

Ambedkar Views about Women: The Other Half of Humanity

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Abstract: *Dr B.R. Ambedkar, a staunch supporter of women's empowerment, completely revolutionised early modern India. This article is designed to understand his contribution towards the upliftment of women's status in society. His feminist ideologies not only led to improvement in the conditions of women but also made them aware of their basic fundamental rights. Ambedkar's intellectual sharpness portrayed his moral courage towards the long-term goals of national growth. In this period, many reformers and leaders came onto the scene. The interesting point here was that they all knew about the oppression happening to women in various ways, but they somehow didn't take a firm stand for their rights as Ambedkar did fiercely, with full respect towards women. Women are an important pillar of society that needs to be respected towards their unpaid work. This article will explain Ambedkar's personal and public perspectives and key contributions to creating strong and courageous women by providing them a platform.*

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"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women have achieved." -

Dr B.R. Ambedkar (Ambedkar 2003, p.120)

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, a great humanist and father of the Indian Constitution, whose childhood experiences forced him to become a reformer. He was born into the *Mahar*, a low-caste untouchable community, which subjected him to deep-rooted societal cruelties. Despite these barriers, he completed his education and emerged as a crusader for human rights. Ambedkar's thoughts about the progress of society were clearly seen through his statement:

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“The progress of any society depends on the progress of women.”¹

This is a compelling statement as in this way, he questioned colonial control and brahmanical domination over women by highlighting women's needs to be progressed for the betterment of society. His works and other historians also mentioned that Ambedkar's vision was not only limited to education, labour or marriage, but it also extended towards women's empowerment and rights.

As the chairman of the Drafting Committee and chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar always wanted to keep women equal in relation to their male counterparts.² During colonial times, as one knows, women suffered a lot, such as no ancestral property, child marriage and became traumatised due to subordination to men of the family.³ That's why after independence, Ambedkar seems to be revolutionary in providing women's education, awareness about rights, and to raise women's voices that were silenced by colonisers long ago. The notion of male ego was prevalent there, as many male leaders of that time never admitted that Ambedkar described women's emancipation as necessary for the emancipation of the nation; they are important members of society.⁴ This article title mentioned “The Other Half of Humanity”, which signifies that half of society, such as untouchables and women, were under oppression and not even considered as human.

His bold attempt to introduce the Hindu Code Bill (Ambedkar 1995, Vol. 14, Part II, p. 1315) was to legalise the rights of women and to reduce the impact of patriarchal subordination upon women. Ambedkar stated that gender equality was seen as a basis for establishing a republican society. Even when conservative members criticised him for the bill, he immediately resigned from the post of law minister in 1951. He openly declared that “I will not be part of a government where women's justice is denied”.⁵ He firmly stood with women and understood their sufferings. He fully concentrated on women's autonomy, particularly for rural women who were not aware of their rights. Overall, his vision of women's empowerment was not emotional or romantic, but rather radical and revolutionary. He was never seen as sympathetic towards them because he always considered women as half, a powerful community and important members of society, as without them no one can establish liberty, equality and fraternity within the community.

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Ambedkar's thoughts about Women's Empowerment and Rights

Ambedkar's own writings are based on a practical approach by depicting women as full-fledged members of the country, and women's empowerment must be attained to establish true democracy. In his early essay, "*Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*" (Ambedkar 1916) he argued that society created an endogamous caste system, in which women has to marry within their caste and to ensure the endogamy, the members of society put forward a cruel practices such as sati system to remove widows and this remarriages because community fears of being their loss of caste.⁶ Apart from that, many instances of early child marriage are mentioned to avoid love marriages. Ambedkar used the term oppression on "surplus women" that refers to widows (extra women). In this way, one can understand that in the name of faith and rituals, they restricted women's autonomy, and it's seen as an attempt to control women's sexuality.⁷ That's why Ambedkar encouraged inter-caste marriage to break their caste endogamy and to liberate them from societal pressure. In his other work, "*The Annihilation of Caste*" (Ambedkar 1936), Ambedkar described the lacunae of Indian leaders such as Gandhi and others, who only focused on political autonomy and ignored social reforms. His declaration was written as:

"Political reform cannot with impunity take precedence over social reform in the sense of the reconstruction of society".⁸

This statement depicted that reformers only focused on political independence and marginalised gender equality. The term reconstruction signifies here to build a society without caste-based restrictions. Women's subjection was seen as a serious social issue in modern India.

Moreover, he pointed to the implications of Hindu religious texts (*shastras* and *smritis*) as a colonial tool to regard women's position as inferior within the community, because these texts focused on patriarchy and depicted women's dependency on male members of their family. In some way, these sacred texts depleted the conditions of women in society. That's why Ambedkar burned a famous religious text, the *Manusmriti*, to reject the authority of the sacred text. In addition to that, he compared the condition of Buddhist and Hindu women, in which he praised Buddhism, where men respect their women's autonomy in

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each arena, while in Hinduism, women were considered as men's property. By portraying this, he demanded new models of gender equality for women's humanitarian rights.

In the constitutional debates that happened in (1945 - 46), Ambedkar stood for women's fundamental rights and successfully amended the articles, principles and reservation seats to empower women. The important articles and directive principles amended by Ambedkar in favour of women's rights are:⁹

Article 14 - clearly stated "Equality before Law", applicable to all human beings irrespective of their gender. Ambedkar amended it to provide equal privileges to men and women.

Article 15 - clearly stated "Prohibition of Discrimination" in every domain, and no women were discriminated against based on their gender. Ambedkar wanted to remove the Brahmanical domination over women through this article.

Article 16 - clearly stated "Equal Opportunity in Public Employment, where one has the right to enter government service. This article empowered women economically for the betterment of their living standards.

These articles are present in Part III of the Constitution. In Part IV, under directive principles, articles amended by Ambedkar and allies are:

Article 39 (d) clearly stated "Equal Pay for Equal Work", to remove the economic discrimination on the grounds of sex and gender. Ambedkar's vision was to fulfil the wage gap between men and women, which established economic equality in society.

Article 42 - clearly stated "Maternity Relief", this directive provided job security during crucial phases such as childbirth in women's lives. Earlier, Ambedkar introduced maternity benefit bills in the Bombay Presidency for women's health.

Apart from that, Ambedkar introduced reserved seats in the legislature¹⁰ that provide a platform to women to publicly present their opinions. Ambedkar thought and worked for the welfare of women in every area, whether it's social, political, cultural or economic.

Another historical essay written by him as, "*The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women*" (Ambedkar 1951), in which he blamed traditional laws for miserable condition of women as he described various instances such as in Vedic times, women were not allowed to start *Upanayana*¹¹, women have no right on ancestral property, women can't remarry and

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women needs guardian such as father, son or brother for their survival. Overall, he targeted *Manu* Codes because it clearly mentioned women can never be independent; it was not wrong to say women were seen as slaves in early modern times. Therefore, Hindu culture, in the name of protection, degraded them under the burden of a patriarchal set-up. The need for a new moral order and modern civil law prevalent in modern India for the upliftment of women was very well supported by Dr B.R. Ambedkar.

Apart from that, Ambedkar, in his work "*The Buddha and His Dhamma*", stated that Buddhism was the only way for women's liberation because it was a rational sect that denied the patriarchal system. According to him, Buddhism admits people without discrimination across caste, class and gender. This religion became a foreground for advocating gender equality and a way to justify that gender never been an obstacle in acquiring freedom and legitimacy in society. Moreover, this work is based on themes such as conversion, in which he stated that women converting to Buddhism doesn't mean they have blind faith, as in reality it was a conscious attempt to reject traditional norms, coercion and silence. This sect became an alternative for women to choose their dignity over subordination. Nevertheless, women's liberation can't be imagined without education, financial independence and voice, that's what Buddhism provided them as a platform to assert their sovereignty.

Through textual work, one can consider Ambedkar as a gender theorist rather than merely as a male reformer; his work about Buddhism clearly indicates conversion as ethical resistance. Eventually, for him, without women's autonomy, one can't imagine any social order, as they were considered as historical actors who fought for their own rights. His advocacy of a casteless and classless society not only for the rights of Dalits but also for women, because he knew that caste was the main reason behind gender oppression, or one can say caste was used as a tool to implement atrocities in women's lives. His view reflects a kind of materialist feminism, as he fought for women's liberation in all arenas, whether it's property rights, marriage, divorce and financial security to fully restore women's autonomy at depth. No doubt, Ambedkar's views reflected an egalitarian approach towards women, but his work has certain limitations also because he only examined structural issues, not the internal contradictions. In Buddhism, there were strict and regulative rules put on *bhikkuni* admission in the sangha that were also seen as a new way of women's subordination. He justified the conversion, but what about monastic patriarchy? Even he criticised religious law and sexual abuse, but fails to analyse that women's trauma is not only created by laws but also happens

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in the home, it's have broad impact in the private sphere, and also needs to be properly addressed. Apart from that, he focused on women's citizenship that makes democracy meaningful in a true manner. Ambedkar always stood for women's legal, political and voting rights, which theorised the concept of citizenship before it began to appear in the political scenario. He covered all aspects but wasn't able to describe women's unpaid labour in the domestic space, which needs to be linked with gender for a better understanding. For him, women was second half of humanity that needed to be protected for a prosperous nation because they were the main element that enforces social hegemony. Even, he emphasised on anti romanticism, by stating that culture and traditions emotionally bound women to behave like a sacrificing mother, calm wives and ideal women. These traditions emotionally trap women from demanding their own rights, where ideal women are considered to be those who don't want equality. Overall, social, political, cultural and traditional beliefs somewhat influenced women to either act as guardians of culture or become negotiators of seclusion, coercion and abuse on a wider scale.

In the context of the Hindu Code Bills, as mentioned by Ambedkar in his "*Writings and Speeches*",¹² the debate happened over those bills because he wanted to codify modern secular laws. The main provisions mentioned by Ambedkar for empowering women were:

1. To protect the dignity of women and security for their children's future, he abolished polygamy and legalised monogamous marriages. This was done to establish equality between men and women in the context of marriage, as if women strictly adhered to one husband, so men must adhere to. In this way, he standardised the institution of marriage.
2. To save the women from family oppression, he legalised women's right to divorce from their husbands to establish affinity in marriage. In this manner, women can protect themselves from domestic violence, marital rape and forced conversions. He empowered women to break their silence and to stand for their rights.
3. To empower women economically, he put the provisions of having equal shares of ancestral property because he knew that legal and political rights were not enough for the upliftment of women. Economic rights also needed to make women a part of wealth in Hindu society. In this way, women became the legal heirs of their fathers' property for true women's empowerment.

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4. To restore the women's autonomy, Ambedkar legalised the child adoption rights of women because in earlier times, women had no power and were completely dependent on male members for child adoption, but men have full rights over them. In this way, widows and unmarried women started adopting and living life on their own terms without male domination.

5. To protect their guardianship rights, Ambedkar regarded mothers having equal parental rights over their child as equal to their father because to uplift women from secondary to legal parent. In this, women made decisions for the welfare of their children without any interference.

Ambedkar designed these provisions specifically to reverse the Manu Laws in the form of new social reforms that restored women's rights and empowered women in each domain. In the context of the debate about the Hindu bill, he openly put forth the suffering of women. The parliamentary records mentioned a debate that Ambedkar's bill attracted both criticism and support. Ambedkar's vision was to introduce women's constitutional rights in the private sphere, or one can say in families, where their autonomy remains limited. He clearly stated in Parliament:

"I would like to remind the House that in this country we have a Constitution which contains an Article that there shall be equality between one citizen and another and there shall be no discrimination ... on the ground of sex. The Hindu Code is a step in that direction." ¹³
(Ambedkar 1995, 1315)

Ambedkar's statement here signifies that fighting for women's rights was not just an initiative to bring a change in their lives, or one can say reclamation, it's a necessity to liberate women for the sake of our nation's growth. Many women leaders, such as Durgabai Deshmukh, Hansa Mehta and others supported clauses about equality in education and service. Even Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad supported the bill for modern India, but never firmly stood against the conservatives because they were afraid of Congress's division. The orthodox section of society, such as Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a member of the Mahasabha Leader, criticised this bill and denounced it as a destroyer of Hindu culture and civilisation. They argued that marriage was a sacred act, it's not a contract and focused on men's legitimacy. Ambedkar fiercely countered him by describing marriage as an act to enslave women for a lifetime. H.V. Kamath, an orthodox member, portrayed the bill as alien and western in the context of monogamy, but Ambedkar countered by describing that equality and justice have no geographical limitations; it's the same for all. Despite these fierce battles,

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bills never passed in their lifetime, but Ambedkar set a foundational base for women's empowerment for the betterment of society that no one can deny. After this, he resigned from the post of law minister because he boldly stated to him, "not be part of a government where women's justice is denied".

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that Ambedkar's shift from sociological analysis to constitutional amendments led to the foundation of women's autonomy. The striking point was that Ambedkar resigned from their post to protect the dignity of women. His works indicated new visions, such as a democracy that moved beyond social issues and entered into intimate spaces where women were oppressed by their own family members. His efforts towards enacting women's rights set a new strand of humanity, and he bravely described that gender equality is very important for establishing true democracy.¹⁴ His views indicated women as a vital "Human Resource" for the growth and prosperity of Modern India because women's participation in service and education gave a new orientation towards modernisation. So, one educated woman educates the entire family. If all women became educated, then they would educate the entire nation. Ambedkar's radical steps transformed women from subordination to independence through the powerful call of "educate, agitate and organise". Women became educated and challenged caste oppression and fought for their economic liberation on a broader scale. His thoughts and writings pushed women to come out of their arena and raise their voice against social evils such as child marriage, coercion, and gender inequality. Besides working for Dalits, Ambedkar openly worked for a better future for women. For him, especially lower caste and rural women who were the most oppressed sections of society, who have a lot of potential need to be garnished for better future growth. This article argued the fact that Ambedkar, in their life span, effortlessly worked for women, albeit somewhat in a limited manner, because he kept women as the focal point in their theories, whether it was social reproduction or transformation, and rejected the glorification of ideal Indian women. His main lacunae are seen in work about only relying on the structural and macro-institutional framework that needs more expansion to carefully analyse the conditions of women in the

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social, political and cultural sphere. Overall, it shows women were half members of the community; without them, imagining the nation's greatness is impossible.

Notes and References

- ¹ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women: Who Was Responsible for It?*, in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, vol. 3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987), pp. 73-76.
- ² References of gender equality mentioned in the *Constituent Assembly of India Debates (CAD)*, vol. VII (29 November 1948), 781.
- ³ The notion of women's subordination described in, B.R. Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman: Who Was Responsible for It?*, in *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987), 388.
- ⁴ Women's growth is seen as linked with the growth of the nation, as well depicted in B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 54.
- ⁵ B.R. Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 15 (New Delhi: Government of Maharashtra, 1997), 95-96.
- ⁶ Ambedkar's firm stand in his essay *Castes in India*, in *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, 49.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 15.
- ⁸ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, in *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, 49.
- ⁹ Key Fundamental amendments mentioned in the Constitution of India, art. 14, 15, 16, 39(d), 42.
- ¹⁰ Reservation seats introduced for women in legislatures, for more information, see in CAD, vol. VII (29 November 1948), 742.
- ¹¹ *Upanayana*, an initiation ceremony of formal education, that was privilege of *dvija* caste (exclude women and *shudras*), for more detail, see in B.R. Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman: Who Was Responsible for It?*, in *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 3 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987), 389-90.
- ¹² Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, pt. II (New Delhi: Government of Maharashtra, 1995), 1314.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 1315.
- ¹⁴ Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 15, pp.95-96.