

# **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Vision on Women's Empowerment**

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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution may be regarded as one of the greatest intellectual and social reformers of modern India for his pioneering contribution in reforming the Hindu social order. He not only struggled throughout his life for the emancipation of social status of the underprivileged and women in Indian society, he is one of the few Indian social and political thinkers, who has done original thinking on the Hindu social order and the status of women within the Hindu society. Exposed to the Western ideas of humanism and rational thinking, Dr. Ambedkar was appalled at the low status of women in Hindu society. He not only worked hard at the grassroots level to raise awareness about the degraded status of women in India but also wrote extensively to counter the views on gender relations sanctioned by *Shastras* and upheld by tradition.

Through his writings, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar unravels the inequality and injustice inherent in the Hindu social order that perpetuates inequality and subordination of women in a systemic manner. In his treatises, “**The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women**”, “**The Women and Counter-Revolution**”, and “**The Riddle of Women**”, Dr. Ambedkar has analyzed how gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only molds the attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to conform to a stereotype feminine behavior. He worked hard to challenge the iniquitous gender relations under the Hindu social order so that Hindu society could be reconstructed along the modern

democratic ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

### **Contribution**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar studied extensively the Hindu *Shastras* and *Smritis* to find out the root cause of the degraded status of women in India. In his article, “**The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman**”, he made a historical study of women’s status in ancient India and the factors that led to a decline in their status in later years. He points out that during the pre-Manu days, women occupied a very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country. That a woman was entitled to *upanayana* is clear from the Atharvaveda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage after having finished her Brahmacharya. From the *Shrauta Shrutras*, women could repeat the Mantras of the Vedas. Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* bears testimony to the fact that women attended *Gurukul* (College) and studied the various *Shakhas* (sections) of the Vedas.

Similarly, Patanjali’s *Mahabhasya* shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. Women also entered public discussions with men on various subjects like religion, philosophy, and metaphysics. The stories of public disputation between Janak and Sulabha, Yajnavalkya and Gargi, Yajnavalkya, and Maitreyi, and Sankracharya and Vidyadhari show that Indian women in pre-Manudays could attain the highest pinnacle of learning and education.

In **“The Woman and Counter-Revolution”** and **“The Riddle of Women,”** Dr. B. R. Ambedkar asserts that women in pre-Manu days were highly respected and cannot be disputed. In the days of Kautilya, marriages were posting puberty is clear from *Baudhayanas Grihya Sutras* where an expiatory ceremony is specially prescribed in the case of a bride passing her menses on her marriage. Unlike Manu, Kautilya’s idea of marriage is monogamy and women could also claim divorce on the grounds of mutual enmity and hatred. Further, there was no ban on women or widows remarrying. Economic independence was guaranteed to married women during the days of Kautilya is clear from the various provisions in *Arthashastra* relating to the wife’s endowment and maintenance. Dr. Ambedkar holds that there was a downfall in the status of women in India due to severe restrictions imposed on them by Manu.

## **Manusmriti and Gender Discrimination**

The women in Pre-Manu days enjoyed respectable status in Hindu society. Women were free and enjoyed equal status along with men in matters of education, divorce, remarriage, and economic independence. The deterioration in the status of women in society began with the imposition of severe restrictions on them under the influence of Manusmriti. Manu held a very low opinion about women. According to Manusmriti, women are not to be trusted for it is in their nature to seduce men. Men are forbidden to sit in a lonely place even with one's mother, sister, or daughter. Women are not to be free under any circumstances, day and night. Women must be kept dependent on the males of their families, 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. Though devoid of virtues, a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. Manu did not give the right to divorce to women under any circumstance while allowing a man to give up his wife at the same time. Indeed, man was allowed to abandon and even sell his wife. Even after repudiation by her husband, she was not released from her husband and could not become a legitimate wife of another. A wife could be subjected to corporal punishment by her husband reducing her status to that of a slave. Like *Shudras*, a woman was forbidden by Manu to study Vedas. Offering sacrifices, the very soul of religion was forbidden to be performed by women. In matters of property, a wife was reduced to the level of a slave as she was not allowed to have any dominion over property. Thus, under the influence of Dharamshastras (*Manusmriti*), women were held in bondage lifelong and were deprived of basic human rights like the right to education, property, and the right to study religious scripture. Dr. Ambedkar points out that *Shastras*, Caste, and Endogamy – the three important pillars of patriarchy in Hindu society were responsible for discriminatory practices against women and their degradation in social status.

## **Struggle Towards Gender Equality**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's approach to women's empowerment is entirely different from other social reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Mahatma Gandhi who tried to reform the Hindu society of certain outdated customs and practices without questioning the hierarchical social order. His approach also

differed from the Bhakti movement which preached brotherhood without attacking the iniquitous Hindu social order that was based on a graded system of caste hierarchy. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar began to voice his concern about the low status of women in Indian society while he was still studying at Columbia University. He perceived education as a catalyst for accelerated change. He began to raise his voice for the liberation of women through his newspapers *Mook Nayak* launched in 1920 and *Bahishkrit Bharat* in 1927. Through his writings in these newspapers, he raised the issue of gender inequality prevalent in Hindu society and the need for women's education to raise their social status. He involved women in his social reform movements against social evils and demanded socio-economic and political rights for the depressed classes and women.

On 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927 at a Conference of Depressed Classes held at Mahad, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar made a bonfire of Manusmriti in the presence of more than fifty women to protest the discrimination of women and untouchables upheld by it. At the end of the Conference, Dr. Ambedkar also addressed a meeting of about three thousand women of the Depressed Classes, the first meeting of its kind in modern India, and urged them to dress well and live a clean life. Do not feed your spouse and sons if they are drunk. Send your children to schools. Education is as necessary for females as it is for males.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar championed the cause of women within the Legislative Council as well. As a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, he raised the problems of Indian women in the discussion within the Council and sought their solutions. His arguments on the Maternity Benefit Bill and Birth Control were quite relevant to recognize the dignity of women. Supporting the Maternity Benefit Bill for women laborers in his speech, he said: It is in the interest of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the prenatal period and subsequently, and the principle of the Bill is based entirely on that principle.

That being so Sir, I am bound to admit that the burden of this ought to be largely borne by the government. I am prepared to admit this fact because the conservation of the people's welfare is primarily the concern of the government. And in every country, you will find that the government has been subjected to a certain amount of charge about maternity

benefits.

In January 1928, a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife as its president. Along with the Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur in August 1930, women also had their separate conference. In the famous Kalaram temple entry movement at Nasik launched in March 1930, about five hundred women participated in the non-violent Satyagraha, and many of them were arrested along with men and ill-treated in jails. To face torture along with their men, women also organized their *Samata Sainik Dal*. When Dr. Ambedkar returned to India after attending the Round Table Conference in 1932, hundreds of women were present for the committee meetings. At various places, depressed classes women's conferences were held and they began to present their demands assertively. The encouragement by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar empowered women to speak out boldly about their feelings. In a press conference held in 1931, Radhabai Vadale said, "We should get the right to enter the Hindu temples, to fill water at their water sources. We call these social rights. We should also get the political right to rule, sitting near the seat of the Viceroy. We do not 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 battlefield 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 Dr. Ambedkar.

In his address at the Depressed Classes Women's Conference held at Nagpur on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1942 under the presidentship of Mrs. Sulochanabai Dongre in which 25,000 women attended, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar said, "I am a great believer in women's ss ss organizations. 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". He also underlined that women should learn to be clean and keep themselves away from vices. They should educate their children and still have high ambitions for them. Speaking on marriage and parental responsibilities, he advised women to get married only when they are financially able. They should stand by their husband as a friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. He reminded them that having too many children is a crime. The paternal duty lies in giving each child a

better start than its parents had. He concluded his address, “I am sure if you follow this advice, you will bring honor and glory to yourselves.”

The extent of awakening achieved among the women of downtrodden classes was visible from the fact that the Women’s Conference demanded the abolition of polygamy and urged institutions of pensions and leave with pay for women workers.

As the first Law Minister of independent India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar introduced the Hindu Code Bill in Parliament on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1951 to codify Hindu laws about marriage, divorce, and inheritance that sought to give equal rights to women vis-a-vis men in these aspects. However, the bill was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindu opinion because it would lead to the break-up of the Hindu social order (patriarchy) if the bill was passed in that form. The government lacked the political will to pilot the bill through Parliament and decided to withdraw it. To register his protest against the government in action, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar resigned from the Union Cabinet.

### **Conclusion**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar not only wrote extensively to counter the orthodox Hindu opinion against women but worked as an activist and social reformer at the grassroots level to organize and empower women of depressed classes so that they could fight to reclaim their social rights such as the right to drink water from their source and right to enter the temple that was traditionally denied to them by the caste Hindus. It was due to the encouragement of Dr. Ambedkar that a large number of women came out openly on the public streets to reclaim their social rights and self-respect.

As a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was at the forefront of championing the cause of women’s empowerment by forcefully arguing for the passage of the Maternity Benefit Bill. As the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. Ambedkar made a pioneering contribution in introducing Articles 14,15,16, 39, and 42 in the Indian Constitution that guarantees protection to women from any kind of discrimination. As the Law Minister in the Union Cabinet, Dr. Ambedkar made every effort for the passage of the Hindu Code Bill despite staunch opposition from vested interests. This shows the great importance he attached to the cause of gender equality in India.

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