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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Vision for the Rights of Women: A Critical Reflection

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Abstract

Ambedkar's life was a struggle for achieving human rights. He fought for the dignity of the deprived people and was also a great thinker of woman rights. Some other intellectuals before him had worked towards women empowerment but Ambedkar ensured that women rights were included in the constitution of India. Ambedkar perceived women as the victim of the unjust and rigid social system. He attacked all major religions of India for subjugating their womenfolk. He asserted that women should be provided equal opportunities of growth. He initiated various movements for the upliftment of women. He suggested measures such as education, inter-caste marriage and inter-dine as methods of removing caste and class hierarchy. He provided various legal protections in constitution to ensure that women get their due credit in the Indian society. These constitutional securities have gone a long way in ensuring women rights in modern India. The contemporary social challenges demand an in-depth investigation of his vision, rationality of his outlook and the intrinsic humanity of his ideas for practical action.

Keywords: woman, woman rights, empowerment, Ambedkar, vision,

Introduction

Dr B. R. Ambedkar's life was a tale of sorrow, sacrifice, struggle and triumph (Ahuja 56). He was born an untouchable which gave him a nasty experience of caste oppression, tyranny and intolerable sufferings (Chitkara 132). But he didn't surrender and instead bloomed through the gloom around him. He fought for the dignity of the deprived people. His life was an endeavour for achieving human rights (Jatava 133). Thus, he was also a great thinker of woman rights. His



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primary goal was to establish a society based on social justice. Ambedkar understood very early that in order to fulfil his idea of an ideal society, everybody should have equal rights irrespective of caste, creed, gender and religion (Keer 342). He, thus, worked for the upliftment of women and their rights throughout his life. He famously said:

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.” (Gunjal 84)

These powerful words were spoken by Ambedkar much before the discourse around women empowerment started in the developed world. He can be rightly referred to as the true champion of women rights in India. Few other thinkers like Basaveshwara, Rajaram Mohan Roy and Jyotiba Phule had pioneered the thought of women empowerment in India (Tejani 42); but it was due to the strenuous efforts of Ambedkar that women rights were formally inculcated in the constitution of India.

Ambedkar’s Views on Women Rights

Ambedkar was not only the father of Indian Constitution; he was a prominent freedom fighter, political leader, writer, economist, philosopher, thinker, editor and a revivalist of Buddhism in India. Dr. Ambedkar fought for extensive economic and social rights for women. He asserted that women should be provided social and educational growth, progress in well-being and their socio-cultural rights (Datta 31). He underlined the need for providing each and every section of Indian women their due share. He maintained that it is essential to uphold and protect the dignity and modesty of women (Singariya 2). In this age of growing participation of women in all spheres of life, it is important to study Ambedkar’s thoughts on women rights in order to carry forward the legacy started by him. Ambedkar’s assessment of women’s oppression, social democracy, caste and Hindu social order and philosophy, are important to present day Indian feminist philosophy (Barnwal 395). However, the contemporary social challenges demand an in-depth investigation of his vision, rationality of his outlook and the intrinsic humanity of his ideas for practical action.

Dr. Ambedkar said,

“The stories of women entering into public discussions with men on most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are by no means few.” (Ambedkar 107)

Ambedkar perceived that women are the victims of the unjust, rigid and caste-based social system. He found through his study of ancient religious scriptures that socio-cultural powers have falsely constructed gender relations (Das 192). Ambedkar pointed out that the laws of Manu on the status of women are very crucial in shaping the Hindu approach and outlook (Indian perspective) towards women which have been propagated and preserved through Hindu personal



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laws based on Shastra, caste and endogamy (Kumar 213). He attacked Manusmriti as a major source which legalizes the denial of liberty, dignity, right to education, property, divorce etc. to women by ascribing a very patronizing ideal to them. It was mainly the mutilated Hindu culture and social customs which hindered women's empowerment in India (Yadav 35). He gave examples from the Vedic period where women enjoyed all the essential rights of a human being. The women had access to all branches of learning. In Brahadaranika Upanishad (III, 6-8), Ambedkar quoted that in king Janaka's Court, a new scholar Gargi was tested in her knowledge by Yaghavalkya (Tikoo 74). The women held all positions on par with men. Even in a religious service, women enjoyed an essential role. No religious ritual by men was complete without the involvement of his wife. For instance, Lord Rama was required to get a statue of Sita in order to continue the formalities for Ashwamegh Yagna. In that period, the girls were even free to select their spouse in open Swayamvars (Tikoo 76). Ambedkar advocated similar freedom, dignity and participation of women in modern India (Thorat and Kumar 212). He fiercely opposed traditions like Devdasi system, polygamy, child marriage, illiteracy for women and even pointed against the strict rules for Muslim women to remain in *Parda* (Veil) (Keer 273). In his famous book "Pakistan and partition of India", he stated his observations about Muslim women and their religious traditions, about wearing veil, their marriages and so on. He believed that Muslim women were also suppressed under various religious traditions (Yadav 36).

Dr. Ambedkar started his movement in 1920. He stated,

"We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is persuaded side by side with female education..." (Kumar 216)

He initiated a massive movement against the outdated Hindu social order by launching a journal "Mook Nayak" in 1920 and "Bahiskrit Bharat" in 1927 for the purpose (Benjamin 9). Through its issues he placed due importance on gender equality and the imminent need for education for the depressed as well as women. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also recommended strategies for women's liberation from oppression. He discovered that their true worth springs from values which promote equality, self-respect and education (Barnwal 398). According to Ambedkar, the society should be founded on reason, and not on dreadful customs of the caste system. He opined that education, inter-caste marriage and inter-dine are vital methods to eliminate castes and patriarchy (Singariya 3). A closer understanding of these ideas reflect that even in today's world, these methods are as meaningful as they were in his times. Modern world still faces the challenges of women education and inter-caste marriages are still looked down upon. But Ambedkar, being a visionary, advocated such means of intermingling to counter these evils (Barnwal 397).

In Ambedkar's movement launched from 1920 onwards, women actively participated and acquired the confidence to voice their issues on various platforms. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar exclaimed,



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“I strongly believe in the movements run by women. If they are truly taken in to confidence, they may change the present picture of society which is very miserable. In past, they have played a significant role in improving the condition of weaker section and classes.” (Moon & Ambedkar 213)

These words would have certainly provided women of those times the necessary confidence to change their social status. Even in present times, these words hold similar significance because we see women leading different social movement across the world. The challenges of the modern society require women to understand their worth and lead movements of change across the globe. Ambedkar’s words will keep on inspiring the women of generations to come.

Contribution to Women Empowerment

Dr. Ambedkar was India’s first Law minister and the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly, and he took it as his duty, to liberate women from the ancient clutches of religious and social persecution (Keer 299). In Indian Constitution, he introduced few articles that help women to improve their status and to compete with their male counterparts. For example, Article 14 provides equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. Article 15(3) enables positive discrimination in favour of women. Article 16 mentions there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office without any discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, creed and sex. Article 39 and 39(d) state Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 the state makes provision for Human conditions of work and maternity relief. The Article 51 (A) (C) makes it a fundamental duty to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women whereas Article 243D (3), 243T (3) & 243R (4) provides for allocation of seats in the Panchayati Raj System (Bakshi and Kashyap 16, 88, 93, 94). His argument for the rights of a mother was,

“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” (Moon & Ambedkar 257)

He strongly advocated for family planning measures for women in Bombay Legislative Assembly. In 1942, being a Labour Minister of Executive Council of Governor General, he introduced a Maternity Benefit Bill (Das 194). He provided several provisions in the constitution for protecting the welfare and civil rights of women. He introduced the Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament and highlighted the issues about women’s property right. The bill received strong opposition from many political leaders but Dr Ambedkar fought them with astute dignity (Jatava 133). This bill was a path breaking development for women rights in India as it brought in many



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crucial changes related to the legitimization of illegitimate children (Sec.16), punishment-bigamy (Sec.26), custody of children (Sec. 26). Another significant development was that the marriageable age for females was raised to 18 years. This single-handedly proved to be an important method to ensure women health and dignity (Yadav 36). The Act also introduced provision for alimony (Sec. 25) and abolished the difference between a maiden and a widow. The women were provided right to inheritance, property, adoption etc (Keer 322). The Hindu Code Bill has gone a long way in providing dignity and sense of self-worth to women in India. Some of the provisions of the Bill are way ahead of their times and inspire the present day struggles of women against social injustice (Datta 30).

Ambedkar opined that women have the right to get equal wages as men and introduced the principle of equal pay for equal work. He advocated that women should have the voting rights. He also strongly supported education of women as he believed that education of woman can uplift the entire family (Datta 29). He even encouraged prostitutes to part away with their profession and lead a life of dignity and honour. He said,

“I am a great believer in women’s organization. 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” (Kumar 217)

In fact, Dr. Ambedkar has always been ahead of his times. Be it his efforts for rights and equality of Indian women in pre and post Independent era through Maternity Benefit Bill, Abortion Act, or on Birth Control in Bombay Legislative Council in 1927 as its member, or his voice against Devadasi system at a meeting in Damodar Thakersey Hall, Bombay in 1936, or organization of Women’s Conference at Nagpur in 1940, the fight of Dr. Ambedkar for the women rights stand out and are going to remain relevant in every era (Ahuja 58).

His views regarding the social status of women and more specifically her role as a key unit of the family system can be understood by these words of Ambedkar,

“The relationship between husband and wife should be one of closest friends” (Ambedkar 108)

He equated the best relationship two human beings can enjoy to the relationship between a husband and wife. In the modern world, where husband and wife are finding it difficult to come to terms with their changing roles, these words of Ambedkar act as a guiding light. Ambedkar strongly supported education of women as he had the firm conviction that education of woman can prove a boon to the whole family. Today, educated girls are preferred choices for marriage because they spread the light of learning to future generations as envisioned by Ambedkar. He even asserted prostitutes to give up their humiliating profession and live a life of honour and dignity. He advocated voting rights for women and brought a new trend for empowering the women. Not only women, all Indians should be thankful to him because of his tremendous



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efforts towards developmental works. The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once said,

“Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of Hindu society” (Ahuja 89)

Conclusion

In the contemporary context, Ambedkar and his views on women rights are yet to be truly realized. He fought against all kinds of discrimination against women throughout his whole life, still discrimination against women in Indian society is overlooked. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, admitted that social and economic structure of the nation is largely responsible for gender inequality, which was envisaged by Ambedkar long ago (Singariya 2). As responsible citizens of the country, it is our duty to fulfil the dreams of Ambedkar to create a better world for women. It's fair to conclude that it is imminent for the feminist discourse to turn to Ambedkar. In the present times, the challenge is not to talk about gender in isolation, but to include class, caste and other factors. Therefore, there is a need to reclaim Dr. Ambedkar's writings as women rights classics.

It may also be mentioned here that the term “Social Justice” will not be implemented properly if the people of India should not change their attitudes specially towards women, SCs, STs and other weaker section of the society. In the era of globalisation many MNCs are searching for merit for the smooth running of the functions of their companies. In that context, the companies should work within the constitutional framework and the government should make rules for the engagement and involvement of people from different categories to ensure social justice. This way the society would be truly based on equality and equal opportunity and the dreams of Ambedkar would be fulfilled. It is also to be narrated here that, at present the Indian women have progressed a lot in various parts of their life although they are still suffering from various social evils like dowry, eve teasing, rape etc. It is a fact that in the glorious development of Indian society, the Indian women have march forward to the developmental process and somewhere treated equally with their male counterparts but it is yet to be realized by the people of India that women should have given the equal rights and opportunity with men so as to establish a shining India where women can live freely and equally irrespective of religion, caste, creed, gender etc. The best way to conclude would be to quote Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's famous slogan on Unity, Education and Agitation. He said,

“Unity is meaningless without the accompaniment of women. Education is fruit-less without educated women, and Agitation is incomplete without the strength of women”. (Ambedkar 105)



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