

Dr. Ambedkar and Gender Equality

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“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved”

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Abstract: Dr. Ambedkar fought tooth and nail for women’s economic liberation and for securing women’s social rights. The all round development of women was his top most agenda and he left no stone unturned in achieving this goal. As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of Constitution, Ambedkar tried an adequate inclusion of women’s rights in the political vocabulary and constitution of India. Dr. Ambedkar, a social visionary aptly provided appropriate rights to women in the Constitution through several articles and at a later stage, many more were included. The vision of Ambedkar is yet to become reality and unless minds are united it will be only a distant dream.

Keywords: Tooth and nail, Vocabulary, Visionary Agenda, Distant Dream

Dr. Ambedkar as Saviour for Women’s Liberation

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who is well known as the ‘**Father of Indian Constitution**’ is a multi-faceted personality exhibiting in himself a iron willed political leader, a par excellence freedom fighter, ideological thinker, shrewd philosopher, a social reformer, a great editor and so on. Ambedkar fought tooth & nail for women’s economic liberation and for securing women’s social rights. He stressed the need to safeguard the dignity and to respect the modesty of the women folk. The all round development of women was his top most agenda and he left no stone unturned in achieving this goal.

Societal positioning of women:

Irrespective of the ages, somehow women in our land were not given proper treatment. **Her societal positioning was never at par with men. She was not**

given even the basic rights. They were even equated to animals and put to the lowest rug of humanity.

Equality Based Reconstruction of the Hindu Society:

The All India Dalit Mahila conference was organized, on 20th July, 1942 and 25,000 women attended this event. Ambedkar was highly pleased with the awakening and activities of women. On 13th August, he wrote to one of his friends, Meshram about this. On 6th January 1945, the All India Untouchable Women’s Conference was held in Mumbai. (Limaye, 1999:57-61). In the movement, his strategy was similar to Gandhian method though he had disagreements on many things with Gandhi. **To him the emphasis was on reconstruction of the Hindu society on the basis of equality rather than the social reforms initiated by Brahma Samaj or Arya Samaj because their attempts were limited only to the upper strata of the society.** His in depth study of Smritis and Shashtras and his experience from the response of upper castes during his temple entry movement crystallised his conclusions on Hindu philosophy and society.

Crusade against Unjust Social Practices:

Running newspapers, women’s hostels, boarding schools participating in Sathyagrahas were some of the activities of woman for acquiring the personality development to secure efficient administrative and leadership capacity as men have. Gaining inspiration and encouragement from Ambedkar, many women wrote on topics like Planning, Buddhist philosophy and such other topics. Women also wrote plays, autobiographies, and participated in Satyagrahas. Tulsabai Bansode started a newspaper titled ‘Chokhamela’. This showed how Ambedkar created awareness among poor, illiterate women and inspired

them to fight against the unjust social practices like child marriages and devdasi system.

New Charter of Human Rights:

As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of Constitution, Ambedkar tried an adequate inclusion of women's rights in the political vocabulary and 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. Hence, there are Articles like 15(3), 51(A), and so on. His key work in the preparation of Indian Constitution made it to be known as a '**New Charter of Human Rights**'. He looked upon law as the instrument of creating a sane social order in which the development of individual should be in harmony with the growth of society. **He incorporated the values of liberty, equality and fraternity in the Indian Constitution.**

Political Democracy vs. Social Democracy:

Considering the belief that any scheme of franchise and constituency that fails to bring about representation of opinions as well as representation of persons falls short of creating a popular government, he submitted the Constitution with a warning. He said in his speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 25th November 1949, "**Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy.**" By social democracy he means a way of life, which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as principles of life. He further said: "On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. **In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality.** In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value.

Dr. Ambedkar's Early Warning Signal:

In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we

will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. **We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up.** The new social movements emerged especially from Dalits, women and peasants, to assert democratic rights and urged for a new path of development which legitimises this warning of the Father of the Indian Constitution, when he submitted it to the nation.

Significance of the Hindu Code Bill:

His strong concern for women appeared in the form of the Hindu Code Bill in Parliament on 11th April 1947, which invited strong opposition from the Hindu orthodoxy in post-independent India. The Bill provided for several basic rights to women. The Bill sought to abolish different marriage systems prevalent among Hindus and to establish monogamy as the only legal system. It aimed at conferment of right to property and adoption of women. It provided for restitution of conjugal rights and judicial separation. It attempted to unify the Hindu code in tune with progressive and modern thought. (Mathew, 1991:73-73; Ahir, 1990).

Constitutional Support:

Dr. Ambedkar, a social visionary aptly provided appropriate rights to women in the Constitution through several articles and at a later stage, many more were included and a suggestive list reads as follows:-

Article -14 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 – Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work.

Article - 42 – Just and human conditions of work and maternity relief.

Article - 46 – The State to promote with special care,

the educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

Article - 47 - The State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health and so on.

Article - 51(A) (c) Fundamental duties to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women.

Article - 243 D (3), 243T (3) and 243R (4) provides for allocation of seats in the Panchayat Raj System.

Opposition for the Bill:

The Hindu Code Bill was introduced in parliament in 1948 and when debated on the floor of the house, the opposition was strong against the Bill. Ambedkar tried his level best to defend the Bill by pointing out the drawbacks of Indian society and arguing that the ideals in the Bill are based on the Constitutional principles of equality, liberty and fraternity and that in the Indian society characterised by the caste system and the oppression of women since women are deprived of equality, **a legal frame work is necessary for a social change in which women have equal rights with men.** He also pointed out that the aim of the Bill was “to codify the rules of Hindu Law which are scattered in innumerable decisions of High Courts and of the Privy Council which form a bewildering motley to the common man”. (Arya, 2000:63).

Resignation of Dr. Ambedkar:

However, 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. The very foundations not only of one pillar but of all the pillars on which the Hindu society rests are shaken”. In reality, the Bill was a threat to patriarchy on which traditional family structure, was bounded and that was the major reason behind the opposition. Therefore, on the eve of the first elections in 1951 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dropped the Bill by saying that there was too much opposition. **On this issue, the then Law Minister Dr. Ambedkar resigned.**

Basic Rights Still at Stake:

The resignation show how the parliament of independent India deprived its women citizens of even basic rights (Haksar, 1986: 56- 57) Although most of the provisions proposed by Ambedkar were later passed during 1955-56 in four Bills on Hindu ‘marriage’, ‘succession’, ‘minority and guardianship’ and ‘maintenance’ and later in 1976 some changes were made in Hindu Law, it still remains true that the basic rights of women have yet to be restored to them even after fifty years of the working of the Indian Constitution based on the principle of liberty, equality and justice to all Indian citizens. The nature of controversy on Hindu Code Bill made it clear that the rights for women documented in the Book of Indian Constitution is very difficult to translate into reality.

Birth of ‘Second Wave Feminism’

One can find an adequate answer for this in Ambedkar’s analysis of the Hindu social order and its philosophy that perpetuates inequality, slavery, poverty, ignorance and powerlessness for the oppressed classes and also to women, which has its impact in modern times also. However, the Hindu Code Bill helped the resurgence of feminist movement in India. This crusade of Ambedkar to emancipate women from injustice inspires the women leaders in Parliament to keep the issue alive until its enactment. This was the starting point for women to recognise their position and pursue rights movement by acquiring strength from ‘second wave feminism’ started in the early 1960s. Women are still fighting issues such as rape, dowry death, communalism, fundamentalism, sexual harassment, violence-domestic and social, poverty and so on.

Embracing Buddhism:

His strong disagreements with Hindu ideals compelled him to accept Buddhism as his religion. In a speech at Nagpur on 15th October, 1956 he said that according to the tenets of Hinduism only the so called higher castes have been benefited. Sudras and untouchables have nothing much to gain from it. “As soon as the wife of a Brahmin conceives, she thinks of the High Court whether any post of a Judge has fallen vacant but when our women become pregnant, she

cannot think of anything better than a sweeper's post under the Municipal Corporation". In contemporary India the globalisation process has made this thesis applicable to all economically deprived sections irrespective of caste due to the trend of making the rich richer and the poor poorer and denying labour rights to them. He concluded that Hinduism will ruin the Hindus and ultimately India.

Voicing Against Hinduism:

The inclusion of Hinduism in politics is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship. He recalled Daniel O. Connell to caution India that "No man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty". The dissatisfaction with Hinduism which led to the mass conversion of 30000 untouchables into Buddhism even in the 21 century is a point to rethink about the manifestations of Hinduism in the post modern era. If not, as Ambedkar said, Hinduism will remain as a religion that glorifies ignorance and preaches inequality and hatred, divides people into multitudinous castes and sub castes, sanctions poverty and keeps majority of its followers poor, illiterate, ignorant, disunited and divided. Re-domestication of women will be the ultimate result. That women can be raped and paraded naked through the streets is a reality in contemporary India and is a symptom of restoration of Manusmriti Raj.

Ambedkar as Social Architect:

Dr. Ambedkar who was recognized internationally as a crusader against caste system, a vigilant fighter for the human rights of all the oppressed and enslaved and the emancipator of humanity from social and economic injustice, had his last breath on 6th December 1956. In the condolence message, on Ambedkar's death in Parliament, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said; "Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of the Hindu society". His dream of society based on gender equality is yet to be realized and therefore his thoughts are important for the social reconstruction that favours women's empowerment.

'Bharat Ratna' Award:

Dr. Ambedkar was honoured by the Nation through 'Bharat Ratna' posthumously which was received by his widow Savita Ambedkar in 1990. Dr. Ambedkar Foundation was set up under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on 24th March 1992 for the purpose of promoting and propagating his ideology of social justice so as to reach the common masses. The Foundation implemented Schemes such as Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial, Dr. Ambedkar National Public Library, Dr. Ambedkar Chairs in Universities/ Institutions, Dr. Ambedkar Award for Social Understanding and Upliftment of Weaker Sections and the Dr. Ambedkar International Award for Social Change.

Tribute to Dr. Ambedkar:

It made a feature film on Ambedkar and published 144 volumes of his speeches and writings so far in various languages. Dr. Ambedkar Chairs have been set up in nine universities/institutions. Baba Amte was given Dr. Ambedkar International Award for Social Change in 1999 and Remy Fernand Claude Satorre Bonhomme of Spain has been selected for the year 2000. As Lord Casey said, Ambedkar stands as the "fountainhead of wisdom and knowledge" in modern India also.

Conclusion

Ambedkar authored, 'The riddle of the women', 'The woman and the Counter Revolution', 'The rise and fall of Hindu women', **all portrayed the pathetic and pitiable condition of Indian women as passive and submissive and best suited only to a life of domestic and family chores.**

One cannot forget the recent hue and cry over 'Women's Reservation Bill' which is yet to see the light of the day but no one seems to be honest in its perspectives and a clear cut approach is not within reach. The provisions of Constitution and Acts are not suffice to deal with the magnitude of domestic violence in the country. **The vision of Ambedkar is yet to become reality and unless minds are united it will be only a distant dream.**

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