

ROLE OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR IN THE UPLIFTMENT OF WOMEN

Dr Monika Srivastava,

*Associate Professor,
Dept. of History & Culture of Asian People,
A.P. Sen Memorial Girls'College,
University of Lucknow, Lucknow*

From time immemorial, the women in this land of ours were treated as a sort of thing. Her placing in the society was not at par with other human being. She has no rights. She cannot move nor do anything at her will. In Hindu Shastras, she has been branded just like animals. From the verses of Ramayan as written by Mr. Tulsi Das, " *Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, naari- Ye sab tadan ke adhikari,*" one may easily draw inferences as to what status has been granted to our mothers. Similarly, we can understand that of Draupadi of Mahabharata was reduced to a very low status, as she was the wife of five husbands (Pandwas). She was not only, the wife of five husbands; she put at stake in gambling by none else than the so called Dharmraj Yudhishtar!

In 'Manusmriti' the ancient Hindu Code-book, the status granted to women is quite visible and she was put to the lowest rug of humanity as she was treated at par with the animals and slave by the proprietors of Hindu Dharma. Such was the placement earmarked to our mothers, sisters and even great grand mothers that the heads of humanity bend upon down with shame!¹

That is why Dr. Ambedkar was of the firm opinion that until or unless, by applying dynamite, the Hindu Dharma-shastras are not blown up, nothing is going to happen. In the name sanskaras, the Hindu women are tied up with the bondage of superstitions, which they carry till their death. They are also responsible for inculcating these wrong notions learnt by them through baseless traditions and preaching of the Shastras in the budding minds of their offspring.

Otherwise also the women in India have remained a matter of joy and a source of amusement as such she was used and misused by men just to serve their evil ends. She has been used just like a machine for procreation. It has also been mentioned in Hindu Shastras that the woman is the bonded slave of her father when she was young, to her husband when she is middle aged and to her son when she is a mother.² Of course, all the epigrams, aphorisms, proverbs, platitudes and truisms bear necked truth about the stature of women in India. Ambedkar saw women as the victims of the oppressive, caste-based and rigid hierarchical social system. He believed that socio-cultural forces artificially construct gender relations, especially by Manusmriti and Hindu religion.

In his *The Riddle of the Woman, The Woman And the Counter Revolution, The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women, Castes in India: Their Mechanism Genesis and Development* and through the issues of his journals *Mooknayak* (1920) and *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927), Ambedkar tries to show how the gender relations and differences are constructed by Hindu Brahminical order, which conditions women to conform a stereotype feminine behavior, requiring them to be passive and submissive, suited only to a life of domestic and family responsibilities.

In the *Women and Counter Revolution* and *The Riddle of Women* Ambedkar portrays the way in which Manu treated women. He pointed out that the laws of Manu on the status of women are very important in moulding the Hindu attitude and perspective (Indian perspective) towards women,

perpetuated and maintained through Hindu personal laws based on shastras, caste and endogamy, i.e. the base of Indian patriarchy. He attacked Manusmriti as a major source, which legitimizes the denial of freedom, self respect, right to education, property, divorce etc., to women by attributing a very lofty ideal to them. He observes in the law book of Manu that the killing of a woman is like the drinking of liquor, a minor offence. It was equated with killing of Sudra. Manu even advises a man not to sit in a lonely place with his own sister, daughter or even mother. Some of the other laws Manu prescribed are: Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of their families), and, if they attach themselves to sexual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. Nothing must be done independently by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, even in her own house. Let every woman who marries stand by her husband, claim to be his friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave, Ambedkar stated. I am confident that if you follow this suggestion, you will attain honour and glory.

In the matter of property a wife was degraded by Manu just as a slave. He forbade women the study of Vedas, and performing Sanskaras uttering the Ved mantras because he projected women as unclear as untruth is. Manu instructs women: "Though destitute or virtuous or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. ...She must always be cheerful, clever in management of her household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economic in expenditure". Ambedkar cites evidences of higher status of women in the pre-Manu days. She was free and equal partner of man and had the right to education, divorce, remarriage and economic freedom. The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulabha, Yajnavalkya and Maitrei, Yajnavalkya and Gargi, and Sankaracharya and Vidyadhari show that Indian

women in the pre-Manu period could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education.

He also offers ways for overcoming tyranny. Buddhist values, which promote equality, self-respect, and education, provided them with emancipation. Buddha, according to Ambedkar, treated women with respect and affection, never attempting to degrade them like Manu did. He taught Buddhist Dharma to ladies as well as religious philosophy. Women such as Vishakha, Amrapali of Visali, Gautami, Rani Mallika, queen of Prasenajith, are examples of Buddha's treatment of women as equals, according to Ambedkar. The Hindu culture and social practices were mostly responsible for impeding women's empowerment.

Women and men in India enjoy de jure equality. Article 14 of the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights and opportunities to men and women in political, economic and social spheres, Article 42 directs the State to make provision for ensuring just and humane conditions for work and maternity itself and Article 51 (A) imposes upon every citizen, a fundamental duty to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

However this de jure equality has not yet materialised into a de facto equality, despite the efforts made in the Five Year Plans. The First Five Year Plan sought to "promote the welfare of women" by helping them to play their legitimate role in the family and the community but emphasized that the major burden of organising activities for the benefit of the female population had to be borne by the private agencies. Five Year Plans continued to reflect the same welfare approach to women's interests though they accorded priority to education for both, men and women and launched measures to improve maternal and child health services and supplementary nutrition for children as well as expectant and nursing mothers.

It was the Sixth Five Year Plan in which the focus on women's interests shifted from 'welfare' and 'development'. Planners and policy makers began to recognize women not only as partners but

also as stake-holders in the development of the country. The Seventh Five Year Plan saw developmental programmes which aimed at raising the economic and social status of women and at ensuring that they get the benefits of national development. This is when 'beneficiary oriented programmes' providing direct benefits to women in different developmental sectors began. There was a stress upon the generation of both skilled and unskilled employment through formal and non-formal education and vocational training.

The Eight Five Year Plan had a Human Development focus. It tried to ensure that the benefits of development do not bypass women and it implemented special programmes for women to complement the general development programmes and to monitor the flow of benefits to women in education, health and employment.

The Ninth Five Year Plan was rather ambitious. It took up 'empowering women as agents of socio-economic change and development' as a major commitment. To begin with, it adopted the 'National Policy for Empowerment of Women', which among other objectives, sought to organise women into Self Help Groups to work for their own empowerment, accorded a high priority to schemes for maternal and child welfare and most importantly, made a bid at easy and equal access to education through the Special Action Plan of 1998, plans for the free education of girls up to the college level (inclusive of professional courses) and vocational training.

Education as such, results in positive externalities. Not only does it have an intrinsic value in the sense of the joy of learning, reading etc, but it also has instrumental, social and process roles. Aristotle when asked how much the educated were superior to the uneducated he said, "as much as the living are from the dead." ³ Moreover education may spread through Interpersonal motivation. When one individual sends her child to school, her neighbor is likely to do so as well. Women's education too, often spreads this way, more specifically, through same sex effects. i.e. an educated woman is far more likely to send her daughter to school than an uneducated

woman. Also, she is likely to maintain better conditions of nutrition and hygiene in her household and thereby improve her family's health. The presence of a larger number of female teachers may encourage parents to send their daughters to school. Thus education is a fundamental tool for women's empowerment.

"The underlying reasons of gender inequality are tied to social and economic structure... and behaviours," The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001, concedes to the views of Ambedkar,. As a result, women, particularly those from weaker sectors such as Scheduled Castes/Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minorities..., have insufficient access to education, health, and productive resources, among other things. As a result, they are largely marginalised, impoverished, and socially excluded." Furthermore, feminist scholars recognised the significance of caste in modern India. Many feminist researchers think that caste must be considered while studying Indian society, particularly after the controversy over the Women Reservation Bill. Though patriarchy is widespread in India, its severity varies by religion, location, caste, community, and social group, and it is maintained and perpetuated through endogamy.⁴ The current scenario necessitates feminists working for women's emancipation in the context of India, based on the ground realities as experienced by all sectors of oppressed and marginalised women. Since Ambedkar's was himself a victim of oppression and discrimination in all its forms his views on women's oppression and equal rights are more useful than anyone else.

Dr. Ambedkar carried on Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's and his wife's pioneering work. He started involving women in his campaign for the abolition of caste prejudices right from the beginning. He realised that true mulnivasi progress could not be achieved unless the women themselves were liberated. He began inspiring the females. His first demand for adult franchise, which was granted in the early 1920s following brahmin resistance, offered voting rights to both untouchables and women. That was the start of a new age for women's

liberation. Dr. Ambedkar then included women, particularly mulnivasi women, in the movement. During the Mahad Tank fight in December 1927, on the first day (of the second leg) when the procession was carried out, women marched alongside men. On the second day, Dr. Ambedkar only spoke to women. He urged them to join the fight against the caste system's oppression. He highlighted to them that men alone will not be able to defeat this threat. His key point was the "importance of women's participation in the combat against depression."

He also urged the women to be ready for a cultural shift. He advised them to modify their clothing styles, get rid of useless decorations they used to wear all the time, send their daughters to school, maintain hygiene, and so on. His lecture was so powerful that women threw away their unwanted jewellery right there in the meeting. The next day, the women were seen wearing completely different outfits. As a result of Dr. Ambedkar's efforts, mulnivasi women's attitudes have shifted dramatically giving extra impetus to the movement.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was a staunch proponent of family planning. In 1938, he underlined the importance of family planning. He introduced a Maternity Benefit Bill in 1942 as a Labour Minister of the Governor General's Executive Council. Nobody had ever considered it at the time. Because he was the 14th kid in the family, he even chastised his own parents in public addresses. This demonstrated his care for the women's welfare.

Dr. Ambedkar was also a proponent of women's self-organization. On July 20, 1942, Nagpur hosted a landmark women's convention. A total of 25,000 mulnivasi women attended the seminar. He advised the women in his lecture to be progressive and to get rid of traditionalism, ritualism, and customary behaviors that were impeding their advancement. He also advised them to avoid early marriages and instilling inferiority complexes in their children.⁵

Through the constitution of India, as the chairman of the constitution drafting committee, Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in granting equal status

to all the citizens irrespective of sex, religion etc. Thus the women, contrary to their low status as per Hindu law books, were for the first time got equal status lawfully. He provided several provisions in the constitution for protecting the welfare and civil rights of women. Social reform consisted of reform of the family system and religious reform. Family reform included abolition of practices like child-marriage etc. This was important mainly because it involved upliftment of women. Reforms regarding marriage and divorce laws for instance, would benefit women who were as oppressed as the untouchables. . 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. In turn, Dr. Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet expressing his discontent over non acceptance of woman's right by the parliament. Ambedkar strongly criticized the degradation of women in the Indian society. He believed that women were entitled to an equal status with men and that they must have the right to education.⁶ While he organised the untouchables, he always called upon women of the untouchable community to come forward and participate in social and political movements.⁷ Dr. Ambedkar described the Hindu Code Bill as compatible with Hindu scriptures. He said the right to property is according to Brihaspat Smriti, support for divorce is given in Parashar Smriti, so if the Hindus want to continue on the traditional path, the does not stop them from doing so.⁸ Ambedkar was very clear in his views when he spoke in the parliament that if Hindu society, culture and religion has to survive it is now mandatory to repair those parts of Hindu society which have now broken-down.

Dr. Ambedkar's Hindu Code Bill's concepts and principles were incorporated in the constitution in four parts. 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 were incorporated in the Hindu Code Bill on the basis of the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar. These laws transformed women's position and gave them the power to adopt, inherit,

and own property, which Manu had completely forbidden them. It was all due to the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar that the women got equal standing in the society vis-a-vis men.⁹

Dr. Ambedkar tried to provide an adequate protection of women's right both politically and constitutionally. i.e. 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.¹⁰ Article 39 - Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 - Human conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 51 (A) (C) - Fundamental duties to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women.¹¹ Article 46 - 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.¹² Article 47 - The state to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health and so on.¹³ Article 243D (3), 243T (3) & 243R (4) provides for allocation of seats in the Panchayati Raj System.¹⁴

In recent past, a lot hue and cry is being made over 'Women's Reservation Bill' by the different sections of the Indian society, different political or apolitical organizations but nobody seems to be honest in its perspectives. The political empowerment is a must for the all round development of the women, but as in the case of dalit politicians and legislators, our efforts may prove futile. We must concentrate on imparting social education before giving any concrete shape to their political empowerment to the women. Without academic and social education, the political empowerment of women in certain parts of the country had proved futile.

In Panchayat Raj set up in U.P. and elsewhere in the country, the uneducated women are subjected to exploitation at the hands of government machinery. It will not be prudent on our part to restore the rights of the women belonging to the affluent section of the society only. Therefore,

our efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of Indian women by giving their due share.¹⁵

Now the question arises as what sort of empowerment our women needed prior to restarting their equal property rights? There is lot of nodal agencies including the national Commission for Women said to have been working for the welfare of the women apart from governmental efforts. Where do they reach in this direction? Leaving a meager number of urban and suburban women, the Indian women are still crying for simple justice, which is not even allowed to have been accessed to them. With their age, no bar, they have been raped, kicked, killed, subdued & humiliated almost daily. Why? Because of our indifferent attitude towards them. This indifferent attitude and approach appears from the time of the birth of female child.¹⁶ They are subjected to rebuke and ignored so far as their education and other facilities are concerned which are required for their proper and healthy growth/development. The male child is given preference over the female child? With this attitude of our own, we use to suppress and remained unfair towards the fair sex.

Today women are on the road to progress. Day by day they are soaring higher and higher. But vast majority of women are still far behind. Let us be a little bit honest to diagnose the illness by taking into consideration all the aspects and aspirations in changed scenario, circumstances and atmosphere. Only then we could have a perfect planning to achieve our cherished aim that is empowerment of Indian women and could be able to restore their property and other rights in order to bring her at par with other human beings. This could be achieved only if we are able to blow up the traditional restrictions by using dynamite as affirmed by none else than Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the emancipator of the millions including Indian women. Ambedkar was of the view that "I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women had achieved" This clearly showed how he wanted to promote the well-being of the women.

¹ Kamlesh Sharma - Baba Saheb Ambedkar: Life and Work

² Sohanlal Shastri – Hindu Code Bill aur Dr. Ambedkar.

³ K.S. Chalam – Modernization and Dalit Education Ambedkar’s Vision.

⁴ S. N. Choudhry - Dr. Ambedkar on Caste and Hindu Religion: An Appraisal.

⁵ A. C. Jena - Panchayat Raj and the interest of the Weaker sections.

⁶ Sohanlal Shastri – Hindu Code Bill aur Dr. Ambedkar.

⁷ R. D. Maurya - Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Social Justice.

⁸ Sohanlal Shastri – Hindu Code Bill aur Dr. Ambedkar speech on 11 January 1950 at Siddharth College, Bombay.

⁹ D.C. Ahir - The Legacy of Dr. Ambedkar.

¹⁰ D.D. Basu – Introduction to the Constitution of India.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ G Nancharaiah - Dr. Ambedkar’s Political and Economic Thought.

¹⁶ Bharati - Indian Women Through Ages.