



The Research Frontline - Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal of Interdisciplinary
Inquiry and Research

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To cite this article: Bhattacharjee O. (2026): The Mind as Revolution: Psychological Reform Towards a Democratic Society, The Research Frontline - Journal (Vol 1, Issue 2, January - March 2026)
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.66871/trf-j.v1i2.005>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.66871/trf-j.v1i2.005>




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Allahabad Academic Press,



Published online: 05 May 2026.



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Vol. 1, Issue 2, January - March 2026



The Mind as Revolution: Psychological Reform Towards a Democratic Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex relationship between caste, gender, and democracy in India through the writings of B. R. Ambedkar and feminist scholars such as Uma Chakravarti. It argues that Brahminical patriarchy, deeply embedded in religious practices and legitimised through scriptures, continues to structure social relations and political life in contemporary India. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and repeated political reforms, caste-based hierarchies and gendered domination remain firmly entrenched, limiting the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Drawing on Ambedkar's critique of social reform and Chakravarti's analysis of caste gender relations, the paper highlights how caste operates not only as a political or economic system but also as a deeply internalised social consciousness. Engaging with Frantz Fanon's theorisation of colonial consciousness and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and with Gopal Guru's analysis of Dalit humiliation, it introduces the concept of psychological reform to emphasise the need for an inner transformation that involves unlearning inherited hierarchies, moral prejudices, and social instincts. The paper argues that without such psychological reform, democratic transformation in India remains incomplete and largely symbolic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 26 January 2026
Accepted: 30 March 2026

KEYWORDS

Caste, Ambedkar, Patriarchy, Reform, Democracy, Psychological Reform, Gramsci · Fanon

I. Introduction

Caste in India is not merely a question of political representation or electoral arithmetic; it is a question of lived humiliation and inherited hierarchy. To study caste exclusively through the lens of parties, elections, or reservations is to overlook its deeper moral and psychological violence. B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) tears through this superficial understanding, exposing caste as a system that cripples both individual freedom and collective ethics. Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahminical patriarchy further complicates this critique by demonstrating how caste sustains itself through gendered control, claims of ritual purity, and religious sanction. The subordination of women and the subjugation of lower castes, as this paper argues, are not parallel phenomena but two sides of the same social order.

Together, Ambedkar and Chakravarti help us recognise caste as the most profound challenge to Indian democracy, a structure that cannot be dismantled by policy alone, but demands a radical rethinking of morality, religion, and social relationships. This paper advances that argument further by proposing that political reform and social reform, while necessary, are insufficient without a prior, more fundamental transformation: psychological reform. Drawing on Fanon's analysis of internalised colonial

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consciousness and Gramsci's theorisation of hegemony as a system that naturalises domination, this paper argues that Brahminical hierarchy operates not merely as an external structure but as a form of internalised common sense. It is only when inherited hierarchies are unlearned at the level of individual consciousness that the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity can cease to be merely constitutional promises and become social realities.

II. Caste Embedded in Daily Life: Social and Psychological Dimensions

"The path of social reform, like the path to heaven, at any rate in India, is strewn with many difficulties." — Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 1936

Ambedkar held, with considerable conviction, that political reform cannot guarantee social transformation and that social reform must therefore precede political change. The validity of this position is starkly evident even after seventy-nine years of Indian independence. Caste-based violence and suppression continue to exist within a constitutional republic that explicitly enshrines fraternity and equality as its animating principles. The gap between constitutional promise and social reality is itself a testament to the limits of political reform alone. Ambedkar further noted that caste animosity does not only cut across inter-caste lines; even sub-castes within Brahmin identity, Golak, Deorukha, and Chitpavan, maintain mutual hostility, revealing that the system fractures social solidarity at every level.

What makes the caste system particularly resistant to reform is that it has seeped beyond the boundaries of public life into the most intimate dimensions of daily existence. Anthropologist McKim Marriott (1968) demonstrated that the flow of food functions as a primary determinant of caste rank: givers of food are structurally positioned as superior to their receivers. The concept of *joothan* food rendered impure through contact with the saliva of an upper-caste person, yet designated for Dalit consumption, illustrates this with disturbing clarity. The downward flow of food from the 'pure' to the 'polluted' constitutes what this paper terms a *gastronomic panopticon*: a system of surveillance and hierarchy so thoroughly internalised that it governs even the most private act of eating.

It is at this point that Frantz Fanon's analysis becomes indispensable. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon argued that the colonial subject does not merely suffer external domination; they internalise the coloniser's conception of their own inferiority, coming to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor. The psychological violence of colonialism, Fanon demonstrated, lies precisely in this internalisation: the colonised begin to reproduce the hierarchies that subordinate them. The Dalit experience of caste maps with uncomfortable precision onto this Fanonian framework. The person who accepts *joothan* as their natural portion, who internalises the logic of pollution and purity as self-evident, has absorbed the Brahminical gaze into their own consciousness. A reform that operates only at the level of law or social custom cannot reach this depth. What is required is what Fanon would recognise as a rupture in consciousness, a deliberate, willed refusal of the inherited self-conception that the dominant order has imposed.

It is precisely this depth of penetration into food, touch, domestic space, and bodily practice that leads this paper to argue for the primacy of psychological reform. By psychological reform, this paper refers to the process of unlearning caste-based hierarchies, moral prejudices, and inherited social attitudes that shape everyday behaviour and sustain inequality. Unlike legal or political reform, which operates at the level of institutional structure, psychological reform works at the level of individual consciousness, transforming how people understand dignity, purity, authority, and social worth. Drawing from Ambedkar's emphasis on the necessity of social reform, this paper argues that democratic transformation in India cannot be fully realised unless such internal changes in mindset take place. Social reform should precede political reform, but psychological reform must precede social reform.

III. Religion as a Pillar of Caste Hierarchy

"Each nation has a main current in life; in India, it is religion." — Swami Vivekananda

Ambedkar's analysis converges, in a critical sense, with Vivekananda's observation, though where Vivekananda celebrated religion as the organising energy of Indian civilisation, Ambedkar viewed that same religious centrality as the very mechanism through which the Chaturvarna system, the four-tiered caste hierarchy, was legitimised and preserved. Because political power in India has historically been dominated by upper-caste elites, Ambedkar held little hope that political institutions would spontaneously dismantle caste. Such elites might, at most, abolish practices like Sati when they affected their own women, but they had neither the incentive nor the will to challenge the broader hierarchical order from which they benefited.

Ambedkar was equally sceptical of the Socialist model as a remedy for caste oppression. In India, he argued, power is concentrated not only in capital but in religious capital. Millionaires donate vast sums to temples and religious institutions, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than subverting them. Even those Brahmins who were secular and broad-minded, who privately acknowledged the injustice of caste, were disinclined to relinquish their structural advantages, remaining, in practice, indistinguishable from their more conservative kin.

This is where Gramsci's concept of hegemony offers a powerful analytical lens. For Gramsci, dominant groups maintain power not primarily through coercion but through consent by making their worldview appear as natural, inevitable common sense that the dominated themselves accept and reproduce. Writing from an Italian fascist prison, Gramsci observed that the most durable form of domination is one that requires no enforcement because it has been internalised by those it subordinates. Brahminical caste ideology operates in precisely this way. The religious legitimisation of Varna hierarchy through scripture, ritual, and the authority of priestly interpretation has produced a social common sense so pervasive that it governs conduct even without the presence of an enforcer. The lower-caste person who avoids the upper-caste well, the woman who voluntarily confines herself to domestic space, the voter who supports the candidate of their own caste: each is reproducing Brahminical hegemony through their own choices, without experiencing those choices as constrained. Psychological reform, in Gramscian terms, is the work of building a counter-hegemony, an alternative common sense grounded in the democratic values of dignity, rationality, and equality.

This religious entrenchment of caste also foreclosed the possibility of the horizontal solidarity that enables democratic politics elsewhere. The kind of religious cohesion visible among Sikhs or Muslims, solidarity that crosses class lines within a faith community was, Ambedkar argued, structurally impossible within Hinduism, a religion that enshrined hierarchy even within its own caste groups. For Ambedkar, only intercaste dining and intercaste marriage could break the social rigidity that religion had produced. The deep entanglement of religion and caste in India continues, therefore, to challenge not merely social equality but the democratic ideals of fraternity themselves.

It is from this analysis of religious rootedness that Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahminical patriarchy draws its analytical force. Archaeological evidence from the pre-Vedic period suggests that women participated more or less equally in hunting and gathering activities. The subordination of women, Chakravarti (1993) argues, began with the Aryan settlements and the consolidation of Vedic religion, which marked the beginning of systematic social and religious subjugation. Scriptural texts reference 'dasi' (female slaves) far more frequently than 'dasa' (male slaves), revealing that the control of women's sexuality and, through it, the management of caste purity was a central rather than incidental preoccupation of Brahminical ideology. Concepts such as Pativrata Dharma and Stree Dharma codified female conduct in ways that served unmistakably casteist purposes.

Ambedkar, in *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman* (1951), locates this dynamic within a specific historical context: Shudras and women were, he argues, the two groups most drawn to Buddhism, a

religion that rejected the Varna system, and it was precisely this mass movement toward a more egalitarian faith that prompted Brahminical texts to intensify the restriction of women's freedoms. The sole aim of such control was to retain Brahminical dominance within and beyond the household, ensuring the sustained privileges of male Brahmins and the continued suppression of both women and lower-caste populations.

IV. Caste and Patriarchy: Persistent Challenges to Indian Democracy

"Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life." — B. R. Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly, November 25, 1949

The Indian state has made formal, and at times sincere, attempts to address gender inequality through legislation and institutional design. The reservation of 33% of seats for women in local self-governing bodies, the Panchayati Raj institutions, stands as one of the most ambitious of these efforts. It intended to bring women, particularly in rural areas where the grip of Brahminical patriarchy is most entrenched, into the formal exercise of political power. On paper, the results appear encouraging: the Press Information Bureau (2025) reports female participation in rural local governance at approximately 46%.

Yet the reality behind this figure is considerably more ambivalent. The reservation scheme gave rise to the widespread phenomenon of the Sarpanch Pati or Pradhan Pati, the husband, or another male relative, who exercises the decision-making authority nominally held by the elected woman. The female representative is present; the female voice is not. This is not a peripheral anomaly but a structural response to the reform, one rooted in precisely the internalised Brahminical patriarchy that Chakravarti theorised. In Gramscian terms, this is hegemony operating at its most intimate level: the norms of male authority are so thoroughly naturalised that even a legal intervention designed to redistribute power is absorbed and neutralised by the existing social common sense. When a policy designed to redistribute political agency is subverted through a domestic proxy system, it reveals the inadequacy of institutional reform alone. Democratic representation becomes a formal shell when psychological and social norms remain unchanged. The question is not simply how many women are elected, but whose will is being exercised through their presence.

V. Entrenched Hierarchies: How Caste Undermines Political Equality

India's political institutions have made consistent efforts to dismantle social inequality through constitutional provisions and judicial interpretation. Article 15 of the Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of caste, religion, or gender. Nevertheless, the Brahminical hierarchy that the Constitution sought to abolish has, in important respects, been reproduced and in some ways deepened through the politicisation of caste identity itself.

Perhaps no indicator makes this more vivid than the persistent caste-marking of those who have risen to the highest constitutional offices. President Draupadi Murmu is routinely described in public discourse as the 'Scheduled Tribe President'; her predecessor Ram Nath Kovind was similarly labelled the 'Dalit President.' Their caste identities, far from being irrelevant to their elevation, become the defining frame through which their authority is understood and, implicitly, limited. The individual is subsumed by the category. A more overtly hostile instance occurred when a shoe was hurled at Justice B. R. Gavai, a sitting Dalit judge of the Supreme Court, following his remarks on a Hindu deity (Poddar & Lukiv, 2024). The act made visible the resentment that formal inclusion does not dissolve but merely drives underground.

These incidents reinforce, with uncomfortable clarity, Ambedkar's central contention: no degree of political or legislative reform can produce genuine equality unless the hierarchies embedded in social consciousness are confronted and transformed. Legal frameworks change what people may do; they

do not, by themselves, change what people believe, feel, or instinctively enact. Gopal Guru's (2009) analysis of humiliation as the defining experience of Dalit subjectivity is relevant here. For Guru, humiliation is not merely an emotional response to injustice; it is a structuring force that shapes Dalit consciousness and self-understanding. The persistence of caste-based humiliation, even in contexts of formal political inclusion, reveals the gap between institutional recognition and genuine social transformation. That transformation requires the psychological reform this paper has been arguing for: an active, willed process of unlearning that must accompany, and in some respects precede, institutional change. Crucially, the primary burden of this unlearning falls not on those who suffer under the hierarchy but on those who benefit from it, the upper-caste consciousness that must interrogate and dismantle its own inherited advantages.

VI. Caste-Based Politics: A Necessary Evil and Democratic Challenge

Political scientists have long grappled with the ambivalent consequences of caste entering the democratic arena. Rajni Kothari, in *Caste in Indian Politics* (1970), pioneered the concept of the 'politicisation of caste,' recognising it as both an enabling and a distorting force within Indian democracy.

The enabling dimension is historically significant. In the early post-independence decades, the most influential legislative positions were secured almost exclusively by upper-caste elites, who were largely indifferent to the material and social struggles of lower-caste populations. Kothari's 'Congress System' or the dominance of the Indian National Congress across the first three decades of Indian democracy was, despite its secular self-presentation, an upper-caste-led formation that routinely marginalised Dalit and OBC interests. In this context, the emergence of caste-based regional parties such as the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, the RJD and JD(U) in Bihar, and the DMK in Tamil Nadu represented a genuine redistribution of political voice. To that extent, the politicisation of caste was a necessary corrective.

Yet its costs are high. Caste-based politics heightens chauvinistic caste consciousness and transforms elections into zero-sum contests between communities rather than deliberations over policy. Caste parties frequently serve the interests of their own constituency at the expense of broader democratic goods, pursuing opportunistic alliances to secure seats rather than to advance coherent programmes of social transformation. More troublingly, lower-caste voters often find themselves structurally trapped, their electoral choices constrained by caste loyalty rather than expanded by political agency. The democratic ideal of the rational, free citizen exercising genuine political choice is significantly undermined when caste determines the horizon of political possibility. This too is a form of Brahminical hegemony: the internalisation of caste identity as the primary political identity forecloses the kind of cross-caste solidarity that a genuinely democratic politics would require.

VII. Conclusion: The Necessity of Psychological Reform

The evidence examined in this paper points consistently to a single, structurally significant conclusion: political reform does not guarantee social reform, and social reform cannot be realised without a prior transformation of the psychological and moral inheritance that sustains caste. Even seventy-nine years after independence, the minds of citizens across caste positions remain shaped by Brahminical codes, hierarchies, and norms whose hold is so pervasive as to seem natural. What is striking, however, is that the degree of dependence on these social norms varies from person to person. That variation is itself psychological.

It is worth remembering that it was a modest but real degree of psychological reform and an inner refusal to accept inherited hierarchy as inevitable that produced figures like Kadambini Ganguly, India's first female graduate, and Anandi Gopal Joshi, its first female doctor. Both overcame the weight of Brahminical social norms through a combination of individual courage and rational self-determination. Savitribai Phule's entire pedagogical project can be read as an institutionalisation of this impulse: her schools for lower-caste and female students were not merely sites of literacy but of

reconstructed self-understanding, places where those whom Brahminical society had taught to see themselves as lesser could begin to see themselves differently. Pandita Ramabai, in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1888), documented with painful precision how even upper-caste women were systematically denied education, a reminder that the problem of psychological reform extends across caste positions, even if its costs fall most heavily on those at the bottom.

Psychological reform, as this paper has used the term, is not a therapeutic or purely individual process. It is a social and ethical one: the active, reasoned dismantling of inherited prejudice through commitment to rationality and human dignity. Ambedkar understood this when he located the source of caste's resilience not in law or economics alone, but in the internalised social consciousness of those who both enforced and submitted to it. Fanon understood it when he insisted that genuine liberation required a rupture not just in political structures but in the colonised subject's self-understanding. Gramsci understood it when he argued that transformative politics must begin with the construction of a counter-hegemony, an alternative common sense. Gopal Guru (2009) understood it when he insisted that the experience of humiliation must be theorised from within Dalit subjectivity rather than managed from outside it. Together, these frameworks converge on a single insight: the mind is not merely the site of oppression's effects, it is one of the primary sites of its reproduction, and therefore one of the primary sites of its undoing.

To reform that consciousness requires, first, the willingness to interrogate it to refuse the emotional bait of caste loyalty, religious sanction, and communal solidarity in favour of the harder and more democratic work of treating persons as persons. The same logic extends to electoral politics: the manipulation of caste sentiment, the disinformation, and the false promises that characterise so much of Indian electoral competition are themselves expressions of Brahminical hegemony in action, binding voters to inherited identities and foreclosing rational deliberation. Making genuinely free electoral choices requires precisely the psychological reform this paper has described: the capacity to see through communal appeals and ground political judgment in reasoned evaluation of democratic goods.

The mechanisms through which such psychological reform might be cultivated through pedagogy, counter-narrative, inter-caste intimacy, deliberate rational practice, or the kind of symbolic rupture that Ambedkar himself enacted through his conversion to Buddhism constitute the analytical agenda this paper sets in motion and that subsequent work must develop. Until the deep-seated hierarchies of the mind are actively questioned and transformed, the ideals of Indian democracy will remain what they have largely been: constitutional promises unfulfilled. This is, ultimately, what Ambedkar understood when he insisted that political democracy cannot survive without social democracy at its foundation. What this paper has argued is that the foundation beneath that foundation, the ground on which social democracy must be built is psychological.

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