



THE NOTION OF WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN THE VISION OF AMBEDKAR

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of Ambedkar's social and political vision, during the pre independence period and thereafter, gives an opportunity to imbibe the novel concepts of humanity and social justice. More precisely, his whole life was a constant struggle against injustice in society. His socio-political vision was based on three fundamental principles viz., Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. His study of social facts enriched his socio-political philosophy. He believed that the root cause of injustice prevailing in India was caste hierarchy and the sense of ignorance towards the weaker sections of society including untouchables and women. He admitted that the caste system, in the hands of the orthodox individuals, has been an authoritative weapon to persecute the socio-political reforms and none of these reform movement could be successful without the annihilation of caste. After the attainment of independence in 1947, he demanded justice for the weaker sections of the society by making provision in the Constitution. He brought that unprecedented dignity to the lives of the women and untouchables, which any other contemporary social and religious reformers tried and failed to bring for centuries. The aim of his vision was to arouse in men and women the passion for right relations. His purpose was practical rather than speculative and his philosophy of life was essentially a development and evolution under unbiased behaviour and environment.

Keywords: Colonialism, Untouchability, Shudra, Veda, Sati

An Introduction to the Vision of Ambedkar

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar is widely known as the architect of Indian Constitution. Apart from this adoration, he is regarded as a reputed educationist, lawyer, orator, politician, trade union leader, preacher and above all a great social revolutionary. He was one of the most educated persons of all the politicians of the contemporary period. He wrote several books and articles to prove logically his theories and thoughts. He opined that intellect is not the property of any particular caste or class and if given an opportunity the most despised on the earth can surpass any other superior castes or classes.

During 18th and 19th century, many social reformers emerged and raised their voice against injustice prevailing in socio-political structure in India, however, a few leader were successful in communicating their ideas towards the welfare of depressed society. In this reference, Ambedkar worked for the rights and dignity of Dalit society, women, untouchables, minorities and working class people and for this holy cause, he struggled all his life for the minimum dignity of all human beings irrespective of caste, class or sex.¹

His two notable literary works, '*Who Were the Shudras*' (1947) and '*The Untouchables*, (1948) has for the first time introspected and interpreted elaborately the status of shudra and untouchable respectively throughout the centuries. Similarly, he wrote about the condition of women and the notion of womanhood in detail. Ambedkar advocated human dignity, liberty, quality, and fraternity through the legal codified provision.²

Many authors mention that the Ambedkar's view on women's oppression and equal rights are far more practical than any other theory based on mere observation. As we know that Ambedkar himself faced inhuman oppression and discrimination in all its severity, therefore, his views on discrimination in Indian society may be considered reliable and meaningful. To understand Ambedkar's ethics, it is quite indispensable to know some of his bitter and better life experiences

¹ Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts, writings and political philosophy could be termed as Social Humanism. He developed a socio-ethical philosophy and steadfastly stood for human dignity and freedom, socio-economic justice, material prosperity and spiritual discipline. He showed the enlightening path for Indian society via his ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity and made India a democratic nation in a true sense.

² Various scholars observed that Ambedkar's ethical and political ideas sprang from the conception of the meaning of human relationship, and the problem of rights among human relations was the key to his entire thought and action. It was in this conviction and with an optimistic faith in human goodness, love and truth, which he entered upon his sacred mission.

that he underwent at the outset of the socio-political initiation. Ambedkar opined that education could be a better tool to establish a just society. He perceived education as a catalyst for a movement oriented for self-respect and self-help. It is quite interesting to know that, when he was in Columbia University, he wrote to a friend on the need to women education. He said that, *“We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with female education.”* Ambedkar has an innate passion of reading and writing and it is a well known fact that he had the habit of working for more than eighteen hours a day. This reading-writing habit helped him to comprehend the feminist developments in different cultures and countries around the globe. Ambedkar had conceptual similarity with J. S. Mill in reference to the subjection of women. Both of them opined, *“The legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and one of the chief hindrances to human development; and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no privilege or power on the one side, nor disability on the other.”*

It was the thought of Ambedkar that establishment of women’s hostels, boarding schools, printing local daily newspapers and participation in Sathyagrahas were some of the activities of women for acquiring efficient administrative and leadership skills as men have. Gaining inspiration and encouragement from Ambedkar, many women extensively wrote on topics like political planning, social justice, need of education, Buddhist philosophy and such other topics. They also wrote plays, autobiographies and actively participated in Satyagrahas. This is the clear evidence how the vision of Ambedkar created awareness among poor, illiterate and oppressed section of the contemporary society and inspired them to fight against the unjust social practices. Dr. Ambedkar spent his entire life for the betterment of women even involved in bad practices and professionals like prostitution. The greatest example of it was seen in Kamathipura. As per records, there was a person named David who was the mediator working in brothel. He left his profession persuaded by the thoughts and teachings of Ambedkar. He evoked all prostitutes to give up their profession and lead the life of honour and dignity.

Ambedkar and Political Awakening among Women

For the emancipation and empowerment of women, Ambedkar started his reformist campaign in the beginning of 1920. He started fierce programme against the Hindu social structure and launched a journal *Mook Nayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* in 1920 and 1927 respectively. Through

these literary weapons he put due stress on the need of gender equality, equal education and exposed the problems of the dalits, untouchables and women. In Ambedkar's movement, women actively participated in public domain, acquired the stipulated confidence and marked her presence at various political-administrative platforms. Venubai Bhatkar and Renubai Shambharakar are worth mentioning in this reference. In 1924, *Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha* was formed to work for the socio-political equality of oppressed classes and promoting their mutual interests.

In the third decade of 20th century, Ambedkar went to Europe for higher education in the London School of Economics. By 1923, he obtained M. Sc, D. Sc and the Law degree for the prestigious European institutions. During 1922-23, he got the opportunity for post-doctoral research at the University of Bonn in Germany. This exposure to the West has influenced his perception on feminist issues to a large extent. In the contemporary political scenario, it was a time when first wave of feminism had been coming to an end with the achievements of franchise rights for women in Britain and America in 1918 and 1920 respectively. From this time onwards, Ambedkar's perception of the women problems, emphasizing their right to education, right to property and involvement in the political process gained ground. After completion of his research he came to India and devoted his life fully to work for the oppressed social classes. He was deeply motivated by the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity.

From 1925 onwards, women started participating in satyagrahas throughout the country and they started establishing associations/political parties for oppressed classes with an aim of spreading education and political awareness among them. It was due to their constant efforts that in the Mahad Satyagraha for temple entry (1927), even upper caste Hindus participated in the movement along with the unprivileged ones. In the Satyagraha it was decided to burn the Manusmriti, which humiliated shudras and women.³ In the demonstration after the bonfire of the Manusmriti Dr. Ambedkar addressed the meeting and advised women to change their lifestyle including wearing saree and lightweight ornaments. Deeply motivated by the personality of Ambedkar, the upper caste women named Tipnis taught the dalit women the proper way of wearing sarees and other ornaments.

³ In Manu Smriti, the author not only shows contempt for women but also describes them as slaves, devoid of intellect; denies them the right of education and the right to property and forbids them from performing socio-religious customs.

In the beginning of 1928, a women association was founded in Bombay. Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife, was nominated as the president of this association. In 1930, this association summoned its separate conference along with the Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur. Under the banner of this association, the Kalram Temple Entry Satyagraha (1930) was initiated at Nasik in which five hundred women participated and many of them were arrested. To face tortures along with men, women also organized their *Samata Sainik Dal*.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-32), different women associations participated in the nationwide freedom movement. It was this time that the plight of oppressed classes gained momentum and the demand for the rights of women were given consideration even by the British government. It was the vision of Dr. Ambedkar that the women associations were marching towards their aim. When Ambedkar returned to India after attending the Round Table Conference in 1932, hundreds of women were present for his welcome at Bombay. At different places, depressed classes women's conferences were held and they began to present their demands assertively. The encouragement of Ambedkar empowered women to speak out their demands in a bold manner. As Radhabai Vadale said in a press conference in 1931 that, "*We should get the right to enter the Hindu temples and to fill water at their water resources. We call these social rights. We should also get the political right to rule and even to sit near the seat of the Viceroy. We don't 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 battle field 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.*" The credit for this self-respect and firm determination of women goes to Ambedkar.

During Quit India Movement, on 20th July 1942, The All India Dalit Mahila conference was organized where 25,000 women attended the proceeding. Ambedkar was highly pleased with the political awakening and activities of women. In January 1945, the All India Untouchable Women's Conference was held in Mumbai, where Ambedkar spoke for his strategy. As per his words, the emphasis was on reconstruction of the Hindu society based on equality rather than the social reforms initiated by Brahma Samaj or Arya Samaj. Ambedkar opined that the reforms of these attempts were limited only to the upper strata of the society. It is quite remarkable that his in-depth learning of Smritis and Shashtras and his understanding from the response of upper

castes during his temple entry movement crystallized his conclusions on Hindu philosophy and society.

The Role of Ambedkar in British Administration for the Betterment of Women

It is remarkable that Dr. Ambedkar was recognized as a learned person by the British government and he was appointed on policymaking designation for several times. Dr. Ambedkar was the first Indian who demanded voting rights for women. Before Independence, the right to vote was given to the rich, the landed and the taxpayers. Ambedkar voiced for the Universal Adult Franchise before the Southborough Commission and later on, he presented the same before the Simon Commission (1928) for all Indians without any biasness or discrimination on any ground. Like to voting rights, Dr. Ambedkar was the first person who coined 'Equal pay for equal work' irrespective of the sex. As Labour Minister in the Viceroy executive council, he said, *"We have also taken care to see, and this is an important point, that women shall be paid the same wages as men. It is for the first time that I think in any industry the principle should be established of equal pay for equal work irrespective of the sex."* After the attainment of independence, while drafting the Indian Constitution Dr. Ambedkar embodied the Article 39(d) that narrates the state to strive for securing equal pay for equal work of both men and women.

Dr. Ambedkar played a vital role in the formulation and implementation of Maternity Benefits Bill.

While narrating his views, Ambedkar said in the Bombay legislature (July, 1928), *"I believe that it is in the interests of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the pre-natal period and also subsequently. I am prepared to admit this fact because the conservation of the people's welfare is primarily the concern of the Government. In every country where the maternity benefit has been introduced, you will find that the Government has been subjected to a certain amount of charge with regard to maternity benefit. I think, therefore, the benefits contemplated by this bill ought to be given by this Legislature to the poor women who toil in our factories in this Presidency."* Deeply impressed by the views and virtues of Dr. Ambedkar the first Maternity Benefits Act was passed in India in 1929 by the Bombay legislature, which was followed by Madras Legislature Council in 1934. As a Labour Minister in the Viceroy executive council between 1942 and 1946, Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in bringing the Mines Maternity Benefit Bill for women in all over India. Under this act, a woman

working in the mine was entitled to maternity benefit for a period of eight weeks. This period of eight weeks was divided into two parts of four weeks each, one part preceding delivery and another part succeeding delivery. Later on, all the acts of Maternity Benefit of various states were repealed and the Central Government in India adopted the Maternity Benefit Act (1961).

The Role of Ambedkar in the Formulation of Constitution for the Betterment of Women

The contribution of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in the formulation of Indian Constitution can be easily understood by the adoration of New Charter of Human Rights. He looked upon law as the tool of creating a rational social order in which the growth of an individual should be in harmony with the development of society. He incorporated the values of liberty, equality and fraternity in the Indian Constitution.

Since Ambedkar was well convinced about the status of women in social structure throughout centuries, as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he tried an adequate inclusion of women's rights in the constitution of India. Therefore, by considering women's equality both in formal and substantial senses he included special provisions for women while all other general provisions are applicable to them, as to men. Noteworthy provisions are: Article 14 offers equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the ground of sex. Article 15(3) enables affirmative discrimination in favour of women. Article 39 gives equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 narrates human conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 51 (A) (C) describes Fundamental duties to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women. Article 46 instructs the state to promote with special care, the educational and economic interests of weaker section of people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. Article 47 directs the state to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health. Article 243D (3), 243T (3) & 243R (4) provides for allocation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj System.

Being India's first Law minister and chairman of drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Ambedkar thought it appropriate, rather his duty, to free women from the age old oppression by reforming the Hindu social laws. He, therefore, took an idea to draft and introduce the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly. The Hindu Code Bill, the most formidable legislative measure of modern India, sought to put an end to a variety of marriage systems

prevailing in India and legalize only monogamous marriages.⁴ It was the greatest ever social reform in India. It is nothing but declaration of women rights. It spoke of giving back dignity to Indian women and giving equal rights to men and women including the rights related with property, order of succession to property, marriage, divorce and guardianship. It was by any time a revolutionary measure and first step towards the recognition and empowerment of women in India. By these a women will have property in her own right and able to dispose of her property. Speaking on the merits of Hindu Code Bill, Dr. Ambedkar said, *“I should like to draw the attention of the house to one important fact. The great political philosopher Burke who wrote his great book against the French Revolution said that those who want to conserve must be ready to repair. I am asking this House is if you want to maintain the Hindu system, Hindu culture and Hindu society, do not hesitate to repair where repair is necessary. This Bill asks for nothing more than to repair those parts of the Hindu system which have become dilapidated.”* When the government unnecessarily curtailed his vision, Dr. Ambedkar offered his resignation.⁵ The orthodoxy in the ruling party led by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee did not allow this bill to be passed. Even the women member, Sarojni Naidu was vehemently against for these women rights. In his letter of resignation dated the 27th September, 1951 to the Prime Minister, 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. However, even that part of Bill had been killed. I see no purpose in my continuing to be a Member of your Cabinet.”* After his resignation, the government classified the Hindu Code Bill under various definitions.⁶

⁴ The Code directly sought to confer on women the right of property and adoption, which had been denied by Manu. It put men and women on an equal level in all legal matters.

⁵ The Bill could not withstand the opposition from the Hindu orthodoxy. Their major argument was that the Bill was an attempt at the demolition of the entire structure and fabric of Hindu Society. In reality, the Bill was a direct threat to the traditional patriarchal family set up and that was the major reason behind the opposition. The Bill sought to abolish polygamy and proposed the right to property and the right to divorce for women.

⁶ The Hindu Code Bill was later split in to four Bills and the same were put on the Statue Book by Parliament. The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), The Hindu Succession Act (1956), The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956) and The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956) are the four enactments, which incorporate the ideas and principles of Hindu Code Bill formulated by Dr. Ambedkar.

The ideology and vision of Dr. Ambedkar also reflects in the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001), which narrates, *“The underlying causes of gender inequality are related to social and economic structure and practices. Consequently, the access of women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including Scheduled Castes/Tribes Other Backward Classes and Minorities to education, health, and productive resources, among others is inadequate. Therefore, they remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded.”*

Conclusion

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was the first Indian to strike hard for the dawn of a new age for the common man, the downtrodden and for the Indian women. It was his aim to reconstruct the social order based on social equality, justice and reason. His socio-political philosophy advocated for complete social amelioration, political enlightenment and spiritual awakening. He had deep faith in nature gifted fundamental human rights of men and women, in the dignity of the individual and in socio-economic justice for the promotion of social progress and better standards of life with peace and security in all spheres of human life.

Dr. Ambedkar challenged the Hindu Caste structure and opined that this structure has been primarily responsible for committing all sorts of atrocities on the various sections of the society particularly the weaker sections as dalits, untouchables and women. He was against Manusmirthi as it gives a blank cheque to the Brahmins to commit all sorts of atrocities on the above-mentioned communities and justify their evil desires.

The contribution of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in socio-political structure of India is unparalleled. The Nation honoured him by offering Bharat Ratna posthumously, which was received by his widow Savita Ambedkar in 1990. Likewise, in 1992 Dr. Ambedkar Foundation was set up under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for the purpose of promoting and propagating the ideology Dr. Ambedkar. Various national and international prestigious awards have been given in the name of Babasaheb, among them the noteworthy is Dr. Ambedkar International Award for Social Change. Baba Amte and Spanish scholar Remy Fernand Claude Satorre Bonhomme were given this award in the year 1999 and 2000 respectively. With an aim to motivate the youth of India Dr. Ambedkar Chairs have been set up in nine Universities/institutions. Therefore, it is quite right to accept the words of Lord Casey that Ambedkar stands as the ‘fountainhead of wisdom and knowledge’ in modern India.

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