



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Life Through the Lens of Prosocial Behaviour: A Psychological Analysis

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Abstract—Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956) is widely recognized as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and a transformative leader for Dalit emancipation. This paper interprets his life and contributions using contemporary frameworks of prosocial behaviour, which refers to voluntary actions aimed at benefiting others. Ambedkar's activism, scholarship, and institution-building reflect six interrelated dimensions of prosociality: empathy-based action, duty without self-interest, commitment to collective welfare, service as moral obligation, equanimity across social groups, and personal sacrifice. The analysis integrates Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, Penner's multilevel model of prosocial behaviour, and Indian psychological constructs such as *seva* and *paropakara*. The argument advanced here is that Ambedkar represents a case of enduring, high-cost prosocial engagement under conditions of extreme personal adversity. The paper concludes by discussing implications for leadership studies, psychology of social justice, and value-based education in India.

Keywords: *Ambedkar; prosocial behaviour; altruism, social justice; empathy-altruism*

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1. Introduction

Prosocial behaviour is defined as self-initiated actions whose primary intention is to enhance the welfare of another person or group, independent of legal compulsion [1]. Western psychological literature explains such behaviour through several paradigms: the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which centres on other-oriented emotional concern [1]; social learning theory, which emphasizes imitation and reinforcement [2]; cost-reward models that frame helping as a rational calculation of gains and losses [3]; and evolutionary perspectives like kin selection and reciprocal altruism that explain helping through genetic and strategic benefits [4]. A limitation across these models is their difficulty in explaining sustained, costly activism directed at out-groups by leaders who incur heavy personal losses. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's biography offers a relevant case to address this gap. Born in 1891 into a Mahar Dalit household, he experienced institutional untouchability, economic marginalization, and social ostracism from childhood [5]. Despite these constraints, he completed advanced studies at Columbia University and the London School of Economics, gaining expertise in economics, law, and governance. After returning to India, he devoted his life to eradicating caste discrimination and building an egalitarian

society [6]. His contributions included organizing temple-entry agitations, establishing educational institutions and periodicals, presiding over the drafting of India's Constitution, and leading a mass Buddhist conversion in 1956 with around 500,000 followers [5]. These actions satisfy Batson's (2011) criteria: they were voluntary, oriented toward others' welfare, and not legally required. Indian Psychology provides culturally embedded constructs that enrich this analysis [1]. Terms such as *karuna* for compassionate engagement, *nishkama karma* for detached selfless action, and *seva* for duty-based service offer alternative lenses to interpret sustained helping [7]. Ambedkar translated these ideals into practice through his slogan "Educate, Agitate, Organize," converting ethical principles into large-scale social action. This paper therefore analyses six core prosocial dimensions evident in Ambedkar's life.

1.1 Empathy and Karuna: Emotional Foundation of His Activism

Batson's (2011) empathy-altruism hypothesis posits that empathic concern for someone in distress can produce motivation to alleviate that distress, even when it involves personal cost [1]. Ambedkar's childhood exposure to discriminations such as being denied water and forced to sit separately in school-generated intense awareness of others' suffering [8]. This aligns with what Batson (2011) terms "empathic distress" that

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later matured into stable empathic concern for Dalit communities. His writings reflect this emotional grounding [1]. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), he argued that a society's progress should be judged by the status of its women [9], demonstrating perspective-taking. Graziano et al., (2007) showed that empathy combined with agreeableness increases helping; Ambedkar's colleagues described him as reserved yet resolute, and his orations consistently centered Dalit lived experiences [6], [10]. Indian Psychology conceptualizes this as *karuna* which means active compassion that moves beyond feeling to action [11]. The 1927 Mahad Satyagraha, where Dalits publicly accessed water from a restricted tank, exemplifies *karuna* in practice [5]. Unlike empathy that can cause burnout, Ambedkar balanced it with strategic planning, reflecting *karuna* integrated with *samadrishti* or balanced vision [7].

1.2 Nishkama Karma and Duty Without Attachment

The Bhagavad Gita's principle of *nishkama karma* means performing action without concern for results resonates with Ambedkar's approach. He declined lucrative legal work and political positions when they conflicted with Dalit interests, accepting office only when it advanced education for marginalized groups [8]. This illustrates action guided by duty rather than reward. Cost-reward models predict avoidance of high-cost helping [3], yet Ambedkar faced loss of income, social boycott, and health decline but continued his work [6]. Sharma and Misra (2012) found that Indians scoring high on *nishkama karma* scales persist in volunteering despite costs, a pattern Ambedkar embodied nationally [12]. His 1927 burning of the *Manusmriti* despite legal threat further shows action detached from fear of consequence [5]. Penner et al., (2005) argued that durable prosociality depends on internalized values rather than transient emotions [13]. Ambedkar internalized responsibility toward the *bahujan* masses, making "Educate, Agitate, Organize" a lifelong value system, not a short-term strategy [6].

1.3 Sarva-jana-hita: Dedication Towards Universal Welfare

Though Ambedkar is remembered for Dalit rights, his agenda was inclusive. He advocated labour protections, women's legal rights, and religious freedom for all Indians [14]. As Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, he ensured fundamental rights applied to every citizen, not only Dalits [15]. This reflects *sarva-bhuta-hita* concern for the welfare of all beings [16]. Levine et al., (2001) noted that collectivist societies extend help to strangers more readily [23]. Ambedkar extended this politically by forming alliances with workers, farmers, and women's groups [6]. He opposed communal division and supported a secular state to protect all minorities [17], challenging Trivers' (1971) view that altruism is limited to kin [4]. His "universal kinship" was constructed through law and policy [4]. Lyubomirsky et al., (2005) found

that broad, other-focused prosocial acts enhance helper well-being more than narrow acts [18]. Ambedkar reported inner satisfaction from national service despite personal hardship [8], suggesting his universal focus contributed to sustainability.

1.4 Seva and Paropakara: Service Framed as Moral Duty

Indian Psychology distinguishes *seva* as service performed without expectation of reward, and *paropakara* as actions intended to benefit others [7]. Unlike Western models that treat helping as optional, *seva* frames it as *kartavya* meaning an ethical obligation [11]. Ambedkar's public life reflects this orientation. In 1924 he founded the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* with the stated purpose "to educate the depressed classes, agitate for their rights, and organize them" [8]. The organization ran free schools, student hostels, and libraries, treating education as a duty rather than a business. Penner et al., (2005) noted that norm-based prosociality is more enduring than mood-dependent empathy [13]. Ambedkar internalized *seva* as a constant duty. As Law Minister in 1947, he used his position to draft the Hindu Code Bills to expand women's rights, not for personal advantage [15]. When those Bills stalled in 1951, he resigned, citing failure to fulfil his responsibility to women [14]. This aligns with Srivastava and Krishna's (2013) finding that *seva* orientation predicts long-term volunteering better than general agreeableness [19]. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory explains how Ambedkar's actions became models for others [2]. The Mahad Satyagraha, Kalaram Temple entry movement, and the 1956 Deekshabhoomi conversion were public, observable acts that communities across India replicated, diffusing prosocial norms [5]. Darley and Latané (1968) showed that responsibility diffused across groups reduces helping [20]; Ambedkar countered this by making responsibility personal: "If you do not fight for your rights, who will?" [25].

1.5 Samadrishti and Sahishnuta: Equal Vision and Tolerance

Samadrishti means viewing all beings with equal regard [16], while *sahishnuta* refers to tolerance. Despite facing intense prejudice, Ambedkar avoided generalized hatred toward upper castes. He stated, "I have no hatred for Hindus. I have hatred for Hinduism which has made them behave as they do" [9]. This reflects *samadrishti*: criticize oppressive structures, not entire groups. Graziano et al., (2007) found that higher agreeableness reduces in-group bias in helping [10]. Ambedkar's *samadrishti* extended further. While advocating for Dalits, he simultaneously supported labor legislation for all workers, legal reforms for all women, and religious liberty for Muslims and Christians [15]. This matches Levine et al., (2001) observation that collectivist cultures broaden the circle of care [23]. Ambedkar broadened it through constitutional design rather than cultural appeal alone. *Sahishnuta* appeared in his conduct at the Round Table Conferences, where he engaged calmly with Gandhi and British officials despite provocation [8]. Pettigrew

and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis show that respectful inter-group contact reduces prejudice[24]. Ambedkar's tolerance created conditions for dialogue, increasing the likelihood of legislative gains such as reserved representation.

1.6 Tyaga: Renunciation and High-Cost Sacrifice

Tyaga means relinquishing personal gain for collective welfare [16]. Ambedkar's life involved repeated acts of tyaga. He abandoned a potentially profitable legal career to focus on social reform [6]. He declined the Vice Chancellorship of Bombay University because it would limit time for public work [8]. His final act of tyaga was renouncing Hindu identity by converting to Buddhism in 1956, knowing it would cost political alliances [5]. Piliavin et al., (1981) cost-reward model suggests people avoid high-cost helping, but Ambedkar re-framed cost through tyaga [3]. Cornelissen et al., (2013) found that when Indians interpret action as tyaga, perceived cost decreases because "ego reduction" becomes a psychological reward [7]. Ambedkar declared, "I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu" [8]. The material cost was social exclusion; the psychological gain was freedom from caste identity. Lyubomirsky et al., (2005) reported that costly prosocial acts produce greater happiness than low-cost ones [18]. Ambedkar's followers describe gaining "self-respect" despite material poverty after following his example [5]. This illustrates the paradox of tyaga: loss in material terms, gain in psychological dignity.

1.7 Social Learning and Making Prosociality Institutional

Bandura (1977) argued that lasting behaviour change results from observing models and receiving reinforcement[2]. Ambedkar applied this through three strategies:

1. Modelling: He lived austere, studied continuously, and confronted power directly.
2. Reinforcement: He launched newspapers Mooknayak, Bahishkrit Bharat, and Janata to highlight Dalit achievements and strengthen group identity [5].
3. Institution building: In 1945 he established the People's Education Society along with colleges and schools to embed education as a long-term prosocial intervention [6]. This shifts prosociality from isolated acts to systemic change.

Penner et al., (2005) multilevel framework includes individual, organizational, and cultural levels[13]. Ambedkar operated at all three: personal empathy, community mobilization, and constitutional law. The Indian Constitution functions as the largest codified prosocial document: it guarantees equality, prohibits untouchability under Article 17, and mandates affirmative action [15]. By embedding prosocial norms in law, Ambedkar addressed Batson's (2011) concern that individual empathy declines over time, whereas institutions endure[1].

1.8 Constitution as Structural Prosocial Design

As head of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar embedded safeguards that made prosocial conduct a state duty. Article 14 ensures equality before law, Article 15 prohibits discrimination, Article 16 guarantees equal opportunity, and Article 17 abolishes untouchability [15]. These provisions are not recommendations but enforceable obligations. This reflects nishkama karma at the level of the state: governance must prioritize citizen welfare without seeking reward [7]. It also reflects sarva-bhuta-hita meaning welfare of all, not just the majority [16]. Austin (1966) described the Constitution as a "social document" because its central purpose was societal transformation, not just administration [15].

From a cost-reward perspective, Ambedkar increased the cost of non-action for the state. By criminalizing discrimination, he altered Piliavin et al., (1981) equation: now the state faced penalties if it failed to act prosocially[3].

2. Ambedkar as an Integrative Model of Prosocial Leadership

Ambedkar's life integrates all determinants Penner et al., (2005) identified in their multilevel model of prosociality: situational, dispositional, motivational, and cultural[13].

Three Integration that Stand Out

1. Emotion & Rationality: Western theories often separate "hot" empathy from "cold" analysis. Ambedkar combined both. He experienced karuna for Dalit suffering yet applied his LSE training in economics and law to craft policy solutions [6]. Batson (2011) noted that empathy alone can lead to burnout. Ambedkar avoided this by integrating emotion with detachment meaning nishkama karma [1](Cornelissen et al., 2013).
2. Individual & Institutional Scale: Most prosocial studies focus on single acts like aiding a stranger [20]. Ambedkar scaled it up. He moved from personal seva to organizational seva through schools and media, then to constitutional seva [13]. This addresses sustainability: individuals tire, but institutions continue [15].
3. In-group & Universal Scope: Trivers (1971) suggested altruism favors kin [4]. Ambedkar began with Dalits but expanded to workers, women, tribal groups, and all minorities [4][14]. This reflects samadrishti and vasudhaivaakutumbakam from Indian Psychology [11]. Levine et al., (2001) found collectivist cultures help strangers more; Ambedkar made "strangers" legally equal as citizens [23].

2.1 Cross-Cultural Comparison

Compared to Western civil rights figures, Ambedkar's profile was distinct. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized

Table 1: shows his actions to modern prosocial constructs

Ambedkar's Action	Prosocial Construct	Western Theory	Indian Psychology Concept	Outcome
Mahad Satyagraha 1927	Empathetic & Civil Disobedience	Empathetic - Altruism [1]	Karuna – Compassion	Public water access for Dalits [5]
Burning Manusmriti	High-cost Norm Challenge	Cost Reward Model [3]	Tyaga Sacrifice	Symbolic rejection of caste law [8]
Constitution Drafting	Institutionalized Welfare	Multilevel Prosociality [13]	Sarva-jana-hita – Universal Good	Legal rights for all citizens [15]
Deekshabhoomi Conversion	Mass Prosocial Mobilization	Social Learning [2]	Seva & Samadrishti	5,00,000 people gained new identity [5]

love and nonviolence, similar to karuna and sahisnuta [21]. Ambedkar added constitutional engineering as a prosocial instrument. Nelson Mandela demonstrated tyaga through 27 years of imprisonment [22]. Ambedkar demonstrated tyaga by sacrificing career, health, and social acceptance without state-imposed imprisonment [8]. Miller et al., (2011) found Indians score higher on “non-attachment” than Americans [27]. Ambedkar embodied this by resigning as Law Minister when Hindu Code Bills failed, stating “I do not want office if I cannot perform duty” [14]. Such nishkama karma is uncommon in Western political psychology where holding office is itself treated as reward.

Implications for Theory and Practice

1. Leadership Psychology: Ambedkar redefines leadership as “prosocial architecture.” Leaders can design systems where prosocial behaviour becomes the default. Article 17 banning untouchability functions as a structural nudge—it increases the cost of discrimination [3]. Organizations can apply this by embedding equity into policy, not only training.
2. Social Justice Psychology: Ambedkar’s use of education as intervention supports Bandura’s (1977) social learning [2]. His People’s Education Society still operates 60+ institutions [6]. Modern DEI initiatives can adopt “Educate, Agitate, Organize” as a framework: create awareness, challenge norms, build institutions.
3. Positive Psychology: Kumar and Metre (2017) showed karuna meditation reduces burnout among Indian nurses. Ambedkar’s biography can serve as a case study for “compassionate courage” which means helping despite cost [28]. Hofmann et al., (2011) support using such models to prevent helper fatigue [29].
4. Education: NCERT and universities can present Ambedkar not only as a historical figure but as a prosocial role model per Bandura (1977)[2]. Exposure to “duty and empathy” modelling increases internalization of seva among students [19].

Limitations and Future Research

- This paper is conceptual. Empirical testing is needed: does exposure to Ambedkar’s speeches increase prosocial behaviour compared to neutral material? Sharma and Misra’s (2012) Nishkama Karma Scale could measure changes after reading his writings [12].
- Ambedkar also faced criticism for confrontational tactics from Gandhians [30]. Future studies should test whether “confrontational prosociality” like burning Manusmriti produces stronger or weaker long-term attitude change than non-confrontational sahisnuta.
- Neuroscience research could examine whether reading Ambedkar activates brain regions linked to fairness and justice, similar to Desbordes et al.’s (2012) findings on compassion meditation [31]. Cross-cultural studies comparing Ambedkar with Western leaders could test if Indian constructs predict helping beyond Big Five traits [10].

3. Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s life demonstrates sustained, high-cost prosocial behaviour. He transformed personal karuna into collective seva, converted tyaga into constitutional rights, and applied samadrishti to envision a nation where “all citizens are equal” [15]. Batson’s (2011) empathy-altruism hypothesis explains his drive. Penner et al.,(2005) multilevel model explains his methods. Indian Psychology’s ideas of nishkama karma, paropakara, and sarva-jana-hita explain his endurance [1], [7],[13]. Together they show prosociality is most powerful when emotion, duty, and institutions reinforce each other.

As contemporary societies face caste, class, and identity conflicts, Ambedkar’s model provides direction: recognize others’ suffering, act without attachment to personal gain, create systems that outlast you, and expand the definition of “we” as widely as possible. His Deekshabhoomi message- “be educated, be organized, be agitated” is not just a slogan but a prosocial strategy [5]. In a world where helping is often transactional, Ambedkar shows that the highest form of service is to design a just system that makes your role unnecessary. That is prosocial behaviour at scale.

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