



Dalit Women in India and Ambedkar : The road to Gender Equality in 21st century

Dr Anu

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

Dr B. R. Ambedkar

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar not only championed the cause of social justice for the downtrodden and underprivileged sections of Indian society but also worked tirelessly throughout his life to challenge the legitimacy of orthodox Hindu social order that upheld iniquitous gender relations in an institutionalized manner. His mission in life was to recreate Hindu society along the modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. The paper analyzes the contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a thinker and social reformer in the emancipation of social status of women in the Hindu society. The paper also analyzes the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary feminist discourse on gender equality under Indian social conditions. His main argument is that gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to conform to a stereotype feminine behavior.

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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of Indian Constitution may be regarded as one of greatest intellectual and social reformer of modern India for his pioneering contribution in reforming Hindu social order. He not only struggled throughout his life for the emancipation of social status of the underprivileged and women in the Indian society, he is one amongst 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 the 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 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”, “The Riddle of Women”, and “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, Dr. Ambedkar has analyzed the manner in which gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds 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.

The paper also analyzes the relevance of his ideas in the contemporary feminist discourse on gender equality under Indian social conditions. Dr.B.R Ambedkar studied extensively the Hindu Shastras and Smritis to find out the root cause of degraded status of women in India. In his article, “The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman”, he made a historical study of the 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 upanayan is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From the Shrauta Shrutras, it is clear that 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 into public discussion 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 shows that Indian women in pre-Manu days could attain the highest pinnacle of learning and education. In the articles, "The Woman and Counter Revolution" and "The Riddle of Women", Dr. B. R. Ambedkar asserts that women in pre-Manu days were highly respected cannot be disputed. In the days of Kautilya, marriages were post puberty is clear from Baudhayan's Grihya Sutras where an expiatory ceremony is specially prescribed in the case of a bride passing her menses on the occasion of her marriage. Unlike Manu, Kautilya's idea of marriage is monogamy and women could also claim divorce on the ground of mutual enmity and hatred. Further, there was no ban on woman or a widow remarrying. Economic independence was guaranteed to married women during days of Kautilya is clear from the various provisions in Arthashastra relating to wife's endowment and maintenance. Dr. Ambedkar holds that there was a down fall in the status of women in India due to severe restrictions imposed on them by Manu. In his paper presented for the anthropology seminar of Dr. A.A. Goldenweiser at Columbia University, USA in May 1916 on, "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development", Dr. B. R. Ambedkar unravels the genesis, mechanism and spread of caste system in India and its consequences for gender relations on the Hindu society.

His broad vision can be summed up: "Caste in India means an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.----Thus, the conclusion is inevitable that endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. ----The superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste.----A caste is an enclosed class". In other words, caste system was created by preventing intermarriage between different classes. The resulting disparity between marriageable units of the two sexes within a caste group (as a consequence of artificial parceling of the Hindu society) was resolved by observance of certain highly obnoxious/ inhuman customs, namely, Sati or burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, enforced widowhood and child marriage. This consequently led to decline in the social status of women in the Hindu society. In other words, Dr. Ambedkar viewed caste system and the customary practices associated with it as largely responsible for the degradation of women in contemporary Indian society. Manusmriti and Gender Discrimination The women in Pre-Manu days enjoyed respectable status in the Hindu society. Women were free and enjoyed equal status along with men in matters of education, divorce, remarriage and economic independence. The deterioration in status of women in the 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.

Dr. Ambedkar points out that Shastras, Caste and Endogamy – the three important pillars of patriarchy in Hindu society – were responsible for discriminatory practice 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 Bhakti movement which preached brotherhood without attacking the iniquitous Hindu social order that was based on graded system of caste hierarchy. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's mission in life was to challenge the ideological foundations of graded system of caste hierarchy that denied equality, freedom and human dignity to women in Hindu society.



He believed that society should be based on reason and not on atrocious tradition of caste system. Therefore, in order to reconstruct Hindu society along modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity, he suggests in “The Annihilation of Caste System” that Hindu minds should be purged from the thralldom of the Shastras. To quote him, “Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry without your telling him or her to do so”. He found education, inter-caste marriage and inter-dinning as methods by which caste and patriarchy maintained through endogamy can be eliminated. Dr.B. R. Ambedkar began to voice his concern about the low status of women’sin Indian society while he was still studying in 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 MookNayak 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 of 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. In Mar 1927, Dr. Ambedkar launched Mahad Satyagraha to assert the right of untouchables to take water from Chawdar Tank at Mahad. Accompanied by thousands of men and women in this historic march, Dr. Ambedkar remarked that the movement is to liberate society from out worn traditions and evil customs imposed ruthlessly and upheld religiously by a vast society upon its weaker and helpless constituent and to restore human rights and dignity to them.¹⁰ On December 25, 1927 at a Conference of Depressed Classes held at Mahad, Dr.B. R.Ambedkar made a bonfire of Manusmriti in presence of more than fifty women to protest against 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 necessary for females as it is for males. Speaking on the burning of Manusmriti later in 1938, he said, “The bonfire of Manusmriti was quite intentional. It was a very cautious and drastic step but was taken with a view to forcing the attention of Caste Hindus. ----- We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries-----”. 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----. 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 ascertain amount of charge with regard to maternity benefit. In January 1928, a women’s association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai, Ambedkar’s wife as its President.

Dr Ambedkar believed with the Saint Tukaram that destruction of the wicked was also a form of non-violence. Dr.B. R. Ambedkar after taking over as the first Law Minister of independent India, introduced Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament in February 5, 1951 so as to codify Hindu laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance that sought to give equal rights to women vis-à-vis men in these aspects. However, the bill was strongly opposed by orthodox Hindu opinion on the ground that it would lead to break-up of Hindu social order (patriarchy) if the bill was passed in that form. The government lacked political will to pilot the bill through Parliament and decided to withdraw it. To register his protest against government inaction,Dr. B. R.Ambedkar resigned from the Union Cabinet. Relevance of His Ideas Dr. B.R.Ambedkar was a great champion of gender equality is clear from his various writings on Hindu social order. In order to find out the root cause of degraded status of women in Hindu



society, he studied Shastras, Smritis, Buddhist literature, Kautilya's Arthshastra and so on.

Dr Ambedkar was a true iconoclast and known for his eclectic approach. He devoted himself to a critical appraisal of these historical and religious texts and later on established the fact that while women in Pre- Manu days enjoyed equal social status vis-à-vis men and even were economically independent, their status declined in the post-Manu period under the influence of Manusmriti. That is to say, the social institutions of caste and endogamy upheld by Manusmriti were largely responsible for decline in the social status of women in the Hindu society.

The inseparability of caste and gender inequality in the conceptualization of Hindu social order by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is an important theoretical input in understanding the hurdles to empowerment of women in the Indian social milieu and needs to be taken note of by the Indian feminists. In other words, any feminist discourse/agenda for the empowerment of Indian women must take into account the realities of Shastras (Manusmriti), Caste and Endogamy –the three important pillars of Hindu social order –that moulds Hindu minds and deny equal social status to women in matters of entitlement of rights, property, and inheritance. 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 grass roots level to organize and empower women of depressed classes so that they could fight to reclaim their social rights such as right to drink water from their source and right to enter temple that were traditionally denied to them by the caste Hindus. It was due to the encouragement by 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 in the forefront in championing the cause of women's empowerment by forcefully arguing for the passage of Maternity Benefit Bill. As the Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee, Dr. Ambedkar made an unparalleled contribution in introducing Articles 14, 15, 16, 39,42 in the Indian Constitution which guarantee protection to women from any kind of discrimination and second grade citizenship. Also as the Law Minister in the first Union Cabinet in the Independent India, Dr. Ambedkar initiated the process and played a leadership role for the passage of Hindu Code Bill despite staunch opposition from orthodox sections which believed in the inherent inferiority of women.

This shows the great importance he attached to the cause of gender equality in India. While Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has made a notable contribution towards the emancipation of Indian women through his rich and illuminating interpretations of Hindu social order (based on graded system of Caste hierarchy and gender inequality), the contemporary feminist discourse in India has largely ignored this rich classic literature. However, it needs to be realized that any feminist discourse on gender equality in India in isolation of social institution of caste would be a futile exercise as women as a category undifferentiated by caste does not exist for feminists to mobilize. Unless this social reality dawns on Indian feminists, they would be devoid of any concrete agenda that truly empowers common women. There is, therefore, a need for Indian feminists to turn to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to understand the complex matrix of caste and gender so as to build a counter narrative that challenges the hegemony of patriarchal Hindu social order which reproduces gender inequality and violence in a systematic manner.

Conclusion

Dr Ambedkar's contribution in the making of Modern India is known to all and his fast growing appeal and following is largely attributed to his ideas for not only empowerment of women but also providing them appropriate and equal representation in all the spheres and particularly the decision making process. The present



paper has sought to underline his remarkable contribution in the upliftment of all women in general and dalit women in particular. As Sharmila Rege has rightly pointed out that feminism movement must reclaim Ambedkar for its natural growth, this paper clearly brings out how the idea of women empowerment would have remained partial and incomplete without his idea of equal opportunity and equal representation. Many feel that the present deadlock about the 33 per cent of women reservation in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies and other aspects of Gender equality would have found effective remedy and resolution under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar.

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3. Shrauta Shutra refer to Brahmanic Vedic ritual manuals. Shrauta derives from shruti which means revealed texts, passed on orally. It belongs to the early late – Vedic period and pre-date the Smritis.
4. Patanjali was a Sanskrit grammarian (of second century CE).
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