^{viii}

Turning to the core objectives of the conference, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the need to address the growing issue of diversity in labour legislation following the federal constitution of 1935. The inclusion of Labour legislation in the Concurrent Legislative List created a situation where each province could potentially pass its own labour laws, leading to discrepancies that could undermine the uniformity required for national progress. The conference's primary objective was to correct this trend and ensure consistency in labour laws across the country.

While promoting uniformity in labour legislation remained a central focus, Dr. Ambedkar introduced two additional goals for the conference: the establishment of a procedure for resolving industrial disputes and the discussion of matters of national importance concerning the relationship between labour and capital. These three objectives—uniformity in labour laws, the establishment of dispute resolution mechanisms, and the discussion of key issues affecting workers and employers across India—formed the foundation of the conference's aims.

Dr. Ambedkar concluded by reiterating that the issue of uniformity in labour legislation was vital for a diverse and large country like India and that this goal would continue to be a priority in future discussions.

The Tripartite Approach of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Towards Labour Welfare

The Text of Speech of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar - *"I do claim credit for the Tripartite Labour Conference, that, if we have done nothing more, we have at least done one thing, namely, to*

induce, if not to compel, the representatives of employees to meet the representatives of employers and discuss matters of the utmost and gravest importance."^{ix}

Before Dr. B. R. Ambedkar took charge of the Labour Department, Government of India, there was no structured system for joint consultation between labour and management. Matters of common interest were addressed separately by the two parties, with no collaborative framework in place. However, this changed significantly under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, as he introduced a tripartite approach,^x which brought together representatives of labour, employers, and the government. This approach laid the foundation for the evolution of labour policies and the formulation of key schemes.

During the Tripartite Labour Conference held in New Delhi on August 7, 1942, under his chairmanship, Dr. Ambedkar highlighted the significance of this shift. He stated, "*It is for the first time in the history of these labour conferences that the representatives of the employers and employees have been brought face to face within the ambit of a joint conference.*" What set this conference apart from earlier ones was not just the collaborative nature of the discussions but also its establishment as a permanent feature of labour policy planning.

Under Dr. Ambedkar's tenure, these tripartite bodies became more active. Between July 1942 and June 1946, the Indian Labour Conference met four times—August 1942, September 1943, October 1944, and November 1945—while the Standing Labour Committee convened eight times. A review of their agendas reveals that all critical aspects of the government's labour policy were discussed during these meetings.

Although the recommendations of these bodies were advisory, they had a profound impact. They shaped government decisions and fostered mutual understanding between employers and employees, ultimately advancing labour relations in India.

Labour Welfare Funds

When Dr. B. R. Ambedkar initiated his legislative work on labour welfare and social insurance, a significant challenge was the lack of reliable data. The information from the Royal Commission on Labour had become outdated, and reports by Provincial Labour Enquiry Committees were narrow in scope. Although the Industrial Statistics Act 1942 aimed to gather comprehensive industrial data on wages, housing, employment, and welfare, its implementation was inconsistent. Many provincial governments had yet to frame rules, and data collection before 1946 was voluntary, limiting its usefulness. This gap underscored the urgent need for systematic and accurate data to inform labour welfare policies.^{xi}

Labour Investigation Committee: A Milestone in Social Security for Workers

The Tripartite Indian Labour Conference, held in September 1943, played a pivotal role in shaping India's social welfare framework. After reviewing Shri B. P. Adarkar's report on Sickness Insurance^{xii}, the conference recommended the formation of a dedicated committee to examine social welfare measures and propose strategies for implementing social security for India's working class.

In response to this recommendation, the Government of India established the Labour Investigation Committee on January 12, 1944. Chaired by D. V. Rege, the committee also included members S. D. Deshpande, Ahmed Mukhtar, and B. P. Adarkar. Its mandate was to investigate critical aspects of workers' lives, including wages, employment conditions, housing, and overall social conditions, to gather comprehensive data for formulating effective social security policies.^{xiii}

The committee's scope extended beyond industries previously studied by the Royal Commission on Labour. It delved into a wider range of sectors, including some that had not been thoroughly examined earlier, such as industries other than coal and cotton. Alongside its

main report, the committee produced 34 additional reports, each offering valuable insights into various industries across the country.

This extensive fact-finding effort provided a wealth of information that became instrumental in crafting policies aimed at improving the living and working conditions of Indian labourers. The Labour Investigation Committee's work marked a significant step forward in the journey toward a robust social security system for India's workforce.

Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund: A Landmark in Labour Welfare

The coal industry, pivotal to India's economy, especially during World War II, faced challenges as workers moved to war industries, impacting coal output. To address this, the Government of India introduced several measures, including the controversial temporary removal of the ban on underground employment of women in certain regions. However, under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's insistence, the ban was reinstated on February 1, 1946.^{xiv}

A major initiative was the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund, established through an Ordinance on January 31, 1944, and later formalized as the Coal Mines Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1947. Funded by a levy on coal and coke dispatches, the fund financed welfare activities for colliery workers, including housing, medical care, education, and clean water. Initially set at 25 paise per ton, the levy was gradually increased to meet growing welfare demands.

The Coal Mines Welfare Organisation emerged as a direct provider of welfare services, a departure from the earlier supervisory role of the government. By 1980, it had constructed nearly 1.82 lakh houses, established central and regional hospitals, initiated anti-disease campaigns, and provided education and recreation facilities, benefiting millions of workers and their families across eight states.

This initiative marked a significant shift in labour legislation, emphasizing not just standards but active implementation of welfare programs for coal mine workers.

Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund: A Milestone in Workers' Welfare

The Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund was established to support welfare initiatives for workers in the mica mining industry. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced the Bill for this purpose in the Central Legislative Assembly on April 8, 1946. The idea originated during a conference led by Dr. Ambedkar in Kodarma on April 29, 1944, where it received strong support. Subsequent discussions in Dhanbad, under the Coal Mines Welfare Commissioner and Labour Secretary, finalized the proposal in late 1945.^{xv}

The initiative was driven by Dr. Adarkar's report, which highlighted the dire conditions in the mica mines. During the Bill's introduction, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the urgent need for reforms, citing these intolerable conditions. Though initially hesitant to refer the Bill to a Select Committee, he agreed with the condition that it would report promptly. The Bill was finalized and passed on April 15, 1946, without major amendments.

The Mica Mines Labour Welfare Organisation, established under this framework, provides healthcare through hospitals in Bihar, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh, including specialized treatment for diseases like tuberculosis and cancer. The organization also promotes education, recreation, and housing, offering subsidies for infrastructure development for workers. Inspired by this initiative, similar welfare funds were later established for workers in coal, iron ore, manganese ore, limestone, dolomite, and the beedi industry.^{xvi}

Creches and Pithead Baths: Advancing Labour Welfare

During Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's tenure, significant amendments were made to the Indian Mines Act, 1923, to improve the welfare of mine workers. The Indian Mines (Amendment) Ordinance

of 1945 empowered the government to mandate the construction and maintenance of creches for children in mines where women were employed. The Mines Creches Rules, introduced in July 1946, set guidelines for constructing approved creches, ensuring medical examinations, staffing, record maintenance, and regular inspections.

Another key amendment passed on February 2, 1946, required mine owners to provide separate bathing facilities for male and female workers. While presenting the Indian Mines (Amendment) Bill, Dr. Ambedkar highlighted the importance of pithead baths equipped with showers and lockers, emphasizing their role in fostering miners' self-respect and ensuring they could return home clean.

The Coal Mines Pithead Bath Rules, also published in July 1946, detailed standards for constructing and maintaining pithead baths, locker rooms, latrines, and urinals in sanitary conditions. It also included provisions for inspections to ensure compliance.

To accelerate the construction of pithead baths, Dr. Ambedkar announced that the government would cover 10% of the construction costs. Additionally, the requirement for prior publication of construction schemes under Section 31 of the Act was waived to expedite the process. These measures marked a progressive step toward improving the working and living conditions of miners in India.

Social Security Reforms During Dr. Ambedkar's Tenure

When Dr. B.R. Ambedkar assumed charge of the Labour Department, India's social security system for workers was in its infancy, with only the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923, and the Maternity Benefit Act providing any form of protection. During his tenure, Dr. Ambedkar made significant strides in improving these laws and laying the groundwork for future social security schemes.^{xvii}

An Overview of the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923

The Workmen's Compensation Act, which provided compensation to workers in the event of injury, death, or disablement during employment, was amended during Dr. Ambedkar's time in office. In 1943, the eligibility limit was increased from Rs. 300 to Rs. 400, and the maximum compensation amounts were raised. The maximum compensation in case of death was increased from Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 4,500, while in the case of permanent total disablement, the compensation was raised from Rs. 5,600 to Rs. 6,300. These amendments were aimed at providing more substantial support to workers and their families in times of need.

The Maternity Benefit Act: Ensuring Rights and Welfare for Women Workers

The Maternity Benefit Act of 1929 was a landmark piece of pre-independence Indian legislation that specifically addressed the need to safeguard women's rights related to childbirth in the workplace. This law was crafted with contributions from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, N.M. Joshi, and M.K. Dixit, who actively advocated for its passage in the legislature. Much of the demand for this reform came from Bombay's cotton mills, where many women worked under conditions that ignored their reproductive rights. The International Labour Organization's updated Maternity Protection Convention of 1952 provided the impetus for post-independence India to establish more humane working conditions for women. Building on the foundation of earlier laws, the Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 was enacted to ensure maternity protections for women employed in government institutions and factories. However, the Act initially excluded small-scale industries and agricultural workers. Over time, its scope was expanded to cover the private sector, ensuring broader protections for working women across various fields.

The Maternity Benefit Act, which applied to women employed in certain industries, was also amended twice under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership. The first major amendment, passed on July 23, 1943, clarified ambiguities in Section 5 of the Act, which governed the benefits available to women workers. The second amendment, passed on April 4, 1945, made substantial improvements to the benefits and the duration of authorized leave for women workers employed in underground mines.^{xviii}

Under the revised rules, the period of maternity benefits for women working underground was extended to 16 weeks, with 10 weeks granted before confinement and six weeks after confinement. Additionally, the period of authorized absence was extended to a full 26 weeks, with 10 weeks allowed for partial work (no more than four hours a day) in cases where creches were unavailable, and a more flexible arrangement for those working in mines. The wage payments were also raised, with women working on the surface receiving Rs. 0.75 per day, and women working underground receiving Rs. 6 per week. These changes reflected a growing recognition of the need for women workers to be supported in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

Labour Welfare and Social Insurance Initiatives: Advancing Worker Protection and Security

The concept of broader social security, encompassing sickness, unemployment, and death benefits, was still in its early stages when Dr. Ambedkar began his reforms. The Labour Investigation Committee, formed in 1944, highlighted the lack of attention given to these issues in India compared to other countries. The committee noted that Indian workers faced many of the same risks as their counterparts elsewhere but lacked the social security protections to mitigate these risks.^{xix}

To address these issues, Dr. Ambedkar supported the development of a comprehensive social security scheme that would include workmen's compensation, maternity benefits, and sickness insurance. In March 1943, Prof. B.P. Adarkar was appointed to prepare a report on health insurance for industrial workers. His interim report was submitted in August 1943, and the final report in 1944 proposed a unified social insurance scheme that combined various forms of social security for workers. This scheme would be compulsory and contributory, with government contributions kept low to facilitate its implementation.

Adarkar's proposal was scrutinized by experts from the International Labour Organization (ILO), who endorsed the idea of a unified social insurance scheme covering workmen's compensation, maternity benefits, and sickness insurance. They also recommended extending the scheme to include both manual and non-manual workers in all perennial factories and their families.

In 1944, the proposal was discussed in the 6th Labour Conference, and it was agreed that the government should move forward with the preparation of a social security scheme. A Bill containing the scheme was introduced in the Central Assembly in November 1946 and was passed in April 1948 after undergoing significant revisions by the Select Committee.

Global Influences on Social Security Policy

Dr. Ambedkar's social security reforms were influenced by global developments in social insurance. The first social insurance scheme was introduced in Germany in 1883, followed by England in 1911, Japan in 1922, and the United States in 1933. The widespread devastation caused by World War II prompted global efforts to create a more secure world, and the United Nations and ILO provided a strong push for compulsory social insurance schemes. The Beveridge Plan in Britain, the Wagner Murray Plan in the U.S., and the Marsh Plan in Canada

furthered the global dialogue on social insurance, influencing the formulation of India's social security framework under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership.

In India, the idea of social insurance was first formally discussed in 1928 when the ILO Draft Conventions on sickness insurance were considered. Although these recommendations were initially rejected, the Royal Commission on Labour and the ILO continued to push for the development of a social security system. Dr. Ambedkar's tenure marked a turning point, as the government began actively working toward implementing such systems.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's tenure as the Labour Minister in the Government of India was marked by significant advancements in the realm of workers' rights and social security. By amending existing laws, introducing new protections for women workers, and laying the foundation for a comprehensive social security system, he helped to shape a more inclusive and equitable labour policy for India. These reforms laid the groundwork for future legislation that would ensure greater protection for workers, particularly in terms of health, maternity, and compensation for industrial accidents.^{xx}

Holiday with Pay and Reduced Working Hours: Advancing Workers Rights

The Text of Speech of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar – *“It emphasised that the present was an opportune moment for taking up this question because there was a need for giving relief to factory workers. Moreover, shorter hours would lead to greater employment. The memorandum made it clear that the reduction in hours should not be accompanied by any reduction in basic wages or dearness allowances unless there was a fall in prices”*^{xxxi}

During Dr. Ambedkar's tenure as the Labour Member, significant amendments were made to the Factories Act, 1934, which improved the conditions for workers. These amendments addressed key issues such as paid holidays and reduced working hours.

One major change came in 1944, when the Factories Act was amended to require factory owners to provide washing facilities in all types of factories. Prior to this, washing facilities were only mandated for factories dealing with hazardous materials. This amendment empowered the government to prescribe the number of washing places required in factories and gave inspectors the authority to gather relevant information from factory owners.^{xxii}

Another significant change took place in 1945, with the passing of the Factories (Amendment) Bill. This amendment was in line with the ILO Convention No. 52 of 1936,^{xxiii} which recommended providing paid holidays for workers. The new provisions were more favourable to the workers than the ILO's recommendations. Under this amendment, adult workers in perennial factories were entitled to 10 days of paid holiday, and child workers were entitled to 14 days. The leave could be accumulated for up to two years. Previously, the ILO Convention only recommended six days of paid holiday without any provision for leave accumulation.

Eligibility for the paid holiday was based on 12 months of service, with allowances for 30 days of absence due to sickness, authorized leave, legal strikes, and other justified reasons. The amount paid during the holiday was based on the average of the worker's earnings over the previous three months (excluding overtime). Half of this payment was to be made before the worker took leave. If the worker did not take the holiday, they were entitled to a compensatory holiday.

Another key amendment in 1946 addressed working hours. The Factories (Amendment) Act of 1946 reduced the weekly working hours for perennial factories from 54 hours to 48 hours, and daily working hours were reduced from 10 hours to 9 hours. For seasonal factories, the weekly working hours were reduced from 60 hours to 50, and the daily working hours were reduced from 11 to 10. Any work beyond these hours was to be paid as overtime at double the normal rate.

Dr. Ambedkar justified these reductions in working hours by explaining that workers, who had been working longer hours during the war, needed relief. He also pointed out that the reduced hours might help mitigate unemployment caused by retrenchment. In response to concerns about a shortage of cloth, Dr. Ambedkar explained that certain industries could be exempt from the reduced hours for six months as a temporary measure, based on the recommendations of the Department of Industry and Commerce.

These amendments were part of India's efforts to comply with international labour standards. While the Washington Convention recommended a 48-hour workweek, India had previously been allowed to maintain a 60-hour workweek. However, this amendment brought India closer to the global norm. During this period, the ILO's 1935 convention recommended a 40-hour workweek, and some trade unions in India had advocated for a 44 or 45-hour workweek. The compromise solution was the 48-hour workweek that was eventually adopted.

Industrial Employment and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution

The Industrial Employment Standing Orders are crucial for defining the terms and conditions of employment, helping to reduce conflicts between employers and workers. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Bill in the Central Assembly on April 8, 1946, calling it urgent and non-controversial. He explained that the Bill aimed to have the terms of employment written down, certified by an officer, and used as evidence in case of disputes.^{xxiv}

Dr. Ambedkar also highlighted the Bill's connection to the upcoming Health Insurance Scheme, noting that workers' wages, contributions, and benefits needed to be clearly outlined in the Standing Orders for the scheme's smooth implementation.

The Bill was discussed at the Indian Labour Conference in 1943 and 1945, where it was deemed essential and non-contentious, leading to its passage and enforcement on April 23, 1946.

Compulsory Recognition of Trade Unions: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Vision for Labour Rights

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced the Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill in the Legislative Assembly on November 8, 1943, aiming to make the recognition of trade unions compulsory. The Bill had three main points: it required employers to recognize trade unions, established specific conditions for such recognition, and treated non-recognition as an offence. For a trade union to be recognized, it needed to have been in existence for at least a year, and its executive members should not have participated in an illegal strike. However, the Bill was allowed to lapse after a period of public consultation.

After receiving feedback from provincial governments, employers' associations, and workers' organizations, the Bill was revised. On February 21, 1946, Dr. Ambedkar reintroduced the revised version in the Legislative Assembly. During discussions, the new Labour Member, Shri J. Ram, acknowledged that the revised Bill was essentially the same one previously introduced by Dr. Ambedkar. He also pointed out that the issue of trade union recognition had been discussed at the First and Second Labour Ministers' Conferences in 1940 and 1941, as well as at the Fifth meeting of the Standing Labour Committee in June 1943.^{xxv}

Protection of Minimum Wages: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Commitment to Worker's Rights

On April 11, 1946, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar introduced a Bill in the Legislative Assembly aimed at creating a wage-fixing mechanism to ensure that minimum wages were set and periodically revised for industries where labour was poorly organized or unorganized. The Bill proposed the formation of Advisory Committees and Boards with equal representation from both labour

and employers to advise the government on wage matters. It also included a list of industries where workers were underpaid, with the provision to add more industries as needed. The Bill was referred to a Select Committee in April 1947 and was eventually enacted into law on February 9, 1948.^{xxvi}

During the Bill's introduction, Shri J. Ram, the new Labour member, emphasized that no industry should be allowed to operate if it couldn't afford to pay a minimum wage to its workers.

The need for minimum wage legislation has been recognized for some time. The Royal Commission on Labour had called for an inquiry into the issue, and various provincial committees, including the Labour Investigation Committee, had recommended the establishment of wage-fixing mechanisms. The Rege Committee had highlighted the alarmingly low wage levels in many Indian industries, which had not been revised for years.

The issue of minimum wages had been discussed at the Fifth and Seventh Indian Labour Conferences in 1943 and 1945, respectively. Although the idea was supported, progress was delayed due to a lack of reliable data and other urgent labour-related legislation that had to be prioritized, such as the Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund Bill and the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Bill.

Despite these challenges, Dr. Ambedkar's determination to push forward labour-friendly laws was evident. He was keen to enact as many laws for workers as possible, often accomplishing this in record time. His background and connection with labour movements made him a strong advocate for workers' rights, and while some of his decisions were contentious, his efforts were widely recognized, even by those who were otherwise opposed to his political affiliation.

While the success of these labour reforms was a collective effort involving various parts of the government, it's clear that Dr. Ambedkar's leadership and vision played a significant role in advancing these crucial changes for labour protection during his tenure.

Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's tenure as the Labour Member of the Government of India marked a transformative period in the evolution of India's labour policies. His pragmatic approach combined a deep understanding of historical injustices with a forward-looking vision for social equity and economic progress. By introducing a tripartite system, he not only fostered dialogue between stakeholders but also institutionalized mechanisms to address labour-related challenges systematically. His contributions to social security, including maternity benefits, compensation for industrial accidents, and minimum wage legislation, significantly improved the lives of workers, especially those in marginalized and unorganized sectors. Dr. Ambedkar's emphasis on robust data collection and evidence-based policymaking set a benchmark for effective governance. Through initiatives like the Labour Investigation Committee and amendments to key laws, he prioritized the welfare of the workforce while aligning with global labour standards. His reforms were not limited to addressing immediate concerns but also laid a foundation for future advancements in worker rights and social security systems.

Moreover, his initiatives to uplift women workers through enhanced maternity benefits and workplace facilities underscored his commitment to inclusivity and gender equity. By ensuring better working conditions, reduced working hours, and increased worker protections, Dr. Ambedkar not only addressed systemic exploitation but also contributed to a more equitable and humane industrial framework.

His legacy serves as a cornerstone for India's labour reforms, reflecting a balance between economic growth and social justice. It remains a guiding principle for contemporary policymakers seeking to create a fair and just workforce ecosystem.

References

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- ^x The Indian Labour Conference serves as a tripartite platform comprising three key stakeholders: (1) representatives of employers, (2) representatives of employees, and (3) representatives of the government. This body was established to facilitate dialogue and collaboration among these groups, providing a dedicated forum to address labour-related issues and foster mutual understanding.
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