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Gender Egalitarianism In Ambedkar's Discourse- An Analysis

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Abstract: The nineteenth century was defined by the focus on rights and wrongs of Indian women while the discernable feature of twentieth century was the advent of female activism. This transition of women from the fringes towards center is attributed to efforts of modernizing reformists like B.R Ambedkar whose discourse is heavily loaded with women related issues and explicit desire for their emancipation. Upliftment of women was a part of his wider vision of restructuring an egalitarian social order. He sketched the origin of female subjugation in traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism and injunctions of lawgiver Manu. This made him repudiate the social edifice based on Hindu orthodoxy and champion reforms for socio legal equality of women. This paper is an insightful study which seeks to investigate how women were positioned in the political philosophy of B.R Ambedkar by poring over his writings and speeches. It also explores Ambedkar's critique of ancient Hindu texts and highlights his contribution in ameliorating the condition of the fair sex through appropriate legislations and constitutional provisions.

Keywords: Reforms, Caste, women emancipation, education, political movements, constitutional provisions, legislation.

The nineteenth and twentieth century were characterized by various reform movements aimed at uplifting the condition of women in India. The nature of reform movements in nineteenth century was subject to divergence in view-points. While a segment of scholars portrayed these reforms as proactive and constructive phenomenon, others have criticized these movements as retrogressive in the sense that they did not spur women to surface as independent individual identities. The critique underscores that these reformist movements were not genuinely feminist as they could not liberate women from traditional structures and

masculine dominance. These reforms were largely expounded by men and laid down fresh normative standards which the women were slated to abide by. The women did not develop their own standards according to their individual inclinations and intent.

The liberation of the fair sex gathered a great impetus in the twentieth century as they engaged themselves in various social and political movements. In this context, the role of social activists like B.R Ambedkar was commendable. Although he is widely acknowledged for his phenomenal contribution to the well-being of Dalit community and other oppressed castes, Ambedkar is rarely conceded as a feminist who had vociferously championed women's right to equality. He worked assiduously throughout his life to challenge the legitimacy of orthodox Hindu social order that endorsed highly reprehensible gender relations in an institutionalized manner. The principal argument of Ambedkar was that gender relations were artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only shaped the attitude of Hindus towards women but also conditioned women to adhere to a stereotyped feminine behavior. Exposed to western ideas of humanism and rational thinking, Dr. Ambedkar was dismayed at the low status of women in Hindu society. He not only strived to spread awareness about the degraded status of women at grassroots level but also wrote profusely to contend with the perspective on gender relations sanctioned by Shastras and sustained by tradition. His pursuit in life was to regenerate Hindu society along modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Dr Ambedkar had a deep concern for women empowerment which was apparent from his speeches. Addressing the Second All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference held on 20th July 1942 at Nagpur he said, *"I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women have achieved. I tell you a few things which I think you should bear in mind. Learn to be clean; keep free from all vices. Give education to your children. Instill ambition in them. Inculcate on their minds that they are destined to be great. Remove from them all inferiority complexes."* These words summarize how revered and elemental he perceived women to be in society and nation.

Among his distinguished works *'Riddles of Hindu Women'* stands out as an exposition of Ambedkar's discerning contemplation of women's rights, a topic often disregarded by many of his contemporaries and predecessors. While the fight against external adversaries particularly British Colonialism was a preeminent focal point of India's freedom struggle, Ambedkar waged another battle against domestic evils such like casteism and gender based discrimination. In his writings, Ambedkar deeply explored the root causes of women's backwardness during his times. He inferred that discrimination coupled with societal evils like Sati, child marriage, dowry, restrictive marriage rites impeded women from acquiring education and led to their isolation from the mainstream. Ambedkar's extensive review of Ancient Hindu texts divulged that women's rights were not always truncated, they were affirmed in a gracious way except in certain texts particularly Manusmriti. Ambedkar objected to the ideal of womanhood as delineated in Manusmriti. In his *'The Women and Counter Revolution'* and *'Riddles of Hinduism'* he proclaims that women in pre Manu days were highly

respected and occupied an exalted position in the intellectual and social life of the country. The women was entitled to Upanayan as is obvious from Athervaveda where a girl is considered as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From Shrauta Shastras it is apparent that women could repeat the Mantras of Vedas. Panini's Ashtadhyayi testifies that women attended Gurukul and studied shlokas. Similarly Patanjali's Mahabhashya portrays women as teachers who taught Vedas to girls. Women also undertook public discussions with men on diverse subjects like religion, philosophy and metaphysics. The stories of popular debates between male emperor Janak and female recluse Sulabha challenging gender norms, sage Yajnavalkya and women scholar Gargi, Yajnavalkya and his consort Maitri on Absolute self clearly show that Indian women in pre Manu days could scale zenith of learning and education.

In Kautilya's Arthshastra, post puberty marriages were the norm as the Baudhayana Griha Sutras prescribed an expiatory ceremony if the bride was menstruating on the occasion of her marriage. Unlike Manu, Kautilya stressed on monogamous marriages and believed that women could claim divorce on the ground of mutual enmity and hatred. Further, there was no bar on remarrying of women or a widow. Economic independence was assured to a woman during days of Kautilya as demonstrated by his pronouncements on a wife's endowments and maintenance. The disdain and degraded status of Indian women came from the restrictions imposed on them by Manu. Ambedkar consistently deprecated the edicts of Hindu Lawgiver and during Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, he and his followers burnt copies of Manusmriti.

In his paper '*Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development*' Dr. Ambedkar elucidated social evils regarding women prevailing in Hindu religion and in Muslim society which had something more in form of compulsory system of Purdah. Condemning Purdah system in his book *Pakistan or Partition of India* in 1945 he stated, "*These burka women walking in streets is one of the most hideous sights one can witness in India. Such seclusion cannot but have its deteriorating effect on physical constitution of Muslim Women. Purdah deprives Muslim women of mental and moral nourishment. Being completely secluded from the outer world, they engage in petty family quarrels with the result that they become narrow and restricted in their outlook.*" Dr. Ambedkar insisted that it is Buddhism which confers women status equal to men and regarded women capable of attaining spirituality.

In his noteworthy work '*The Women and Counter Revolution*' Ambedkar compares Buddhist and Brahmanical texts and contends that Aryan civilization was a barbarous period of Indian History which instituted the structures of women subjugation subsequently challenged by Buddhism. He exposes the hypocrisy of the Hindus who devotedly worshipped Goddesses since ancient times but subjected ordinary women to unfounded contempt, ill treatment, discrimination and injustice therefore confining her in the prison of patriarchy and depriving her of basic rights. Ambedkar called this attitude towards womenkind an insult to humanity as a whole- a kind of wrong doing which Buddha completely reverses by allowing their admission to Bhikkunis Sangha giving all women equal access to knowledge which would lead them to experience intellectual communion and making them equipped to lead the lives as dignified, rational and free

individuals. This was the first revolution against Hinduism but eventually Hinduism through its counter revolution reestablished the patriarchal social order which denied women the freedom they enjoyed under Buddhism.

Ambedkar considered education as a pivotal tool for social advancement of women with particular emphasis on providing equal educational opportunities for both males and females. He wrote in his newspapers *Mook Nayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat* about the significance of female education. In 3rd February 1928 edition of *Bahishkrit Bharat* he wrote, *“knowledge and learning are not for men alone; they are essential for women too...if you want sudhaaranaa for future generations, educating girls is very important. You cannot afford to forget my speech or to fail to put it into practice.”* Addressing the Second All India Depressed Classes Women’s Conference held on 20th July 1942 at Nagpur he said, *“Education is necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress.”* The discernments gained from the works of B.R Ambedkar accentuate this, underlining the transformative potential of education in addressing gender disparities and nurturing inclusive development. Ambedkar’s advocacy of women’s education mirrors a thoughtful acknowledgment of its role in undoing deep-rooted inequalities.

Ambedkar never envisioned women as inactive or submissive subjects, rather he visualized them as empowered beings who could shape their own lives. He believed in constructing a supporting environment for women to unleash themselves as productive members of society. He involved women along with the depressed classes in his political movements for social justice and equality. In March 1927, Ambedkar launched the 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, Ambedkar remarked that the movement was to liberate society from moth balled traditions and evil customs imposed ruthlessly and upheld religiously by a vast society upon its weaker and helpless constituents and to restore human rights and dignity to them. In his famous Kalaram temple entry movement at Nasik launched in March 1930 several women participated in non- violent Satyagraha. Dr, Ambedkar exclaimed, *“I strongly believe in the movements run by women. If they are truly taken in to confidence, they may change the present picture of society which is very miserable. In past, they have a significant role in improving the condition of weaker sections of society.”*

Ambedkar was not only a proficient intellectual but also a man of action. Beyond his theoretical contemplations, he made meaningful contributions to the elevation of women. His appreciable contribution extends to the Mines Maternity Benefit Act where he played a starring role in drafting legislation in 1928 .As a member of Bombay Legislative Council, his urgings on Maternity Benefit Bill and Birth Control were quiet apposite to recognition of 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 also subsequently and the bill is based entirely on that principle....That being so, Sir I am bound to admit that burden of this ought to be largely borne by the government. I am prepared to*

admit this fact because the conservation of people's welfare is primarily the concern of government. And in every country you will find that the government has been subjected to certain amount charge with regard to maternity benefit." He was the leading protagonist of equal pay for equal work irrespective of sex.

However, the apex of Ambedkar's association with gender justice was witnessed during the Hindu Code Bill debates. As a law minister during Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar proclaimed that the prevailing Hindu law expressly dealing with inheritance and succession led to bias against the female heir. He perceived Hindu Code Bill as a solid footing for reform of Hindu society as it diverged from existing Hindu personal law in its reorganization of inheritance, dowry, marriage and divorce. Changes made to upgrade the socio legal status of women were among the most disputatious.

Perhaps the most pugnacious provision was related to the right of daughter to inherit property from father who had died intestate. The first iteration of the bill made the daughter a full or first class successor to the property of father. However, the share they were entitled to was only half of the son. This difference was supposedly offset by the addition of the son as one half successor to the estate of mother. Ambedkar underscored that that this exchange will put son and daughter on an equal foothold in all legal matters. Nonetheless, he accepted that there was still likelihood of partial division of the combined family estate particularly in the event of incongruence between personal wealth of the father and mother. To address this imbalance, the third draft promoted both equity and uniformity by giving daughter full share in father's property and the son a full share in mother's property. Another debatable provision concerned the right of women to exercise absolute control over property they inherited through the male line. Ambedkar challenged the arguments against women holding absolute property. Defenders of status quo claimed it would be dangerous to leave women subject to the influences of all sorts of wily men who may influence them in one way or the other to dispose the property both to the detriment of themselves and as well as to the detriment of family from which they have inherited the family property. Ambedkar shelved this claim by pointing out that women were already trusted to dispose of property they inherited through female line. Logic, consistency and the principle of gender equality enshrined within the draft constitution necessitated that they should be able to dispose of property they inherited from male line as well. The draft code also projected weighty changes to the dowry system. New provisions required a girl's dowry to be held in trust until she reached the age of eighteen so that the husband and his relations could not waste that property and leave her in lurch for the rest of life. Finally, the bill also made substantial changes in the laws surrounding marriage most striking of which were provisions related to restricted polygamy and those that introduced the option of divorce.

Ambedkar's defence of Hindu Code Bill was indicative of both his yearning to rebut the reproaches of Hindu orthodoxy and the modernizing stimulus that strengthened his determination to reform the socio legal status of Indian women. But Hindu Code Bill encountered firm opposition from Congress government and other opposition parties. Intuiting that the government was not in favor of Bill, Ambedkar tendered his resignation in protest. The resignation revealed how the parliament of independent India evicted its women citizens of

even basic rights. However, most of the provisions proposed by Ambedkar were later passed during 1955-56 in four Bills on Hindu Marriage, Succession, Minority and guardianship and Maintenance. These four Acts granted women unmatched assistance in shaping their lives and attaining equal status in society.

Ambedkar was a social ideologue who endorsed the spirit of constitutionalism with befitting rights and dignity for women. As the chairman of Drafting Committee of Constitution, he endeavored for an adequate inclusion of women's rights in the political terminology and Constitution of India. The principle is cherished in Preamble, Fundamental rights, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. His reformist approach towards women emancipation is apparent in various articles of Constitution which offer women equity which they were historically deprived of. Art 14 provides equal rights and opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. Art 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex. Art 15(3) enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women. Article 16 mentions there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office without any discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, creed and sex. Art 39 and 39 (d) state equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Art 42 guides the state to make provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Art 51(A) describes fundamental duty to renounce practices derogatory to dignity of women whereas Art 243 D (3), 243T(3), 243R(4) provides for allocation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj System.

Ambedkar did immense work to ameliorate the condition of Indian women. He questioned the religious scriptures from standpoint of equality and his legislative strivings to enshrine gender justice in the Indian constitution are expressive pointers of egalitarian outlook. His attitude towards female emancipation wasn't simply pretentious but a realist vision to make certain equal bargaining power for women in the socio-legal framework. He said, "*Unity is meaningless without the accompaniment of women, Education is fruitless without educated women and Agitation is incomplete without the strength of women.*" He has bequeathed a lasting legacy of thoughts which will continue to enthuse social reconstruction based on gender egalitarianism.

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