# Less Maslow, More Ambedkar

Maslow asks a human question: What does a person need in order to flourish?

Ambedkar asks a harder public question: What must society guarantee before it is morally fit to rule?

That difference changes the shape of the pyramid. This is not a private self-improvement ladder. It is not a motivational poster about becoming your best self while the public world remains organized to diminish you. It is a dignity-and-power model: a way to ask whether a society has moved people from permission to protection, from participation to capability, from capital to status, and finally into rule-making power.

The point is not to imitate Maslow with different labels. The point is to change the unit of analysis.

Maslow's pyramid usually treats the individual as the main site of progress. Food, shelter, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization are imagined as personal needs. That is useful, but incomplete. Ambedkar's political imagination starts elsewhere. It asks whether a person can live as an equal inside institutions that have historically denied equality. It asks whether the village, school, workplace, court, market, prison, marriage network, and public office recognize human dignity as enforceable, not decorative.

That is why this book begins at access but does not end there.

Progress is real. According to the Ministry of Education's AISHE 2021-22 release, SC student enrolment in higher education rose from 46.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 66.23 lakh in 2021-22, and the SC gross enrolment ratio rose from 18.9 to 25.9 in the same period. India also has a formal legal architecture against caste-based atrocities through the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.
The residue is real too. Public crime data records tens of thousands of registered crimes or atrocities against Scheduled Castes each year. In 2024, the Supreme Court had to direct changes to prison manuals because caste discrimination, caste-based labour allocation, and segregation had survived inside state institutions. Pew's India survey found that 64 percent of Indians said it was very important to stop women in their community from marrying outside caste, and 62 percent said the same about men.
So caste has not vanished. It has changed address.

It has partly moved from the village well to the marriage market, the hostel room, the housing society, the office network, the hiring panel, the university department, the social media feed, the credit decision, the startup ecosystem, the police station, the prison register, and the algorithmic recommendation.
The old question was:

> Can you use the public well?

The modern question is:

> Can you access the public good without permission, segregation, humiliation, extra distance, extra cost, fear, or dependency?

This is the Ambedkarite pyramid of dignity and power:

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      7. Rule-making power
   6. Narrative and status
5. Economic dignity and ownership
   4. Capability infrastructure
      3. Humiliation-free belonging
   2. Safety from violence and retaliation
1. Equal civic access
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The apex is not self-actualization in isolation. The apex is post-caste sovereignty: the freedom for caste to become optional information, not destiny.

Not denial. Not shame. Not compulsory pride demanded by injury. Sovereignty means the person, not the hierarchy, controls what identity does in their life.

They can invoke it when politically necessary.

They can ignore it when personally irrelevant.

They can transform it into solidarity, critique, art, law, capital, memory, or silence.
Their identity becomes a tool in their hand, not a chain around their neck.
That is the wager of this book.

# 1. How to Read the Pyramid

The pyramid is not a ranking of human worth. It is a diagnostic map of social power.
Each layer asks a different question:

| Layer | Core question |
|---|---|
| Equal civic access | Can people enter public life on equal terms? |
| Safety | Can they assert rights without punishment? |
| Belonging | Can they be ordinary once inside? |
| Capability | Can access become competence and confidence? |
| Economic independence | Can they refuse a gatekeeper without collapse? |
| Narrative and status | Can they define themselves without shame or tokenism? |
| Rule-making power | Can they design the institutions that govern them? |

The pyramid should be read from bottom to top, but life does not move neatly. A person may become a senior engineer while still being excluded from marriage networks. A student may enter a university while still lacking the language confidence, mentorship, money, and institutional belonging needed to convert admission into power. A legislator may hold office while party finance, media access, police behaviour, and social capital remain controlled elsewhere.

That is the first principle: entry is not equality.

The second principle is that every layer has a fake version and a real version.
The fake version of access is admission without usability. A school exists, but it is far away, badly staffed, hostile, or humiliating. A police station exists, but complaints are discouraged. A scholarship exists, but paperwork becomes a second exam.
The fake version of safety is law without enforcement. A statute exists, but victims face intimidation, police delay, social boycott, or pressure to compromise.
The fake version of belonging is diversity without fraternity. People are allowed in the room but made to feel like guests, cases, quotas, threats, or exceptions.
The fake version of capability is opportunity without scaffolding. The door opens, but the pipeline remains private: English fluency, coaching, cultural confidence, recommendation networks, interview polish, and professional sponsorship remain inherited.
The fake version of economic independence is employment without bargaining power. A wage exists, but housing, debt, local officials, kinship pressure, and social reputation still make refusal dangerous.
The fake version of status is visibility without authorship. A person is seen, but only in the role society assigns: victim, symbol, beneficiary, angry critic, or inspirational exception.

The fake version of representation is a seat without power over rules.
This is why the pyramid is a discipline of suspicion. It does not ask whether a society has a policy. It asks whether the policy survives contact with village authority, family authority, office authority, platform authority, and state authority.
It also helps avoid two lazy stories.

The first lazy story says nothing has changed. That is false. Enrolment has expanded. Law has changed. Public aspiration has changed. Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, and other caste-oppressed communities have built intellectual, political, professional, cultural, and entrepreneurial power that earlier generations were violently denied.
The second lazy story says formal access has solved caste. That is also false. Hierarchy can survive after entry. It can survive as taste, humour, surnames, networks, "culture fit", housing preferences, marriage norms, informal references, police discretion, credit access, and inherited confidence.
The harder truth is that progress and residue now coexist.

The pyramid is useful because it does not ask people to choose between those truths. It asks where the unfinished work has moved.

Earlier, caste could say:

> You cannot use the well.

Now it may say:

> You can use the well, but not the network.

> You can enter the school, but not the inner circle.

> You can get the degree, but not the confidence.

> You can get the job, but not the sponsorship.

> You can become successful, but we will still decide whether you are respectable.

The climb, then, is not from poverty to success alone. It is from permission to non-dependence.

# 2. Equal Civic Access

Equal civic access is the base of the pyramid because every other promise becomes theatrical without it.
This layer includes school, water, roads, housing, healthcare, ration, documents, transport, internet, courts, police stations, public offices, libraries, hostels, toilets, cremation grounds, markets, and public institutions. It is the material right to appear in the shared world without asking for caste permission.
Ambedkar's older test was brutally concrete: Can you use the public well, public road, public school, and public office?
The modern test is sharper:

> Can you access the public good without permission, segregation, humiliation, extra distance, extra cost, or fear?

That test matters because exclusion often hides inside friction.

A right denied openly is easy to name. A right made unusable is harder to prosecute. The school exists, but it is too far. The hostel exists, but it is unsafe. The government benefit exists, but the documents are hard to obtain. The health centre exists, but treatment is dismissive. The internet exists, but devices, bandwidth, privacy, language, and digital literacy are missing. The complaint mechanism exists, but the complainant must return to the same local power structure the next morning.

This is the politics of the queue.

Hierarchy does not always need a wall. Sometimes it only needs delay, distance, confusion, paperwork, embarrassment, and fatigue.

Equal civic access must therefore be measured as lived access, not formal availability. A village may have a school, but the relevant question is whether every child can sit, learn, eat, ask questions, receive attention, and imagine themselves as the rightful subject of education. A city may have rental housing, but the question is whether caste-coded names, food habits, marriage status, and community labels quietly filter who can rent where. A university may have seats, but the question is whether students can reach the classroom, afford the semester, find housing, secure documents, understand procedures, and survive the social climate.

The good news is that access can expand. The AISHE 2021-22 figures on SC higher-education enrolment are not cosmetic. They represent millions of additional students entering a world from which their communities were historically excluded. Enrolment is not liberation by itself, but it is not nothing. It changes family expectation. It creates first-generation literacies. It produces new claims on the state. It alters the imagination of children watching older siblings leave home for study.

The mistake is to treat enrolment as the finish line.

Access is only the first victory. The second question is whether the institution is ready for the people it admits. If

institutions open the gate but preserve inherited norms of language, taste, mentorship, evaluation, and respectability, access becomes a narrow bridge across a hostile river.

Equal civic access also requires public design. A dignity-centered state does not wait for heroic individuals to navigate hostile systems. It reduces the number of heroic acts required for ordinary life.

That means:

- schools within real reach, not theoretical reach;
- scholarships and documents that do not punish the people they are meant to help;
- safe hostels and transport;
- public health systems that treat caste humiliation as a health risk;
- digital services that assume unequal bandwidth, unequal language capital, and unequal paperwork;
- grievance systems that protect complainants from local retaliation;
- public institutions trained to see dignity as part of service delivery.

This layer is the base because without it the upper layers become performance. You cannot build capability without access. You cannot build economic independence without

usable institutions. You cannot build rule-making power when people are still negotiating for entry.
The standard is simple:

> No one should have to become exceptional just to receive what is public.

# 3. Safety from Violence and Retaliation

Access is meaningless if assertion gets punished.

This layer asks:

> Can a person claim their rights without social boycott, assault, police apathy, false cases, eviction, sexual violence, career sabotage, or reputational punishment?

A right that cannot be safely exercised is not a right. It is a decorative sentence.

The history of caste is not merely a history of exclusion. It is a history of retaliation against breached hierarchy. The punishment often arrives when someone does the thing equality promises they may do: enter a temple, draw water, study, marry across caste, buy land, contest an election, refuse degrading work, file a police complaint, ask for wages, sit on a chair, wear certain clothes, ride a horse, eat in a public place, or speak without deference.

This is why safety is the second layer. Access tells us whether the door opens. Safety tells us whether a person can walk through the door twice.

Retaliation can be physical, but it can also be economic and administrative. A family may be socially boycotted. A tenant

may be pushed out. A worker may stop getting shifts. A student may be isolated by faculty or peers. A complainant may be pressed to withdraw. A public official may delay a certificate. A local employer may quietly blacklist. A woman may face sexual violence not only as gendered violence, but as caste discipline.

The law matters here. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act exists because ordinary criminal law did not adequately name the social character of caste violence. Caste atrocity is not just harm to an individual body. It is a message to a community about where it is supposed to stand.

But law is only one part of safety. A person must be safe before filing, while filing, after filing, during investigation, during trial, and after judgment. Safety is a chain, and every weak link teaches people not to assert rights.

This is why crime data must be read carefully. Registered cases are not the same as actual prevalence. An increase can mean more violence, better reporting, reduced fear, political mobilization, administrative change, or some mixture of these. A low number can mean safety, but it can also mean silence. Numbers are necessary, but they cannot substitute for institutional listening.

The deeper question is whether the state has made retaliation costly.

That requires:

- police who register complaints without caste deference to dominant local actors;
- witness protection that works in actual villages and neighbourhoods;
- fast administrative response to social boycott and eviction;

- school and university systems that protect complainants from academic retaliation;
- workplace procedures that understand caste as a live axis of harassment;
- local officials who are judged by protection outcomes, not by paper compliance;
- courts that recognize delay itself as a weapon.

Safety also has a psychological dimension. If every assertion requires calculating who may punish your family, your siblings, your land, your scholarship, your job, or your marriage prospects, then formal equality has failed at the level of nervous system.
The test is not whether a person can be brave once.

The test is whether ordinary rights can be exercised without extraordinary courage.

# 4. Humiliation-Free Belonging

This is the layer people underestimate.

It is not merely: Are you allowed inside?

It is:

> Are you allowed to be ordinary once inside?

Humiliation-free belonging means no separate cups, no segregated seating, no caste-coded jokes, no ritual disgust around food or touch, no lectures about "merit" that appear only when certain people succeed, no suspicion around scholarships, no curiosity that becomes interrogation, no reduction of a person to their surname, accent, hostel room, reservation category, village, skin tone, clothes, food, or ambition.
The point is not politeness. The point is social breathing.

Humiliation is a political technology. It makes people spend energy managing how they are seen. It converts a classroom, office, hostel, or neighbourhood into a place where the body is present but the mind is partially occupied with self-defence. This is why belonging is not a soft layer. It shapes performance. A student who must constantly prove that they deserve to be in the room has less attention left for learning. A worker who must absorb jokes, code-switch, conceal identity, or manage token expectations has less freedom to create. A founder

who is treated as surprising rather than normal must spend extra energy translating legitimacy. A scholar who is assumed to be writing only from pain may be denied the full range of intellect.

Belonging asks whether people can stop auditioning for humanity.

It also asks whether inclusion is conditional. Are people welcomed only if they are grateful? Only if they are quiet? Only if they perform trauma in acceptable ways? Only if they do not marry across caste? Only if they do not criticize the institution that admitted them? Only if they reassure dominant groups that nothing fundamental needs to change?

Conditional belonging is not belonging. It is tolerated presence.

This layer is where fraternity becomes measurable. The Constitution's promise of equality cannot survive through law alone. It needs everyday habits that make equality feel normal. Shared eating, shared housing, shared friendship, shared authority, shared risk, and shared imagination are not sentimental details. They are anti-hierarchy infrastructure.

Pew's findings on inter-caste marriage attitudes are revealing because marriage is where formal equality meets intimate power. A society may endorse tolerance in public while preserving separation in family life. That matters because family is not just private. It transmits property, status, social capital, safety, networks, and legitimacy.

If a person can sit beside you in a classroom but not enter your family, the hierarchy has adapted. It has moved from civic exclusion to intimate border control.

Humiliation-free belonging requires institutions to notice the ordinary mechanisms of caste:

- jokes framed as harmless tradition;
- questions about surname, region, food, and "background" that function as sorting tools;
- peer groups that reproduce caste networks while claiming meritocracy;
- faculty, managers, landlords, and administrators who treat caste complaints as over-sensitivity;
- cultural events that naturalize only dominant histories and aesthetics;
- professional networks built through kinship and community channels that outsiders cannot access.

The aim is not to create sterile spaces where no one speaks honestly. The aim is to create spaces where honesty is not monopolized by the powerful, and where the burden of adjustment does not always fall downward.

Belonging is achieved when a person does not have to choose between dignity and participation.

It is achieved when they can be excellent, mediocre, quiet, loud, ambitious, flawed, funny, stylish, devout, secular, rich, confused, romantic, technical, artistic, angry, tired, or ordinary without their caste becoming the explanation for everything. That ordinariness is not small. For people historically forced into symbolic roles, ordinariness is freedom.

# 5. Capability Infrastructure

Once access exists, the next question is whether people can convert access into power.
Capability infrastructure is the pipeline that turns entry into competence, confidence, and opportunity. It includes quality schooling, language confidence, nutrition, health, safe hostels, coaching, digital access, mentors, role models, paperwork literacy, emotional resilience, peer networks, professional exposure, and the ability to fail without ruin.
Modern exclusion often says:

> You may enter the school.

Then it quietly denies the scaffolding that turns schooling into mastery.
The old wall was visible. The new wall is often a spreadsheet.

Marks, rankings, interviews, fellowships, entrance exams, placements, internships, and promotions can all look neutral while silently measuring inherited support. The student who had a quiet room, stable internet, English exposure, exam coaching, educated parents, professional relatives, and confidence around authority appears “meritorious”. The student who had none of those things is judged at the same finish line, and the long unequal run-up disappears.

This is not an argument against standards. It is an argument for honesty about what standards are measuring.
A serious society does not lower ambition for excluded communities. It raises the quality of preparation and support. It refuses the insult of symbolic access. It does not say, “We have admitted you, now survive.” It says, “If the public has opened the gate, the public must also build the bridge.”
Capability has at least five parts.

First, foundational capability: nutrition, health, early schooling, reading, numeracy, safety, and attendance. A child cannot compete fairly if the body is neglected before the exam ever appears.
Second, language capability. English is not just a subject. In many sectors it is a gatekeeping technology, a confidence signal, a class marker, and a network key. Regional language strength should be respected, but respect without access to power languages can become a trap. The goal is additive multilingual power, not cultural shame.
Third, institutional literacy. Many first-generation students lose opportunities not because they lack intelligence, but because they lack procedural knowledge: how to apply, whom to email, what deadlines matter, how recommendation letters work, how to read a syllabus, how to contest an error, how to ask for help, how to find funding, how to network without embarrassment.

Fourth, mentorship and sponsorship. Mentorship explains the map. Sponsorship opens doors on your behalf. Excluded students are often over-mentored and under-sponsored: advised, studied, counselled, and inspired, but not actually recommended, hired, funded, cited, or promoted.

Fifth, recovery capacity. Privilege often appears as the ability to make mistakes without permanent damage. A failed exam, bad semester, illness, family crisis, or wrong first job is survivable when there is money, advice, housing, and social capital. Without those buffers, one setback can close a decade.

Capability infrastructure matters because it changes the meaning of access. A seat in college is not the same thing as the ability to use college. A job is not the same as a career. A loan is not the same as capital. A LinkedIn account is not the same as a network.

The key institutional question is:

> What hidden preparation does this system assume, and who was historically allowed to inherit it?

Once that question is asked honestly, policy becomes more practical. Bridge programs stop looking like charity. Mentorship stops looking optional. Hostels, language labs, counselling, placement support, remedial instruction, alumni networks, and anti-discrimination cells become part of the core machinery of equality.

The goal is not to produce dependency. It is to produce non-dependence.

Capability infrastructure is successful when a first-generation student does not remain first-generation in every room forever.

# 6. Economic Independence

Economic independence is where dignity stops begging.

It means land, housing, jobs, business ownership, capital, credit, procurement, inheritance, professional networks, market access, startup access, and the ability to say no.
The key test is:

> Can you refuse a dominant gatekeeper without your life collapsing?

Because dependence is the hidden skeleton of hierarchy.

If someone controls your wage, your house, your loan, your local police access, your marriage prospects, your children's school, your medical credit, or your social reputation, they do not need to call you "untouchable". They can simply make obedience cheaper than dignity.
This is why economic independence is not only about income. Income matters, but power lives in assets, buffers, networks, and exit options.
A monthly salary can still leave a person dependent if they have no savings, no housing security, no legal support, no alternative employer, no professional references, and no family capital to absorb shocks. A small business can still be trapped if suppliers, landlords, credit officers, customers,

and local officials are socially aligned against it. A farmer can own land but remain vulnerable if water, credit, procurement, police protection, and local dispute resolution are controlled by others.

Economic power has a caste geography. It lives in who owns land, who rents where, who lends to whom, who gets informal credit, who receives business referrals, who is trusted with inventory, who becomes a partner, who is seen as "promotable", who enters family firms, who inherits urban property, who can take startup risk, and who is allowed to fail without becoming a cautionary tale.

This layer also exposes the limits of individual success stories. A person may become wealthy and still face social exclusion, but wealth changes the terms of negotiation. It can buy distance from local domination. It can fund education, legal action, relocation, healthcare, political contribution, publishing, business risk, and refusal. It can turn humiliation from an unavoidable condition into a fight one can afford to wage.

That is why hierarchy fears economic independence. It is not only jealousy. It is a loss of control.

The economics of dignity requires more than jobs. It requires:

- land and housing security;
- access to formal credit without humiliation or informal veto;
- public procurement that creates supplier power, not just wage labour;

- entrepreneurship ecosystems that do not treat caste-oppressed founders as charity cases;
- professional associations and alumni networks that actively widen sponsorship;
- inheritance, savings, and asset creation;
- legal aid for economic retaliation;
- labour protections that recognize caste vulnerability in informal and formal work.

The workplace deserves special attention. Modern offices often congratulate themselves for being caste-neutral because nobody says caste aloud. But silence can protect the existing network. Hiring through referrals, cultural-fit interviews, informal mentoring, after-work socializing, English-coded confidence, food politics, surname recognition, and manager comfort can all reproduce social advantage without explicit discrimination.

The question for a workplace is not only whether caste slurs are banned. It is whether opportunity travels through channels everyone can access.

Economic independence also changes family politics. A person with income and assets has more power in marriage decisions, mobility, care work, education choices, and exit from abuse. This matters especially for women from caste-oppressed communities, who can face overlapping control through caste, gender, class, and local violence.

Non-dependence is not isolation. It is the ability to relate without compulsion.

The economic layer is successful when dignity no longer requires permission from the person who signs the wage slip, owns the house, controls the loan, or dominates the village meeting.

# 7. Narrative and Status Ownership

This is the layer of symbolic power.

Can someone from a historically excluded community be rich, stylish, intellectual, spiritual, funny, desirable, elite, global, powerful, experimental, technical, artistic, conservative, radical, or simply uninterested in explaining themselves without being treated as an exception, token, threat, or betrayal?
Narrative ownership is the right to be more than society's preferred script.
Hierarchy does not only control resources. It controls meaning. It tells people what their success means, what their anger means, what their beauty means, what their scholarship means, what their wealth means, what their politics means, what their food means, what their surname means, and what their silence means.
For historically excluded communities, public identity is often trapped between stigma and performance. One side says: hide your caste to avoid discrimination. Another side says: display your caste constantly to prove loyalty, authenticity, or political usefulness. Both can become forms of control if the person is not free to choose.
The highest dignity is not being forced to constantly explain your wound.

Sometimes a person wants to build, flirt, code, design, invest, write poetry, make money, pray, travel, argue, eat well, make art, make mistakes, and not become a museum exhibit for society's guilt. That is not selfishness. It is evidence that dignity has become spacious.
Narrative ownership has several enemies.

Tokenism is one. The token is visible but not free. They are invited to represent pain, diversity, resilience, or progress, but not to shape the agenda. Their presence is used to decorate an institution that refuses deeper change.
Exceptionalism is another. The exceptional person is praised in a way that insults the group: "You are not like the others." This praise is a velvet cage. It offers individual status in exchange for distance from collective history.
Suspicion is another. When a caste-oppressed person becomes powerful, some people treat that power as unnatural. Success is attributed to reservation, politics, luck, foreign funding, identity advantage, or anger. The same society that naturalizes inherited privilege becomes forensic about emancipatory success.
Appropriation is another. Dominant institutions may borrow Ambedkar's image while resisting Ambedkar's institutional challenge. They may celebrate representation while rejecting redistribution, fraternity, anti-discrimination enforcement, and rule-making power.

Narrative ownership requires counter-institutions: publishers, media houses, film worlds, research centres, podcasts, archives, galleries, curricula, platforms, think tanks, investment networks, and cultural spaces where historically excluded communities can define themselves without asking for interpretive permission.

It also requires status freedom in everyday life. The freedom to use or not use a surname. The freedom to marry across caste or within community without coercion. The freedom to be religious, atheist, Buddhist, secular, syncretic, or searching. The freedom to speak in English, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Urdu, or any other language without being sorted into dignity.

Status ownership is not only pride. Pride is necessary when shame has been imposed. But sovereignty is larger than pride. It includes the right to complexity.

The test of this layer is:

> Can a person define the meaning of their life without hierarchy acting as editor?

When this layer strengthens, people stop appearing only as victims in someone else's moral drama. They become authors,

critics, owners, patrons, theorists, lovers, voters, founders, parents, judges, designers, and makers of taste.
That is symbolic power.

It is not cosmetic. It changes what society can imagine as normal.

# 8. Rule-Making Power

The top of the pyramid is not representation alone.

It is rule-making.

Seats are good. Symbolism is useful. Visibility matters. But the deeper question is:

> Who designs the rules of schools, courts, companies, temples, media, venture capital, universities, platforms, political parties, police systems, prisons, and cities?

Representation asks who is present.

Rule-making asks who can change the incentives.

This distinction matters because institutions can absorb representatives without changing their operating logic. A person may sit on a committee whose agenda was set elsewhere. A leader may hold office while finance, candidate selection, media access, bureaucracy, and local coercion remain controlled by other networks. A professor may be hired into a department whose curriculum, hiring norms, citation habits, and informal status system remain unchanged. A founder may be funded only if they fit the investor's comfort zone.
The rule-maker does not merely survive the system. The rule--maker changes what the system rewards and punishes.

At this layer, the questions become structural:

- Who defines merit?
- Who controls admissions criteria?
- Who decides what evidence counts?
- Who writes workplace harassment policy?
- Who designs grievance procedures?
- Who controls police accountability?
- Who decides where infrastructure is built?
- Who sets procurement rules?
- Who controls party tickets?
- Who shapes school textbooks?
- Who owns media distribution?
- Who designs platform moderation?
- Who decides what data is collected and what is ignored?

Ambedkar matters here because his project was not self-help. It was institutional redesign. He understood that dignity cannot depend on the kindness of dominant groups. It needs constitutional form, legal enforcement, political representation, education, economic reorganization, and social democracy.

Social democracy is the difficult phrase. It means liberty, equality, and fraternity have to become habits of collective life, not only promises in law. Without fraternity, liberty becomes the freedom of the powerful to dominate. Without equality, fraternity becomes sentimental. Without liberty, equality becomes administration without voice.

Rule-making power is also where caste critique must enter modern systems that did not exist in Ambedkar's time: digital platforms, algorithmic hiring, edtech, fintech, venture capital, private universities, gig work, housing apps, and global labour markets.

The question is not whether these systems mention caste. The question is whether their design reproduces the old hierarchy through new proxies.

For example:

- referral-heavy hiring can reproduce caste networks while claiming efficiency;
- English-only interfaces can convert language inequality into service inequality;
- credit models can punish people with thin formal histories while hiding inherited capital;
- rental platforms can automate social filtering;
- university rankings can reward institutions that admit diversity but fail at belonging;

- social media can amplify humiliation while calling it engagement.

Rule-making power requires people from historically excluded communities not only as users or beneficiaries, but as designers, regulators, funders, judges, editors, professors, founders, engineers, administrators, and theorists.
The final question is not “Are they included?”

The final question is:

> Can they prevent the next version of exclusion from being built?

That is why this is the top layer. The goal is not to climb into an unjust system and call the climb justice. The goal is to make the system less able to produce dependence, humiliation, and hereditary power in the first place.

# 9. Post-Caste Sovereignty

Above the pyramid sits a cleaner ideal:

> The freedom for caste to become optional information, not destiny.

This does not mean pretending caste never existed. Denial is not liberation. Denial usually protects those who benefited from the hierarchy and asks the injured to forget before justice has been done.
Post-caste sovereignty means something different. It means caste loses the power to script the life.
You can invoke it when politically necessary.

You can ignore it when personally irrelevant.

You can transform it into capital, solidarity, critique, art, scholarship, law, or silence.
You can refuse both shame and compulsory performance.

Your identity becomes a tool in your hand, not a chain around your neck.
This is harder than “castelessness”. Castelessness is often demanded by people who already enjoy the comfort of being treated as default. They say caste should not matter, while living inside networks, marriages, property, language, status,

and cultural codes shaped by caste. In that form, castelessness becomes a request that the oppressed stop naming what the powerful still inherit.
Post-caste sovereignty is not silence. It is control.

It allows memory without captivity. It allows pride without compulsion. It allows critique without reducing the critic to pain. It allows success without requiring the successful person to become an exception used against their own people. It allows solidarity without forcing every individual to live permanently as a public representative.
The modern battlefield is subtle because caste often survives as preference.
Preference sounds innocent. People prefer familiar food, familiar families, familiar accents, familiar neighbourhoods, familiar marriage circles, familiar candidates, familiar schools, familiar styles of speech, familiar confidence, familiar surnames, familiar temples, familiar histories, familiar founders.
But enough private preferences can become a public structure.
That is why post-caste sovereignty cannot be achieved only by telling individuals to think better thoughts. It requires changes in the institutions that convert preference into opportunity: admissions, hiring, housing, credit, media, policing, marriage norms, party politics, school curriculum, and platform design.
The real apex is reached when caste no longer determines:

- where a child sits;
- whether a family can draw water;
- whether a complaint is believed;
- whether a student is treated as meritless;
- whether a worker is promoted;
- whether a tenant is accepted;
- whether a founder is funded;
- whether a person is marriageable;
- whether success is seen as legitimate;
- whether power is seen as natural.

The brutal modern insight is that caste has become more portable. It can travel through forms, jokes, algorithms, family WhatsApp groups, alumni networks, surname searches, dietary policing, matrimonial filters, apartment associations, office referrals, and private anxieties.
So the answer must become portable too.

It must live in law, design, pedagogy, finance, media, family rebellion, data, procurement, school culture, workplace rules, prison reform, and everyday friendship.
The prize at the top is not equality as charity.

It is non-dependence.

The person does not need permission to access the public world. They do not need protection from retaliation just to claim the ordinary. They do not need to shrink inside institutions. They do not need inherited networks to become capable. They do not need a gatekeeper's approval to survive. They do not need a dominant gaze to certify their status. They do not need to wait for someone else to write the rules.
That is the difference between inclusion and sovereignty.

Inclusion says: you may enter.

Sovereignty says: you belong to yourself.

# 10. A Practical Audit

The pyramid becomes useful when it is used as an audit tool.

This chapter translates the argument into questions an institution, workplace, university, public office, political organization, platform, or community can ask itself.

## Access

- Who can use this institution without extra distance, extra cost, extra paperwork, or social permission?
- Which services exist on paper but are hard to use in practice?
- Are documents, language, transport, disability, digital access, and housing treated as part of access?
- Where do people drop out of the process before anyone records a denial?

## Safety

- What happens to a person after they complain?
- Can retaliation be reported quickly and safely?
- Are local power relations considered during protection?
- Does the institution track social boycott, eviction, academic retaliation, workplace sabotage, and pressure to compromise?
- Are police, administrators, faculty, managers, or committee members trained to recognize caste-specific retaliation?

# Belonging

- Can people be ordinary inside this institution?

- Are jokes, food practices, surnames, accents, language, and "merit" talk used as caste sorting tools?
- Do people from excluded communities hold informal trust, or only formal seats?
- Are cultural symbols, histories, and examples drawn from many worlds, or only one dominant world?
- Is the burden of educating others always placed on the people who experience discrimination?

## Capability

- What hidden preparation does success here assume?

- Who arrives with coaching, language confidence, family guidance, professional networks, and recovery buffers?
- Are bridge programs treated as serious infrastructure or as remedial charity?
- Are first-generation students and workers given procedural literacy?
- Does mentorship become sponsorship, or does it stop at advice?

## Economic Independence

- Who controls jobs, contracts, references, housing, credit, procurement, and promotion?
- Are opportunities distributed through informal networks that reproduce caste advantage?
- Can a person refuse a gatekeeper without losing livelihood or housing?
- Are caste-oppressed entrepreneurs treated as serious market actors?
- Does the institution create assets and bargaining power, or only short-term inclusion?

## Narrative and Status

- Who gets to define what success, merit, beauty, intelligence, refinement, spirituality, and leadership look like?
- Are caste-oppressed people visible only as victims, beneficiaries, or symbols?
- Can they be complex without being punished for it?

- Does the institution cite, publish, fund, promote, and archive their thought?
- Is Ambedkar used as decoration or as a challenge to institutional design?

## Rule-Making

- Who sets the agenda before the meeting begins?
- Who writes the criteria?
- Who controls data, budgets, appointments, discipline, and evaluation?
- Are historically excluded people present only as consultees, or do they hold design authority?
- Can the institution detect new forms of exclusion before they become normal?

# The Final Test

Ask one sentence across every layer:

> What would have to change so that dignity does not depend on permission?

That question is the shortest version of the pyramid.

It is also the most demanding.

# Notes and Sources

This book is an argument, not a neutral statistical report. The factual claims below are included to ground the argument and should be read with the usual care: registered cases are not the same thing as actual incidence, survey attitudes are not the same thing as behaviour, and national aggregates can hide large regional differences.

# Higher Education

The Ministry of Education's AISHE 2021-22 release reported that SC student enrolment in higher education rose from 46.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 66.23 lakh in 2021-22, an increase of 44 percent. The same release reported that the GER of SC students rose from 18.9 in 2014-15 to 25.9 in 2021-22.
Source: Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Education, AISHE 2021-2022 release.

# Crime and Atrocity Data

The text refers to public crime data showing 50,900 registered crimes/atrocities against Scheduled Castes in 2021 and 57,789 in 2023. These should be read as registered cases, not total prevalence. Changes in registered cases can reflect changes in violence, reporting, policing, public awareness, or some mixture of these.
Sources:

- Open Government Data Portal India: State/UT-wise Crime/Atrocities against Scheduled Caste(s) from 2021 to 2023
- National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2023

# Prisons and Caste Discrimination

In *Sukanya Shantha v. Union of India*, decided on October 3, 2024, the Supreme Court of India addressed caste-based discrimination in prisons, including caste-based division of labour, segregation, and treatment of denotified tribes through "habitual offender" classifications. The Court directed changes to prison manuals and related model prison frameworks.
Source: Supreme Court of India judgment, 2024 INSC 753.

## Inter-Caste Marriage Attitudes

Pew Research Center's 2021 report found that 64 percent of Indians said it was very important to stop women in their community from marrying into another caste, and 62 percent said it was very important to stop men from doing so.
Source: Pew Research Center, Attitudes about caste in India.

# Conceptual Sources

This book is written in conversation with B. R. Ambedkar's broader political project: the annihilation of caste, constitutional morality, social democracy, education as emancipation, and dignity as an institutional rather than merely personal question. The pyramid itself is a contemporary interpretive model, not a claim that Ambedkar drew such a pyramid. Useful starting points:

- B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*
- B. R. Ambedkar, speeches and writings on constitutional morality, social democracy, liberty, equality, and fraternity
- The Constitution of India, especially Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21