



Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR: VISION TOWARDS WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, popularly known as Father of the Indian Constitution, was one of the most outstanding intellectuals of the 20th century in India. He was a versatile personality who has played a role of statesman, national leader, economist, social reformer, revolutionary, profound scholar and emancipator of depressed classes. He was a lighthouse for the millions of oppressed, exploited and down-trodden people and was recognized as Masiha of untouchables. Along with that he had raised voice against the miserable plight of women in society at that time. His exposure to western education has influenced his perception on women rights. He had held Manu and Hindu social order responsible for the agony of women. He firmly worked for elevating the status of women. Other than launching various social movements in society, he introduced Hindu Code Bill in the parliament. He played a decisive role in creating awareness among women at national level and inspired them to fight for their rights and against unfair social practices in the society. He was a symbol of rebellion against repressive features of Hinduism and demanded social reconstruction. In this article, an attempt is made to highlight the root cause of miserable plight of women in Indian Society, various reformative initiatives taken by Dr. Ambedkar for elevating their position and relevance of his contribution in contemporary times.

Key words: Dr. Ambedkar, Women, Empowerment, Untouchability, Society, Manu smriti, Hinduism, Hindu Code Bill

Introduction

B.R. Ambedkar generally referred to as Masiha of untouchables or father of Indian Constitution, was a multi-faceted personality. He was a notable jurist, statesman, daring national leader, economist, social reformer, profound scholar, journalist and an intellectual revolutionary. He was a lighthouse for millions of downtrodden and disadvantageous people of the society. But another important role played by him, to whom not many

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people are familiar with, is his tireless efforts to raise the status of women by challenging the orthodox Hindu social order and advocacy of their rights. He fought tooth and nail to secure social rights and economic liberation for suppressed Indian women. He acted as a ray of hope for the underprivileged and oppressed section of the society and challenged the legitimacy of orthodox Hindu social setup in which women were granted inferior status to men. He fought hard to safeguard the dignity and superiority enjoyed by women in ancient times. He did an in-depth analysis of the Hindu shastras and Smritis to know the root causes of degradation of women's status in Indian society.

Reasons Responsible for Inferior Status of Women in Indian Social order

Women enjoyed a special status in matriarchal societies in Pre-Vedic Period. They were given complete freedom, rights and were self-dependent. Even in Ancient India, they enjoyed prestigious position in the society. But gradually, with the advent of Aryan or Vedic Culture, the matriarchy got replaced with patriarchy and position of women started degrading. But they still enjoyed significant position in religious ceremonies and were given rights to annul marriage or remarry. Their position got deteriorated in the later Vedic Period because of the practice of gender differentiation. They were just seen as objects and were given animal like treatment. They were devoid of basic human rights. Hindu Shastras do not place them at par with their male counterparts and were not given socio-economic rights. On the other hand, dalit women had to face the brunt of caste, class and gender which makes them socially neglected section of the society.

The position of women further deteriorated with the imposition of stringent rules of Manusmriti, a legal text or Dharmashastra of Hinduism. It is considered as the First Constitution of Aryavarta created by law giver, Maharishi Manu. It describes social system of the Aryans. Instead of their eradication, Manusmitri has codified social evils as social ethos. It has categorized all women as "Shudras". The traditional Hindu Code-book, Manusmitri, has granted women the lowest rank of humanity and treated her at par with animals. Under the influence of this Law Book, Hinduism had made women to face various deprivations such as denial of autonomy, right to education, property, divorce, remarriage, etc. Manu has accorded dependence of women on men throughout different phases of her life. Her father protects her in childhood, husband in youth and son in her old age. She was not seen as fit for independence. Projected as unclean, women were not allowed to recite Veda Mantras. Even killing of women is justified as minor offence and is equated with killing of an animal in the Law Book. Not only this, dalit Women suffered unthinkable exploitation and servility for being shudra. Hinduism had incorporated terrible laws of Manusmitri because these were in furtherance to the interests of upper caste Hindus (Mandal, 80-81).

Ambedkar held Manu and Manusmitri responsible for defamatory and disgraceful position of women in Indian society. He affirmed that laws stated by Manu and perpetuated by Hindu Personal laws had molded the attitude and perspective of Hindus towards women. Manu through his laws had treated women as mere objects for satisfying sexual desires of men and favored child marriage. The upper caste Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas can sexually exploit any lower caste women.

Dr. Ambedkar cited evidences of women enjoying equal status to their male counterparts in pre-Manu period. They were given educational rights and can reach the peak of learning and intellect. They were free to express their thoughts on important issues related to religion, philosophy etc. With invasion of Muslims in India, malpractices such as veil system, polygamy and talak had further worsened the plight of women (Datta, 26). Dr Ambedkar has posed faith in Buddhism, as it fosters equality, education and self-respect of women. Buddhist values allow them liberty to realize their spiritual potentialities and dignity in society (Das, 191).

Ambedkar was defender of women's rights and empowerment. He was deeply concerned with the subservient and unrespectable position of women and wanted to change the discriminatory and inequitable social order. He worked hard to establish just society by empowering women. Born in poor dalit family, he himself was victim of oppression and discrimination and this strengthened his strategies to deal with the challenges and contradictions in a more pragmatic manner.

Various Reforms and Initiatives undertaken by Dr. Ambedkar

The British rule ushered as a ray of hope for Indian women. Educated and enlightened social reformers contributed in liberating the Indian society from the shackles of patriarchy. Swami Vivekananda and Raja Ram Mohan Roy worked hard to abolish the Sati Pratha and favoured widow remarriage. Jyotiba Phule and Mahatma Gandhi had also stood for women's rights.

Ambedkar raised his voice for the cause of women's rights through his fortnightly journals 'Mook Nayak' in 1920 and 'Bahishkrit Bharat' in 1927. Through this platform he made efforts to achieve gender equality, women education and exposed the problems faced by downtrodden section of society and especially women (Devi, 1440). He led various movements and politically organizes women under the All-India Depressed Classes Mahila Federation. He launched Mahad Satyagraha (1927), Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha (1930) and formed Women's Association in Bombay in 1928 to fight for their social rights (Singariya, 2). He wanted women to discard traditional customs, creepy rituals and superstitions and embrace modern and progressive outlook. He considered education as an important weapon to liberate women from the clutches of discriminatory practices and bondages of traditional Indian society. It can boost their confidence and gave them courage to oppose the humiliation and restrictions imposed on them. For empowering women right to education, right to work and favourable working conditions, right to social security, fulfilment of basic requirements including food, clothing and shelter are essential prerequisites. He was in favour of free and compulsory primary education and emphasised technical education for improving the economic conditions of the socially excluded poor section of the society. While giving due consideration to the socio-economic disparities in personal, economic, political and social spheres of life pointed out by Dr Ambedkar, the government of India had announced the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women in 2001 with an objective to create positive environment for fullest development of women and strengthening legal system (Datta, 30 and Shukla).

Inspired by Ambedkar's thought, 500 women got themselves arrested during their Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha. Radhabhai Vadale raised her voice in favour of women's rights and for ending all sorts of

exploitation. In 1924, he strongly advocated family planning and introduced Maternity Benefit Bill in Bombay Legislative Council. It was due to his efforts that the central government passed a Mines Maternity Benefit Act which ensured equal pay and equal rights for mine workers (Datta, 27). He was the first to stand against the unequal treatment of women at their workplaces. He raised the issue for improvement in their working conditions and reduction in working hours.

Manusamriti was considered as a controversial text as it promoted injustice in the society. It stripped away fundamental rights of dalits and women who were considered as inferior and were assigned duty to serve the upper castes. Dr Ambedkar was supporter of equal rights and stood vehemently against the text (Saxena). He was appointed chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee and first Law minister of independent India. He left no stone unturned in putting the Indian society on track of equality, liberty, dignity and fraternity. He inducted several provisions aimed at protection of civil rights and welfare of Indian women. One of his important contributions in this regard was introduction of the Hindu Code Bill in the parliament. The bill was the brain child of two charismatic personalities, namely, Dr. Ambedkar and Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru. It was an attempt to uplift the entire nation, including women by codifying the Hindu Personal Law. It focused on repairing the dilapidated parts of Hindu system by removing all sorts of disparities and inequalities and upgrading the position of women in the society (Datta, 28). The bill was introduced in the legislature in 1947. The main provisions of the Act (i) daughters should be given share of inheritance at par with sons after the demise of parents (ii) women should be granted absolute property right (iii) legal status to monogamy (iv) inter-caste marriage would be permissible (v) law of maintenance, divorce, adoption, minority and guardianship (Kumar, 217). The bill got the support of Jawahar Lal Nehru but faced strong opposition from the orthodox supporters of Hindutva, RSS and Hindu Mahasabha who consider it derogatory to Dharam shastra. Nehru's cabinet approved the bill but it faced strenuous resistance in the parliament from eminent personalities such as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Pt. M. Mohan Malviya, Syama Prasad Mukherjee, Sarojini Naidu and many more. Dr. Rajendra Prasad has threatened the parliament to withhold his assent as President even if it was passed by it. As a result, bill was dropped. In reaction to this, Dr. Ambedkar expressed his discontent by resigning from the cabinet (Babare, 25).

Later, four articles of the Hindu Code Bill got assent of the parliament and became laws. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 gave right to divorce and maintenance; the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 ensured legal rights to inherit property; the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956 guaranteed women legal right to adopt a child and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956 approved women's status of natural guardian of her children. These enactments have endowed women with the right to property, succession and adoption. These acts further facilitated the enactment of Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and Equal Remuneration Act 1976. The Hindu Marriage Act proved to be a boon for Indian Women. It replaced the prevalent system of polygamy with monogamy and provided relief to wife under section 18 of Act in the form of maintenance from husband after divorce. The Hindu Succession Act gave rights to women in matter of possessing and disposing her property. The Hindu Minority Guardianship Act granted the custody of minor below 5 years of age to mother. The custody of illegitimate child will remain with mother. The mother is empowered to appoint new

guardian of her child. The Adoption and Maintenance Act gave right to women to decide about the adoption of child (Datta, 29). It is only because of the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar that our legislative can be kept at par with legislative systems of western nations.

Being main architect of the Indian constitution, he played an active role in incorporation of various provisions ensuring equal status to both men and women. Article 14 guarantees Equal rights and Opportunities. Article 15 prohibits sexual discrimination. Article 15(3) affirms positive discrimination in favour of women. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity. Article 39 provides for equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 secures humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 51A imposes fundamental duty to get rid of practices derogatory to women's dignity. Article 243D (3), 243 T (3), 243 R (4) provides for reservation for women in panchayats and municipalities (Devi, 1445).

Through his writings- *The Riddle of Women*; *The Women and the Counter Revolution*; *The Rise and fall of the Hindu Women*, he portrays the status of women in Indian society and tried to mould the attitude and perspective of people towards women. He made historical study of factors that led to decline in dignity of women. He expressed his dissatisfaction against the discriminatory social order that granted submissive status to women and taught her to remain subservient to male domination on the pretext of religion and customs. His personal experience has helped him to comprehend that caste-gender nexus solely responsible for all types of exploitation in the society. He asserted that for annihilation of caste, elimination of gender discrimination is the foremost requirement. In another literary work entitled 'Caste in India: their mechanism, genesis and development' he highlighted the social evils prevalent in Hindu as well Muslim societies (Datta, 26). He depicted the brutality meted out to women in way of childhood marriage, endogamy, sati and enforced widowhood. He expressed his discontent over purdah system in Muslim society.

Relevance of Ambedkar's Contribution

Ambedkar was hardcore supporter of women's dignity and rights. He wanted to rebuild the Hindu society on the basis of liberty and equality. Being a chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution and the first Law minister of independent India, he was ardent to liberate women from the 'age old slavery by introducing reforms in the social order created under the influence of Manusmitri. His role as a scholar and social reformer went a long way in empowering women and ensuring them respectable position in society. He pointed out the various hindrances that causes hurdle in realisation of India's prosperity in general and of women in particular. He laid down the ground for social justice by enumerating various laws in the constitution of India. Having himself tolerated the brunt of untouchability, he passionately worked hard for elevating the status of backward communities, depressed classes and women.

As the main architect he played a decisive role in incorporating certain measures aimed at the welfare of women. He framed various laws- Women Labour Protection Act, Women Labour Welfare Fund, Restoration of Ban on Women working underground Mines, Voting Rights for Women, Adoption Law, right over Paternal Property, Marriage after 18 years of age, Maintenance Allowances after legal separation, Maternity Benefit for Women Labour Bill- for granting rights to Indian women. The National Policy for the Empowerment of

Women, 2001, held social and economic structure of the society responsible for gender inequality, as visualized by Ambedkar long ago (Shukla).

Though certain degree of progress has been achieved by the society in elevating the status of women and providing them rights but they are still the victims of various social evils such as domestic violence, dowry, acid attacks, eve teasing, kidnapping, rape, crime, honour killing etc. Lot more needs to be done at national level for raising the status of women at par with men. It will take decades to rectify the imbalances created by inequality and discriminatory attitude of the upper classes. According the latest data, nearly 46 percent of the women are illiterate in India. The society which Ambedkar has dreamed of is yet to be established even after 74 years of adoption of our constitution. Although the constitution has provided for various rights to women but there has been dearth of adequate awareness about the rights granted to them (Datta, 30). Only constitutional reforms are not sufficient for emancipating and strengthening women but change in the mind setup and attitude of the people is required to cherish the goals of Dr. Ambedkar. The joint efforts on part of both women themselves and government can remove the hurdles in the way of their development.

Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar always stood against the oppressive social customs of Hindu society and expressed his dissatisfaction over the plight of women. He tried hard to restore the dignity and status of Indian women by framing laws on marriage, divorce, adoption, succession of property etc. His vision of society established on the lines of equality of both men and women is yet to be realized. We should give due consideration to the capabilities and competence of women rather than their gender. Socio-economic reconstruction of the society can only be restored by giving women their due share in every sphere of life. Ambedkar has always dreamt of building a modern and technologically advanced nation. At last, his words “I measure the progress of the community by the degree of progress which women have achieved” are enough for giving direction to the society.

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