

Empowerment of Indian Women: An analysis of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Contribution

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Abstract

By using all his strength, courage and intelligence, Babasaheb Ambedkar done abundant of efforts in the field of Women empowerment in India. Exposed to the western ideas of humanism and rational thinking, he was appalled at the low status of women in Hindu Society. He not only worked hard at the grassroot levels to raise awareness about the degraded status of women in India but wrote extensively to counter the views on gender relations. According to him, women should be considered as women first and then a wife and a mother. Under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, the movement of women acquired its importance. He perceived education as a catalyst for the movement of self help and self respect of women. His speeches created awareness among women folk and inspired them to fight against the unjust and social evils like child marriage, sati pratha, devdasi system etc. Dr. Ambedkar awakened their minds, ignited their hearts and strengthened them as powerful human beings. He fought against the state and society to provide justice for women. He tried an adequate inclusion of women's right in the political vocabulary and constitution of India. He has given equal status to women as men by providing many provisions in the constitution. He was truly a fighter for women empowerment in India. The present paper tries to narrate the views and perceptions of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for women empowerment. The paper tends to analyze his efforts for women emancipation too.

Keywords: Ambedkar, Women empowerment, Gender, Social Justice, Indian Society etc.

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Introduction

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was hailed by various names as Baba Saheb, Architect of Indian constitution, messiah of the downtrodden, intellectual giant among giants, eminent jurist, distinguished educationist, erudite scholar, powerful debator, Buddhist activist, philosopher, anthropologist, historian, orator, writer, economist etc. but not many are aware of his commitment to the women's cause. He was the first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of women. Ambedkar has done many efforts for the empowerment of women in India. He believed that a woman is a part and parcel of human society; no one can neglect or deny it. In his Philosophy, women of India found a new identity. His words and deeds have inspired thousands of women in their struggle against injustice and inequality. He considered education as an important tool for the emancipation of women. In his words, "*Education is as necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress.*" Through education, he believed that women would think independently which will led to their intellectual and mental development.

Dr. Ambedkar was not against religion. He was against illegal inhuman acts done in the name of religion by the orthodox clergies. According to him, the root cause of sufferings for women in India are so-called religious books, especially in his view, a book like, 'Manusmriti' divides people into a stratified caste system and promotes inequality between men and women. Dr. Ambedkar believes that Gautam Buddha treated women with great respect and never tried to vitiate them like Manu did. He consider women like Vishakha, Amrapali, Gautami, Rani Mallika etc who approached Buddha for well being and are treated equal like men. It

was chiefly the Hindu culture and social customs, who stood in the path of women's empowerment.

Objective, Methods and Material

The present paper speaks about Ambedkar's views and perceptions regarding women empowerment. The paper also analyzes efforts done by Dr. Ambedkar for upliftment of women in India.

Secondary data have been collected from internet, Government documents, newspapers, published papers, books and speeches delivered by Dr. Ambedkar in Parliament, various conferences and meetings in pre and post independent India.

Meaning of Women Empowerment

Women Empowerment is an ongoing dynamic process which enhances women's abilities to change the structure and ideologies that keep them subordinate. It is a multidimensional process which enable women to realize their identity, position and power in all spheres of life. In very simple words, it means granting women the freedom to make life choices.

Ambedkar has been very vocal about the issues faced by women and the path towards their empowerment. He awakened in women the zeal to fight for social justice and their rights, through his speeches, thoughts and reforms. Throughout his life, he has worked for the empowerment of Indian women. His concern for women empowerment has been seen clearly from his speeches. Addressing the Second All India Depressed classes women conference held on 20th July, 1942 at Nagpur, he said, *"I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."*

Ambedkar and Women Empowerment: Analysis and Discussion

Dr. Ambedkar worked tirelessly throughout his life to challenge the authority of orthodox Hindu social order that upheld unjust gender relation in an institutionalized manner. Being a pioneer of social justice, he always functioned for women empowerment. He started his movement in 1920. He asserted that, *"We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is persuaded side by side with female education."* He raised his voice against Hindu social order and social system through the renowned journals 'Mook Nayak' in 1920 and 'Bahiskrit Bharat' in 1927. Through these journals, Ambedkar spoke on gender equality, women education and depressed classes.

In the years 1924, he started 'Bahiskrit Hitkarni Sabha' whose motto is 'to educate, agitate and organize'. In the year 1925, he established 'Bahiskrit Shikshan Pradesh Mandal' and installed five hostels in relation to it.

Addressing a meeting of about 3000 women, Ambedkar said, *"Let every girl who marries stand by her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave. I am sure if you follow this advice, you will bring honor and glory to yourselves."* These words of Babasaheb act magically and lit a spark in the heart of Indian women in their fight of gender equality.

A great satyagraha was done in 1930 in Nasik for 'Kalaram Mandir Pravesh' wherein more than five hundred women participated in it only after getting inspired by Baba Sahed's speech.

The encouragement of Dr. Ambedkar to empower women to speak boldly was seen when 'Radhabai Vadale' addressed a press conference in 1931, where she said, *"it is better to die a hundred times than live a life full of humiliation. We will sacrifice our lives but we will win our rights."* The credit for this firm determination goes to none other than Ambedkar.

The thoughts of Ambedkar inspired many women to express their feelings and dare to oppose all evil practices in society like sati pratha, child marriage, devdasi system etc. Best example of it was a lady 'Tulsibai Bansode', who started her own newspaper "Chokhamela" through which she gave voice to many females to express their problems. In a rigid Patriarchal social setup of India, Ambedkar's motivational speeches had created a sense of self even in illiterate females. He evoked women in following words, *"Never wear such clothes which will degrade your personality and character. Avoid wearing the jewellery on your body everywhere. It is not fare to make hole on nose and wear nath."*

Inspired by the thoughts of Ambedkar for women empowerment, a person named 'David' in Kamathipura, who was working in brothel left his profession, such an orator Ambedkar, was.

Ambedkar also gave an ear to the voice of dalit women, who are triply exploited in the patriarchal caste hegemonic Hindu society. He raise awareness among dalit women by such words as, *"Learn to live in cleanliness, stay away from all bad habits and vices. Give education to your children; create a sense of ambition in them. Instill in their minds, the feelings that they will become great. Do not press them to marry until they have attained the capacity to bear the responsibility that comes with marriage. Those who marry should remember that it is wrong to produce many children. Even if no facilities are available to you, mother and father have a responsibility to keep their children in good condition. If you behave according to this advice, you will lift up not only yourselves but dalit society as well, and increase respect for yourselves and for the community."*

Ambedkar concern was not limited to Hindu women only. He opposed purdah system in muslim women because according to him purdah system has deteriorating effects upon the physical constitution of muslim women, thereby depriving her of a healthy social life. He also criticized the denial of rights to muslim women for divorce. *Looking at the sad plight of Indian muslim women, he said, "No muslim girl has the courage to repudiate her marriage, although it may be open to her on the ground that she was a child and that it was brought about by persons other than her parents. No muslim wife will think it proper to have a clause entered into her marriage contract reserving her right to divorce. In that even her fate is, 'once married always married'. She cannot escape the marriage-tie however irksome it may be while she*

cannot repudiate her marriage, the husband can always do it without having to show any cause."

Ambedkar approach to women's right is different from other social reformers like Raja Mohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi, who tried to reform the outdated customs and practices of Hindu system without questioning the hierarchal social order. Ambedkar made his own view for women rights because his goal was to make a society based on social justice. To secure this goal, Ambedkar has given equal status to women on par with men by providing many provisions in the Indian constitution:

Right to Equality (Art. 14 to Art.18)

Right to Liberty (Art. 19 to Art.22)

Right against Exploitation (Art. 23 to Art.24)

Right to Religion (Art. 25 to Art.28)

Cultural and Educational Rights of Minorities (Art.29 and Art. 30)

Right to constitutional Remedies (Art. 32)

Provisions are made for Indian women in the Directive Principles of the state policy (Art. 36 to Art. 51). Provision for free and compulsory education was made up to the age of 14. Also, Article 243D(3), 243T(3) and 243R(3) provides for allocation of seats in the Panchayati Raj system.

To legalize monogamous marriages, to provide property and adoption rights to women and thus to empower women and to put them in equal level to men, Ambedkar prepared a bill called, 'The Hind Code Bill'. The bill was presented in the parliament on 5th February, 1951, but it could not be passed due to severe opposition. Ambedkar felt very bad and he resigned from the post of first law minister of India. In his letter of resignation dated 27th September, 1951 to Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, he wrote, *"For a long time, I have been thinking of resigning my seat from the cabinet. The only thing that had held me back from giving effect to my intention was the hope that it would be possible to give effect to the Hindu code bill before the life of present parliament came to an end. I even agreed to break up the bill and restricted it to marriage and divorce in the fond hope that atleast this much of our labour may bear fruit. But even that part of bill had been killed. I see no purpose in my continuing to be a member of your cabinet."*

Although the Hindu Code Bill could not be passed during Ambedkar's Law Ministry, it was later split into four bills and the same were put on the statue book by parliament as:

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955;

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1956;

The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act; 1956 and

The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956.

Many Indian women are unaware of the contribution of innovative Dr. Ambedkar's chief role for the 'Maternity Benefit Bill Act'. Infact, due to his efforts, the first maternity Benefit Act was passed by Bombay Legislative in 1929. Later, all the acts of Maternity Benefits for various states were repealed and common Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 was adopted by the Central Government of India for all the states.

Before independence, right to vote was given to the selected people only such as rich landlords and tax payers. Some people may claim Montagu-chelmsford reforms granted votes to women but it was only for the selective women and not for all people. It is because of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's efforts Indian people got the right to vote without any bias of gender, caste, class, literacy or religion. He was the first in India who enunciated for the 'Universal Adult Franchise' before 'Simon Commission' for all Indians without any discrimination in gender, caste, class, literacy and religion.

Dr. Ambedkar thus, laid the grounds of upliftment of Indian women and due to his efforts only, women are now holding top position in all fields including medical, engineering, airforce, navy, administration, police, politics etc.

Conclusion

Women constitute about half of our country's population. They have been the sufferers of violence and mistreatment by the male dominated society. Our society is custom bound society, where women have been socially, economically, physically, psychologically and sexually exploited from times age-old, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes on the basis of the writing in the scripture and sometimes by the social authorization. So, it is our duty to maintain the pace of revolution which was started by Bharat Ratan Dr. Ambedkar for the empowerment of women because Ambedkar is relevant even today in the age of liberalization, Privatization and Globalization.

Dr. Ambedkar's three word formula 'to educate, agitate and organize', is a powerful tool of social change even today. His ideas about rights and development of women are still valid in the present scenario not only in India, but in global context too. With the advent of information, education has become a forceful instrument to empower the women in our country. At present, Indian Women have crossed many barriers and progressed a lot in various parts of their lives and are marching shoulder to shoulder to their male counter parts but they still are victims of various social evils as kidnapping, violence, crime, humiliation, dowry, acid attacks, eve-teasing, rape and honour killing. A beginning has certainly been made but it will take decades for these imbalances to be rectified. Dr. Ambedkar's dream of society based on gender equality is yet to be realized and therefore his thoughts and perspectives are important for the social reconstruction that favours women empowerment.

Keeping in mind the importance of Ambedkar's views towards Indian Society, first Prime Minister of free Indian, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru said, *"Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of Hindu Society"*. No doubt, Ambedkar was a Path-maker of all the women irrespective of religion, caste, creed, gender etc. He has paved the path of social justice for women and brought a movement for betterment of women through his thoughts and beliefs. Indeed, he was a modern Manu, whose ideas and perceptions are relevant in today's modern society also. To conclude, I would

only say that Ambedkar was truly a saviour of Indian women who successfully singly tried to break the untouched wall of social customs in the way of empowerment of women in India.

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