



# B.R. Ambedkar's Contribution in Emancipation of Indian Women

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## Introduction :

The issue of emancipation has been a burning issue all through the human history. Empowerment can be defined as a person's capacity to make effective choices and to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The scope of empowerment is quite broad-based as it includes in its fold the civil, political, social, economic and cultural participation and rights. In India's context, historically, women enjoyed high status and position during ancient Vedic age. It was a golden era for them, as they had full liberty, equality and dignity. However, their position started deteriorating during post-Vedic age and turned from bad to worse in Mughal and British India. Women during this period were expected to be subjected to men all their lives, first to fathers and brothers, then to husband and lastly to their sons.<sup>2</sup> Her position was most unpleasant from her birth to her death. Her woes reached its climax in the worst form of sati, girl foeticide and killing of girl child. Woman then was considered to be completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no personality of her own. Women's main objective was considered to minister men's physical pleasure and wants.<sup>3</sup> In 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, before India gained Independence, some religious organizations like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj, led by Raja Ram Mohan Rai and Swami Dayanand, respectively, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Lord William Bentinck, Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule (all in 19<sup>th</sup> century), Mahatma Gandhi, Sarla Devi, Durgabai Deshmukh, and B.R. Ambedkar (all in 20<sup>th</sup> century), made genuine efforts to bring about the liberation of women. Notably, Ambedkar's contribution in the upliftment and

empowerment of women had been tremendous. He was one of the first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of women in India. He believed in the equality, and dignity of women, and made all out efforts to achieve these for them. This paper is designed to analyse succinctly the role played by B.R. Ambedkar in the betterment of women in pre and post independent India.

### **Objective and Research Method :**

The present research work, as noted, is undertaken with an objective to assess and evaluate the dynamics of B.R. Ambedkar's efforts in the emancipation and empowerment of women in the pre and post independence era, in India, as Member of Legislative Assembly, Labour and Law Minister in independent India, Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee and also as social, economic as well as legal reformer. It will also be our endeavour to draw inferences and conclusions of the study on the basis of such an analysis.

This research work is based on secondary data drawn from books, journals, government reports, and speeches delivered by Ambedkar, and also from internet sources, which have been duly acknowledged.

### **Analysis and Findings :**

B.R. Ambedkar firmly believed that unless women are empowered to participate alongside men in the development process, development efforts will only have partial effect. He held the opinion that women must have equal capabilities such as education and health and equal access to resources and opportunities such as land and employment, and at the same time, must have the agency to use these capabilities and resources to make the choices. Since he was an intellectual, he approached the problem in a systematic manner first by understanding the root cause of women's woes in the society and then attacking these and making serious dent in their problems. After having deep understanding of the causes of the problem of pitiable plight of women in contemporary India, he opined that the lower position of women is embedded in the very nature of Hindu Social Order, and its scriptures particularly, the Manusmriti. He therefore attacked Manusmriti, vehemently, as it had irrational and inhuman description of women where they had

no power and they were not equal partners in life with men.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Manu, according to him, was responsible for the fall of Hindu women during post-Vedic era. In Ambedkar's famous book titled 'The rise and fall of Hindu Women' (1988), he quoted verses of Manusmriti to explain the social understanding of the position of women. He pointed out that Manusmriti painted a picture of women as creatures known for their disposition – love for ornaments, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct, and thus women needed to be controlled vigilantly by the guardians. Manusmriti is loaded fully against women. It did not offer the right to divorce to woman. A wife did not have any right over property, and is reduced to the level of a slave in the matter of property as per Manusmriti. Further, the husband had the right to beat his wife. She has no right in selecting a spouse of her own choice, and she had to worship her husband faithfully. And killing a woman was only a minor offence in the eyes of law. She has no right to knowledge, and the study of Vedas was forbidden to her. In brief, the social principles put forward by Manu, according to Ambedkar, resulted in degrading the status of women in Hindu Society. Ambedkar had realized that Hindu Social Order based on Manusmriti, Hindus and also Muslims, both suffered as the principles followed in the society were not based on equality, justice and fraternity.

Ambedkar started his movement against the plight of dalits in general and women in particular in 1920, by bringing a journal 'Mook Nayak'. Another general namely 'Bahiskrit Bharat' was also published by him in 1927. Through these publications, he put due stress on gender equality and the need for women education, and articulated their problems. In January 1928, a women association was founded in Bombay for making their entry to a temple and for self-respect. He was convinced that Hindu Society could be changed from within, and, therefore, he took recourse to law and involvement of the state machinery. While making submission before the Simon Commission (1928), he wanted that the government be made responsible to ensure the spread of education among the masses without any discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, sex and creed.<sup>5</sup> The greater emphasis on law and legal measures for bringing about a just social order was a prominent feature of Ambedkar's social and political idea. And to make these more practical and workable, he also raised the social conscience of the masses through social re-engineering and through education. Because education makes man enlightened, makes him aware

of his self-respect and also helps him to lead a better life, materially. He argued that rights are not protected by laws but by social and moral conscience of society, and also serve as instruments for women emancipation and empowerment for their better future.

While in Bombay Legislative Assembly (1942-46) and as Labour Member of Viceroy's Executive Council, Ambedkar initiated and strongly advocated schemes for the betterment of women. He advocated abolition of unjust social practices like child marriage and *devdasi* system. In 1942, as Labour Minister, he introduced Maternity Benefit Bill. He also wanted the bill not to be confined to the Bombay Presidency alone but to the whole of India. He was also in favour of birth control measures, quite relevant to recognize the dignity of women. According to him, birth control is the only sovereign specific remedy that can do away with all these calamities (untimely death, weak and handicapped child), and in no way gainful due to the addition of unwanted progeny.<sup>6</sup> There one can see the positive step towards women empowerment and the ability to make strategic life choices like whether or not to have children. Notably, he even criticised his own parents in public speeches because he himself was the 14<sup>th</sup> child in the family. This showed his concern to the well-being of the women.

Ambedkar introduced Hindu Code Bill as Law and Justice Minister in April 1947. He incorporated several women's rights while framing it. He fought on the bill and even resigned in 1951, over the non-acceptance fully of the women rights in it. However, the bill was passed in 1955-56, after it was split into four bills, incorporating the ideas and principles of Hindu Code Bill, formulated by Ambedkar. These bills gave independent status to women and endowed them with the right of adoption, succession and property, so completely denied by Manu.

He always raised his voice against all sorts of injustice towards women. He was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of Hindu Society. Jawahar Lal Nehru remarked on his death "His thoughts and teachings are useful and relevant even today, towards all the women, irrespective of their religion, castes and class, Baba had a particular humanitarianism view."

Ambedkar also wanted equal status and dignity between man and woman and thus also between husband and wife. He was against a master slave relation between the husband and wife.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, he advocated active participation of women in political activities, and he also involved women in all his social struggles. His political and legal approach would safeguard against exploitation and the basic ingredients of women empowerment. He gave women vanguard positions as he felt that their involvement would ensure success to all his endeavours.

As noted, his efforts and struggles were not confined to Hindu women alone but extended to Muslims as well. He also highlighted the issues of Muslim women. His secular perspective is known through his thoughts on 'Purdah' (veil) system and legal rights of Muslim women. According to Ambedkar's Indian Social Order : Women Hindu or Muslims were denied their dues in various ways. On Muslim women, wearing purdah, he said that it was contrary to the real purdah system of Islam and was having deteriorating effect upon the physical constitution of the Muslim women, and the isolation of males and females as a result is sure to produce bad effects on the morals of the men.<sup>8</sup> He even thought of betterment of women involved in the bad practices of prostitutions. And this had a salutary effect on these women and several of them abandoned their ignoble profession.

He also fought on the issue of economic discrimination against women. He believed that economic emancipation for women was pre-condition of women well-being. He wanted that the Hindu religion had deprived women of the right to property. In the Hindu Code Bill which he prepared, he took care that women should get an equal share in the family property. He introduced equal pay for equal work irrespective of the sex. On his economic ideas, A.K. Sen, a nobel laureate in Economics, admitted thus frankly "Ambedkar is my father in Economics." Further, as noted earlier, he created a sense of political awareness among the women. In order to create a spirit of self-assertion among women, they had to be given their own identity.

Throughout his life, he fought for the cause of dalits and women. As he got disenchanted with the Hindu Social Order, which was based on Manusmriti, he turned to Buddhism during the later days of his life in October 1956. For Ambedkar, Buddha was one of the main inspiring personalities in history, who raised a strong voice of protest against inequality between people and between men and women. He found Buddhism more liberal, as it allowed women to become an



ascetic who can acquire knowledge and can realize spiritual potentiality. Buddhism did not shun women and express any disdain for women. Buddhism was also free from caste boundaries like Hindu religion which was responsible for women subordination and exploitation, as it prevented marriage from outside the caste group and making it difficult most of the time to find suitable partners inside the prescribed circle of the caste. This situation was not limited to Hindu women only but the Muslim women as well as they were living in Hindu environment in India. However, after the decline of Buddha, women were again degraded to their unequal and low status under the newly made laws of Manusmriti.

It may, indispensably, be mentioned that Ambedkar paved a path of social justice for all women irrespective of religion, caste, creed etc. He brought a movement for upliftment of women through his thoughts, beliefs and actions. He will be remembered as the women liberator and champion of their rights. He fought for their equality and dignity. Ambedkar thoughts are still relevant in the prevailing scenario in India and would continue to inspire women in the fight against them in future as well, who constitute half of the human population. As a mark of respect, Ambedkar was bestowed with Bharat Ratna – India's highest civilian award, in 1990.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

It is evident from the foregoing analysis that Ambedkar was among the most outstanding organic intellectual of India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features against women. He gave them equal status in the society. His ideal society is based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. He made serious dent in the problems associated with women through social, political, economic and legal actions for their emancipation and empowerment in India. He encouraged women to take active part in all sphere of activities to strengthen their position in the society. For this, he adopted multi-pronged strategy for women empowerment in a highly hegemonised caste stratified society. No doubt, he will be remembered as the liberator and champion of women's rights. Ambedkar thoughts would be equally relevant in future as these continue to inspire contemporary women's issues. His legacy at improving the lot

of women through varied government actions is continuing in India, and his vision of women empowerment is in sight, some hindrances notwithstanding. He will be remembered for long, as a women's liberator and champion of their rights.

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