

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Quest for Gender Equality It's Relevance in Contemporary Feminist Discourse

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Abstract

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar not only championed the cause of social justice for the downtrodden and underprivileged sections of Indian society but also worked tirelessly throughout his life to challenge the legitimacy of orthodox Hindu social order that upheld iniquitous gender relations in an institutionalized manner. His mission in life was to reconstruct Hindu society along the modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. The paper analyzes the contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a thinker and social reformer in the emancipation of social status of women in the Hindu society. The paper also analyzes the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary feminist discourse on gender equality under Indian social conditions. His main argument is that gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to conform to a stereotype feminine behavior.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Inequality, Gender, Hindu social order, Dharmashastra.

Introduction

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of Indian Constitution may be regarded as one of the greatest intellectual and social reformers of modern India for his pioneering contribution in reforming Hindu social order. He not only struggled throughout his life for the emancipation of social status of the underprivileged and women in the Indian society, he is one amongst the few Indian social and political thinkers, who has done original thinking on the Hindu social order and the status of women within the Hindu society. Exposed to the Western ideas of humanism and rational thinking, Dr. Ambedkar was appalled at the low status of women in the Hindu society. He not only worked hard at the grassroots level to raise awareness about the degraded status of women in India but also wrote extensively to counter the views on gender relations sanctioned by *Shastras* and upheld by tradition.

Through his writings, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar unravels the inequality and injustice inherent in Hindu social order that perpetuates inequality and subordination of women in a systemic manner. In his treatises, "**The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women**", "**The Women and Counter Revolution**", "**The Riddle of Women**", and "**Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development**", Dr. Ambedkar has analyzed the manner in which gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to conform to a stereotype feminine behavior. He worked hard to challenge the iniquitous gender relations under the Hindu social order so that Hindu society could be reconstructed along the modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The paper analyzes the contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a social and political thinker at the ideological level and as an activist –cum –social reformer at the grassroots level in raising awareness about gender inequality inherent in the Hindu social order characterized by caste, patriarchy and endogamy and challenging the legitimacy of established social order. The paper also analyzes the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary feminist discourse on gender equality under Indian social conditions.

Literary Contribution

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar studied extensively the Hindu *Shastras* and *Smritis* to find out the root cause of degraded status of women in India. In his article, “**The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman**”,¹ he made a historical study of the women’s status in ancient India and the factors that led to a decline in their status in later years. He points out that during the pre-Manu days women occupied a very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country. That a woman was entitled to *upanayan*² is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From the *Shrauta Shrutras*,³ it is clear that women could repeat the Mantras of the Vedas. Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* bears testimony to the fact that women attended *Gurukul* (College) and studied the various *Shakhas* (sections) of the Vedas. Similarly, Patanjali’s *MahaBhasya* shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. Women also entered into public discussion with men on various subjects like religion, philosophy and metaphysics. The stories of public disputation between Janak and Sulabha, Yajnavalkya and Gargi, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and Sankracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu days could attain the highest pinnacle of learning and education.

In the articles, “**The Woman and Counter Revolution**” and “**The Riddle of Women**”,⁵ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar asserts that women in pre-Manu days were highly respected cannot be disputed. In the days of Kautilya, marriages were post puberty is clear from *Baudhayana Grihya Sutras*⁶ where an expiatory ceremony is specially prescribed in the case of a bride passing her menses on the occasion of her marriage. Unlike Manu, Kautilya’s idea of marriage is monogamy and women could also claim divorce on the ground of mutual enmity and hatred. Further, there was no ban on woman or a widow remarrying. Economic independence was guaranteed to married women during days of Kautilya is clear from the various provisions in *Arthashastra* relating to wife’s endowment and maintenance. Dr. Ambedkar holds that there was a down fall in the status of women in India due to severe restrictions imposed on them by Manu.

In his paper presented for the anthropology seminar of Dr. A. A. Goldenweiser at Columbia University, USA in May 1916 on, “**Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development**”,⁷ Dr. B. R. Ambedkar unravels the genesis, mechanism and spread of caste system in India and its consequences for gender relations on the Hindu society. His main thesis is as follows: “Caste in India means an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.-----Thus, the conclusion is inevitable that endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. -----The superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste.-----A caste is an enclosed class”. In other words, caste system was created by preventing inter-marriage between different classes. The resulting disparity between marriageable

units of the two sexes within a caste group (as a consequence of artificial parceling of the Hindu society) was resolved by observance of certain highly obnoxious/ inhuman customs, namely, *Sati* or burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, enforced widowhood and child marriage. This consequently led to decline in the social status of women in the Hindu society. In other words, Dr.Ambedkar viewed caste system and the customary practices associated with it as largely responsible for the degradation of women in contemporary Indian society.

Manusmriti and Gender Discrimination

The women in Pre-Manu days enjoyed respectable status in the Hindu society. Women were free and enjoyed equal status along with men in matters of education, divorce, remarriage and economic independence. The deterioration in status of women in the society began with the imposition of severe restrictions on them under the influence of Manusmriti. Manu held a very low opinion about women. According to Manusmriti, women are not to be trusted for it is in their nature to seduce men. Men are forbidden to sit in a lonely place even with one's mother, sister or daughter. Women are not to be free under any circumstances, day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families; her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Though devoid of virtues, yet a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. Manu did not give right to divorce to women under any circumstance while allowing man to give up his wife at the same time. Indeed man was allowed to abandon and even sell his wife. Even after repudiation by her husband, she was not released from her husband and could not become legitimate wife of another. A wife could be subjected to corporal punishment by her husband reducing her status to that of a slave. Like *Shudras*, a woman was forbidden by Manu to study Vedas. Offering sacrifices, the very soul of religion, was forbidden to be performed by women. In matters of property, a wife was reduced to the level of a slave as she was not allowed to have any dominion over property.⁸ Thus, under the influence of Dharamshastras (*Manusmriti*), women was held in bondage lifelong and were deprived of basic human rights like right to education, right to property and right to study religious scripture. Dr.Ambedkar points out that *Shastras*, Caste and Endogamy – the three important pillars of patriarchy in Hindu society –were responsible for discriminatory practice against women and their degradation in social status.

Struggle towards Gender Equality

Dr.B. R. Ambedkar's approach to women's empowerment is entirely different from other social reformers like Mahatma JyotibaPhule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi who tried to reform the Hindu society of certain outdated customs and practices without questioning the hierarchical social order. His approach also differed from Bhakti movement which preached brotherhood without attacking the iniquitous Hindu social order that was based on graded system of caste hierarchy.

Dr.B. R.Ambedkar's mission in life was to challenge the ideological foundations of graded system of caste hierarchy that denied equality, freedom and human dignity to women in Hindu society. He believed that society should be based on reason and not on atrocious tradition of caste system. Therefore, in order to reconstruct Hindu society

along modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, he suggests in “**The Annihilation of Caste System**”⁹ that Hindu minds should be purged from the thralldom of the *Shastras*. To quote him, “Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the *Shastras*, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the *Shastras* and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry without your telling him or her to do so”. He found education, inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning as methods by which caste and patriarchy maintained through endogamy can be eliminated.

Dr.B. R.Ambedkar began to voice his concern about the low status of women’s in Indian society while he was still studying in Columbia University. He perceived education as a catalyst for accelerated change. He began to raise his voice for the liberation of women through his newspapers *MookNayak* launched in 1920 and *BahishkritBharat* in 1927. Through his writings in these newspapers, he raised the issue of gender inequality prevalent in Hindu society and the need of women’s education to raise their social status. He involved women in his social reform movements against social evils and demanded socio-economic and political rights for the depressed classes and women. In Mar 1927, Dr. Ambedkar launched Mahad Satyagraha to assert the right of untouchables to take water from Chawdar Tank at Mahad. Accompanied by thousands of men and women in this historic march, Dr. Ambedkar remarked that the movement is to liberate society from out worn traditions and evil customs imposed ruthlessly and upheld religiously by a vast society upon its weaker and helpless constituent and to restore human rights and dignity to them.¹⁰

On December 25, 1927 at a Conference of Depressed Classes held at Mahad, Dr.B. R.Ambedkar made a bonfire of Manusmriti in presence of more than fifty women to protest against the discrimination of women and untouchables upheld by it. At the end of the Conference, Dr. Ambedkar also addressed a meeting of about three thousand women of the Depressed Classes, the first meeting of its kind in modern India and urged them to dress well and live a clean life. Do not feed your spouse and sons if they are drunk. Send your children to schools. Education is necessary for females as it is for males.¹¹ Speaking on the burning of *Manusmriti* later in 1938, he said, “The bonfire of *Manusmriti* was quite intentional. It was a very cautious and drastic step but was taken with a view to forcing the attention of Caste Hindus. ----- We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries-----”.¹²

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar championed the cause of women within the Legislative Council as well. As a member of Bombay Legislative Council, he raised the problems of Indian women in the discussion within the Council and sought their solutions. His arguments on the Maternity Benefit Bill and on Birth Control were quite relevant to recognize the dignity of women. Supporting the Maternity Benefit Bill for women labourers in his speech, he said:

It is in the interest of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the pre –natal period and also subsequently and the principle of the Bill is based entirely on that principle----

That being so Sir, I am bound to admit that the burden of this ought to be largely borne by the government. I am prepared to admit this fact because the conservation of the people’s welfare is primarily the concern of the government. And in every country, you will find that the government has been subjected to ascertain amount of charge with regard to maternity benefit.¹³

In January 1928, a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife as its president. Along with the Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur in August 1930, women also had their separate conference. In the famous Kalaram temple entry movement at Nasik launched in March 1930, about five hundred women participated in the non-violent Satyagraha and many of them were arrested along with men and ill-treated in jails. To face tortures along with their men, women also organized their *Samata Sainik Dal*. When Dr. Ambedkar returned to India after attending the Round Table Conference in 1932, hundreds of women were present for the committee meetings. At various places, depressed classes women's conferences were held and they began to present their demands assertively. The encouragement by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar empowered women to speak out boldly their feelings. In a press conference held in 1931, Radhabai Vadale said, "we should get the right to enter the Hindu temples, to fill water at their water sources. We call these social rights. We should also get the political right to rule, sitting near the seat of the Viceroy. We do not care even if we are given a severe sentence. We will fill all the jails in the country. Why should we be scared of lathi-charge or firing? On the battlefield does a warrior care for his life? 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".¹⁴ The credit for this self-respect and firm determination of women goes to Dr. Ambedkar.

In his address at the Depressed Classes Women's Conference held at Nagpur on July 20, 1942 under the presidentship of Mrs. Sulochanabai Dongre in which 25000 women attended, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, "I am a great believer in women's organizations. I know what they can do to improve the condition of society if they are convinced. In the eradication of social evils they have rendered great services".¹⁵ He also underlined that women should learn to be clean and keep themselves away from vices. They should educate their children and instill high ambition in them. Speaking on marriage and parental responsibilities, he advised women to get married only when they are financially able. They should stand by their husband as a friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. He reminded them that having too many children is a crime. The paternal duty lies in giving each child a better start than its parents had. He concluded his address, "I am sure if you follow this advice, you will bring honour and glory to yourselves".¹⁶

The extent of awakening achieved among the women of down-trodden classes was visible from the fact that the Women's Conference demanded abolition of polygamy and urged institutions of pensions and leave with pay for women workers. Addressing the *Samata Sainik Dal* Conference, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar observed that he had love for the principle of non-violence but he differentiated non-violence from abject surrender. He told the volunteers that it did not befit a man to live a life of surrender, servitude and helplessness. He declared that he believed with the saint Tukaram that destruction of the wicked was also a form of non-violence.¹⁷

As the first Law Minister of independent India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar introduced Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament in February 5, 1951 so as to codify Hindu laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance that sought to give equal rights to women vis-à-vis men in these aspects. However, the bill was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindu opinion on the ground that it would lead to break-up of Hindu social order (patriarchy) if the bill was passed in that form.¹⁸ The government lacked political will to pilot the bill through Parliament and decided to withdraw it. To register his protest against government inaction, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar resigned from the Union Cabinet.

Relevance of His Ideas

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar was a great champion of gender equality is clear from his various writings on Hindu social order. In order to find out the root cause of degraded status of women in Hindu society, he studied *Shastras*, *Smritis*, Buddhist literature, Kautilya's *Arthshastra* and so on. Through his critical appraisal of these historical and religious texts, Dr.Ambedkar clearly establishes the fact that while women in Pre-Manu days enjoyed equal social status vis-à-vis men and even were economically independent, their status declined in the post-Manu period under the influence of *Manusmriti*. That is to say, the social institutions of caste and endogamy upheld by *Manusmriti* were largely responsible for decline in the social status of women in the Hindu society.

The inseparability of caste and gender inequality in the conceptualization of Hindu social order by Dr. B. R.Ambedkar is an important theoretical input in understanding the hurdles to empowerment of women in the Indian social milieu and needs to be taken note of by the Indian feminists. In other words, any feminist discourse/agenda for the empowerment of Indian women must take into account the realities of Shastras (*Manusmriti*), Caste and Endogamy –the three important pillars of Hindu social order –that moulds Hindu minds and deny equal social status to women in matters of entitlement of rights, property, and inheritance.

Dr. B. R.Ambedkar not only wrote extensively to counter the orthodox Hindu opinion against women but worked as an activist and social reformer at the grass roots level to organize and empower women of depressed classes so that they could fight to reclaim their social rights such as right to drink water from their source and right to enter temple that were traditionally denied to them by the caste Hindus. It was due to the encouragement by Dr.Ambedkar that a large number of women came out openly on the public streets to reclaim their social rights and self-respect.

As a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar was in the forefront in championing the cause of women's empowerment by forcefully arguing for the passage of Maternity Benefit Bill. As the Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr.Ambedkar made a pioneering contribution in introducing Articles 14,15,16, 39,42 in the Indian Constitution that guarantee protection to women from any kind of discrimination. As the Law Minister in the Union Cabinet, Dr.Ambedkar made every effort for the passage of Hindu Code Bill despite staunch opposition from vested interests. This shows the great importance he attached to the cause of gender equality in India.

While Dr.B. R.Ambedkar has made a notable contribution towards the emancipation of Indian women through his rich and illuminating interpretations of Hindu social order (based on graded system of Caste hierarchy and gender inequality), the contemporary feminist discourse in India has largely ignored this rich classic literature. However, it needs to be realized that any feminist discourse on gender equality in India in isolation of social institution of caste would be a futile exercise as women as a category undifferentiated by caste does not exist for feminists to mobilize. Unless this social reality dawns on Indian feminists, they would be devoid of any concrete agenda that truly empowers common women. There is, therefore, a need for Indian feminists to turn to Dr. B. R.Ambedkar to understand the complex matrix of caste and gender so as to build a counter narrative that challenges the

hegemony of patriarchal Hindu social order which reproduces gender inequality and violence in a systematic manner.

Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar can be regarded as one of the greatest intellectual and social reformer of modern India who struggled throughout his life for the liberation of Indian women (particularly from depressed classes) from the lifelong bondage and slavery under the weight of Hindu social institutions. By conceptualizing caste and gender inequality as inseparable constituents of Hindu social order, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar laid the foundations for gradual transformation of Indian social consciousness and gender justice in India.

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- ². The *upnayan* is regarded as one among twelve *samskaras* prescribed in the *Dharamshastras*. It is regarded as a second or spiritual birth and a person thus initiated is known as *dvija* or twice-born.
- ³. *Shrauta Shutra* refer to Brahmanic Vedic ritual manuals. *Shrauta* derives from *shruti* which means revealed texts, passed on orally. It belongs to the early late – Vedic period and pre-date the *Smritis*.
- ⁴. Patanjali was a Sanskrit grammarian (of second century CE).
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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.352-353.

¹⁸. *ibid.* p. 426.
