

Rethinking Women Empowerment and Development Discourse from Ambedkar's Perspective

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Abstract: The UN document of 1997 proclaims that – if development is not engendered, it is endangered. This view was also highlighted in colour choice of India's Economic Survey 2017-18. The Pink colour of the survey addressed the deeply ingrained societal issues against women and called for a collective self-reflection by Indian society in issues of gender inequality and empowering women with education and economic agency. This line of thought is clearly highlighted in the ideas, vision and policy formulations of Dr. B.R Ambedkar. Being a pioneer of social justice, Ambedkar had a humanitarianism view and worked towards building a society based on social justice for women. He wanted women to become the torchbearers of the new reformed society which is both casteless and classless in nature. In this way, Ambedkar's theorization of the interlinking nature of caste and gender-based oppression in India was a pioneering feat for various women rights movement in India.

Ambedkar was among the first Indians to battle against the unfair and vicious practices like devadasi system, child marriages, prostitution that chained women freedom and forced them lead a despotic life. He left no stone unturned and challenged the basic patriarchal foundation to ensure equality of women, true to its essence of empowerment. His values and vision of gender equality and women empowerment found space in the constitutional framework of India. One of his most important introductions towards the cause was the Hindu Code Bill. Ambedkar's ideas, over the years have influence the enactment of a number of subsequent pro-women Acts, such as The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the Sati Prevention Act, 1987, The National Commission for Women Act, 1990, Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, among others. In this context, the present paper endeavours to - 1) highlight Dr. Ambedkar's view on social ills faced by women in pre and post independent India; 2) focus on his reformative actions and constitutional safeguards towards women empowerment and 3) highlight the relevance of Ambedkar in modern India.

Key Word: Gender inequality, Empowerment, Social justice, Constitutional framework

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is central to achieving the target of inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. It is not only a national goal but also a global agenda under Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 of United Nations. As per "UN Declaration of the Decade of Women" in 1975, creating conditions that are favourable for the full, active and unhindered participation of women in social, economic, political and public life is quint essential for benefit of the society (UNESCO 1995). The UN Women Annual Report 2018-19 states that although over the years the quest for gender equality and women empowerment has accelerated - with vigorous public debate, social mobilization and awareness-raising to transform social norms and strengthen accountability - but inequalities still remain acute, as a result of which women across the globe still struggle to live life with dignity.

The Indian Economic Survey for 2018-2019 also touched upon the issues which directly or indirectly impact the empowerment of women in India viz. Son Meta- Preference, phenomena of unwanted girls etc. The important women-centric take away from the survey are as follows: (i) the demographic advantage available to India can only be reaped if education, skilling, and employment opportunities are provided to the youth especially women; (ii) fifty-seven ministries or departments have formed 'Gender Budget Cells' to strengthen and implement gender budgeting processes in India and (iii) the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) across India has decreased from 167 per one lakh live births between 2011-13, to 130 between 2014-16. The number is expected to be reduced to 70 by the year 2030.

But behind this shining and glittering camouflage lies the bitter truth that in spite of constitutional and legal safeguards, the women in India continue to suffer. As per Global Gender Gap Report 2018 of World Economic Forum, among the 149 countries, India stood at the 108th position. With very few women holding seats in Parliament and in senior positions across the labour force, and violence against women still a glaring

issue, India has a long way to go when it comes to gender equality and women empowerment. In this context, Dr. B.R Ambedkar's ideas, vision and unequivocal determination to work for women's empowerment deserves a reappraisal.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar the principal architect of the Indian constitution, was a scholar par excellence, a philosopher, a visionary, an emancipator and a true nationalist. He was a beacon of light for the millions of depressed, oppressed and exploited women of India. Being a pioneer of social justice, he always worked for the woman emancipation. He was the first Indian reformer who roots out the barriers in the way of advancement of Indian society in general and of women in particular (Das 2015). According to Ambedkar, Empowerment denotes to increasing the social, political, spiritual or economic forte of people and societies. Empowerment and self-sufficiency of women in the sphere of their economic, social, political and health status is both an extremely imperative end in itself and compulsory for the accomplishment of sustainable human development. It is a multi-dimensional, multifaceted, and manifold concept (Gunjal 2012).

Ambedkar was a great supporter of women's liberation. In his article, "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women" he states that the root causes of suffering of women in India are to be found in the so called Hindu religious books like Manusmriti, Atharva Vedas and many others. But the most important among these religious books, Manusmriti divides people into a stratified caste system and promotes inequality between men and women (Narake , Kasare. et al.: 2014) .Ambedkar saw women as the victims of the oppressive caste-based and rigid hierarchical social system. In his writings "The Women and the 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 Indian women are very important in moulding the Hindu attitude and perspective towards women, perpetuated and maintained through Hindu personal laws based on Brahminic Shastras, caste and endogamy (Mandal : 2011) .

Ambedkar in his another paper on "Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development", portrayed how women were treated maliciously by the way of imposed widowhood, sati and child marriages just to uphold the draconian social norms in a society (Kapoor : 1997) . He reviewed the deplorable situation of both Hindu and Muslim women's in society which were denied the basic fundamental and human rights due to various ill practices in the society such as purdah system, sati system, child marriage, female infanticide etc. Ambedkar ,thus, embraced Buddhism which granted women, equal status to that of men and considered women proficient of achieving spirituality.

II. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DURING PRE-INDEPENDENT INDIA

To understand the contribution of Ambedkar in women liberation, we have to trace out the status of women from the Vedic period to British raj. During ancient times the form of society was matriarchal (mother as ruler and head of the family) and popularly it was said that, "YatrNariasyePujante,RamteTatrDevta", means God reside at places where women are worshiped (Ambedkar 1987) . But soon the deterioration of the status of women started in the later Vedic period. Many orthodox principles were imposed upon them and women were treated as slaves, had no property rights and were expected to show their obedience to men. The misery of women was further heightened during the Gupta period which was characterized by evil practises like the Devadasi system, polygamy, child marriage, "pardah" system etc. Under British Raj, a new hope dawned in the mind of women for their emancipation. Western principles of liberty and equality were introduced which enlightened many Indian social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda,Jyotiba Phule, MadamBhikaji Cama, Smt. Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru work for the eradication of all evil practices against women. All over India, there were women movements demanding for the suffrage rights and social legislations like abolition of Sati Act in 1827, the Widow Remarriage Act 1856; Civil Marriage Act 1872 was passed.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's approach to women's rights was exclusively different from other social reformers like 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 (Satyajit Das).Dr. Ambedkar started his movement for women emancipation in 1920. He started fierce propaganda against the Hindu social order and launched a journal Mook Nayak in 1920 and Bahiskrit Bharat in 1927. In his fortnight journals, Ambedkar promoted gender equality and the need for education and exposed the problems faced by the depressed classes as well as women. It was a time when first wave feminism had been coming to an end with the achievement of voting rights by women in Britain in 1918 and America in 1920 and Ambedkar's perception of the women question, emphasising their right to education, equal treatment with men, right to property and involvement in the political process resembled the global feminist demands (Usha K B) .

Ambedkar viewed education as the key to achieve women's dignity and empowerment. He believed that education is essential for women to gain awareness of their socio-political environment. He stated that "We may forgo material benefits of civilization but we cannot forgo our right and opportunity to the fullest extent as

the education is the greatest material benefit" (Mandal:2011) . In the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference held at Nagpur on July 20, 1942, Ambedkar said that "I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" (ibid.) He further raised the women's question during in Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1938, in which he strongly recommended on implementation of family planning measures. As the Labour Minister in Governor General's Executive Council in 1943, he introduced an amendment in Mines Maternity Benefit Act of 1941, which provided pre-delivery four weeks maternity benefit to women. Ambedkar also supported equal wages for women.

In Ambedkar's movements women actively participated and they acquired the confidence to voice their issues on various platforms. For example at the historic Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, women not only participated in the procession from the conference site to the Chavdar Pond but also "participated in the deliberations of the subject committee meetings in passing resolutions about the claim for equal human rights "(Meenakshi and Urmila) . Further in 1942 , around 25,000 women participated in the "All India DalitMahila Conference" and raised several demands relating to their socio-economic development like better education facilities, women's right to divorce her husband, modification of existing polygamy system, improvement of the working conditions of the women and seat reservation in all the representative bodies for the progress and advancement of women of the depressed classes (Narake,Kasare. et al.: 2014) . Thus, Ambedkar played a decisive role in inspiring women to fight against unjust social practices in pre-independent Indian society.

III. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT DURING POST-INDEPENDENT INDIA

Women empowerment after Indian independence can be categorized into two forms of works. Firstly, the work of Dr. Ambedkar himself till his death in 1956. Secondly the regional and Pan India Ambedkarite movements after his death.

The foremost work of Ambedkar after India's independence in 1947 is in framing the Indian constitution. The rights and privileges of women were well presented by Dr. Ambedkar through various debates inside the constituent assembly. The final constitution contributes equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc. At the same time, Article 15(3) provides that the State can make 'any special provisions for women and children'. Thus, positive discrimination in favour of women is permissible and any action taken by the State cannot be held violative of Article 14. But the rule of 'Equality before the law' in Article 14 means that 'amongst equals law should be equal and should be equally administered and the like should be treated alike'. Article 39 stipulates that the State shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 directs the State to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. And Article 51-A (e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

As a first law minister of independent India, Ambedkar took a most famous and radical step in providing all round development and give due share to the women in Indian society. The Hindu code Bill was an important Bill that gave Indian women so many rights which the traditional Hindu never imagined. For Ambedkar human rights and dignity were more important than any religious custom and tradition (Bhushan :2007).

The subject matters of this Bill were mainly: a) to abolish different marriage systems prevalent among Hindus and to establish monogamy in place of polygamy as the only legal system; b) conferment of right to property and adoption to women; c) abolition of caste in the matter of marriage and adoption; d) restitution of conjugal rights and judicial separation and attempts to unify the Hindu Code in time with progressive and modern thought.(Mandal :2011)

The aim according to Ambedkar "was to codify and modify certain branches of the Hindu Law. Dwelling upon its significance, he said that it was beneficial from the point of the country's oneness that the same set of laws should govern the Hindu social and religious life. He further told his audience that the Hindu laws were being revised not because the Hindus were a weak people to resist its rival but for uniformities sake. The Hindu Code was a right step towards a Civil Code." (Narake :2014). In a speech at a rally organized by the Belgaum District Branch of the Scheduled Castes Federation on December 26, 1950 Ambedkar also stated that, "The Bill was only aimed at removing the obstruction of law in the social advancement of women. On wealth depends independence and a women must be very particular to retain her wealth and rights, to help retain her freedom.(Ibid: p 32). According to Mandal (2011), the Hindu code bill, was mostly against the conservatives and stagnant thought like feudalism, Hindu orthodoxy, customs and religion.

The bill was vehemently opposed by most of the congress members, caste Hindu leaders and intellectuals. They considered this move as an attempt to attack the sanctity of Hinduism. Some discarded the Bill totally as interference in the religious matters of the Hindu society. Some objected to the reform of divorce and women's right to inherit property. Hindu Mahasabha leader Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee said that "the Hindu Code Bill would shatter the magnificent structure of Hindu culture and stultify a dynamic and catholic

way of life that had wonderfully adapted itself to the changes for centuries.”(Keer :1987). The nature of controversy on Hindu Code Bill made it clear that the rights for women documented in the Book of Indian Constitution is very difficult to translate into reality.

The movement towards women empowerment continued after the death of Dr. Ambedkar in 1956. The ideals of Ambedkar towards equal and just society have been carried forward and nurtured with the voices of the Dalit and Bahujan women activists like Shantabai Dani, Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar and so on. For Shantabai Dani, inequality was the major source of humiliation. Her book 'The Kaleidoscope: Story of My Life' (1988) was another milestone in Dalit Women's Literature. Similar form of atrocities towards women was captured in the writings of Babytai Kamble. She made an impactful statement in her book, "The Prisons We Broke" on why caste is a major source of exploitation for Dalit women. She expressed her critical views about the Dalit movement, Dalit politics, religion, and its intellectual state. She said, "Nowadays, every activist and leader want to prove himself as another Ambedkar" (Kamble :2019). Therefore, for Kamble, Dalit movement must follow the thoughts of Ambedkar on gender justice and against caste oppression.

The Ambedkarite movement has evolved over time. Today, Gender injustice and violence is something which cannot be viewed in silos. The caste oppression and its impact on gender justice, or vice versa, is matter which is complex. In this respect, Rege (2013:20) work has been pivotal. He demonstrates that Ambedkar "viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated," and sought to "move beyond the binaries of sameness/difference". Similar views are presented by Goringe (2018) , who is of the view that the issues around gender justice and women empowerment is intertwined in nature. For him, "Subjecting the social structures of caste to critical scrutiny and revealing the intersections of caste-class and gender, will advance our understanding of contemporary social formation and inequalities. The ideas about caste, gender and their complex interdependence was portrayed by Ambedkar himself in his book "Annihilation of Caste". He noted that "caste rests upon endogamy". In this sense, as Velaskar (2016) observes, women feature "as gateways to caste through whom caste purity could be threatened and caste status could be claimed"(p. 391).

In this sense, controlling women her actions and behaviours gives rise to "honour". Caste honour, as Gupte (2013) observes, is "largely centered on the behavior of women" (p. 73), and as Welchman and Hossain (2005) argue, is "vested in male (family and/or conjugal) control over women and specifically women's sexual conduct: actual, suspected or potential" (p. 4). By degrading the honour of a Dalit woman, questions on "manhood" of Dalit males (who cannot protect their women) are meant to arouse the collective humiliation of the whole Dalit community. Therefore, for understanding caste violence, an intersectional lens involving women must be adopted for a more nuanced analysis.

The inseparability of caste and gender in Dr. Ambedkar's conceptualization and his interpretations of history and the place and role of marriage in social construction of graded inequality, provide an important understanding of the issues of women's emancipation in the Indian context. As Ambedkar said, "caste is endogamy and endogamy is caste" (Ambedkar :1987). He also brought out how the origin and reproduction of caste rested on gendered violence.

The current discourse on public policy making towards gender justice and against gendered violence basically delves upon the top- bottom approach. The laws and policies around various aspects of women empowerment ranges from the traditional Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), Amendments to the Indian Penal Code, 1862 (1986), Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986), – Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986), The Preconception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition Of Sex Selection) Act (1994), – Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), Prohibition of Child Marriage Act(2006) to the new acts in last decade addressing the evolving form of crime which includes Information and Technology Act (2008), – The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013), Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention Prohibition and 5 Redressal) Act (2013), Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act (2016), Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (Death penalty for raping a minor- 2018) (Chauhan 2019).

The above measures though provide a case by case solution to violence and atrocities. They fail to challenge the rigid institution behind the perpetual inequalities which are derived from the caste hindu dominated Indian society. To prove the above case, we can see despite having brought stricter laws and punishments after Unnao and Kathua Rape cases, India's average rate of reported rape cases is about 6.3 per 100,000 of the population. However, this differs in places like Sikkim and Delhi, which have rates of 30.3 and 22.5 respectively. (Ibid.). The lower rates of rape reports depict the barbaric mentality of revenge against women and girls, which also safeguard harmful traditional and patriarchal norms. The persistence of harmful practices, pervasive gender stereotypes and deeply entrenched patriarchal social and cultural norms is a matter of serious concern.

The cases of domestic violence against women presents a similar lamentable state of Indian society. In 2016, the data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded the incidence of crime against women. The majority of cases under crimes against women were reported under 'Cruelty by Husband or His

Relatives (32.6 percent) followed by 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (25.0 per cent), 'Kidnaping & Abduction of Women' (19.0 percent) and 'Rape' (11.5 percent). To add further, these numbers are not a true reflection of the magnitude of the problem, primarily for the reason that sex crimes are likely to be underreported due to social stigma surrounding such offences (NCRB: 2016).

Gender inequality in providing equal access and education to our girl children pose a serious challenge towards a dignified life. Despite big ticket initiatives announced by successive governments to tackle this inequality, India still have a long way to go. World Bank estimates show that in low income countries like India, less than two thirds of girls complete their primary education, and only one in three completes lower secondary school. The biggest challenge is dropping out of girls from schools which is propelled by multiple social circumstances. These include early marriage, poverty, lack of safety in schools, lower expectations of girls' education and traditional gender norms (Draft national education policy 2019: 137). The cost the country has to bear for this pattern in girl child education is huge, shows a World Bank report. The report estimates the losses in lifetime productivity and earnings for girls of not completing 12 years of education at USD 15 trillion (Rs 15 lac crore) to \$30 trillion dollars (Rs 30 lac crore) globally (World Bank 2018).

IV. CONCLUSION

Ambedkar's vision on gender equality is very important for the socioeconomic reconstruction of the Indian society. In the decades since Independence, we have been preoccupied largely with issues of providing access and equity mostly through various laws and governmental institutions and have unfortunately dropped the baton with regard to radical changes needed within the caste dominated society. An analysis of India's effort towards women empowerment, through empirical evidences suggests that our efforts are very confined and puny. Women centric changes could be brought only by women's sense of self-worth, their right to have choices, have opportunities and resources, power to control their own lives; both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction and social change. Especially, when it comes to reform a society paralyzed by patriarchy, endogamy and caste honour, the role of downtrodden or Dalit women becomes critical in deconstructing the casteist construction of masculinity and femininity.

The issue of women empowerment has become a centre stage in the contemporary period of globalization and information technology. However, the power relation of - "man- woman", "oppressor-oppressed", "masculinity - femininity" has become blurred. Taking the cue from the writings of Ambedkar will help in deconstructing the same. We have to think ahead of our time, as did Dr. Ambedkar when he first brought the Hindu Code Bill. The teachings and thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar are useful not only women but also all the Indian even today. His deep concern and feelings for all round development of women is expressed from each sentence and word. In his last speech in Indian Parliament we can know his feelings and respect showed towards women. He quoted the famous thoughts of an Irish Patriot Daniel O Connal as, "No man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity. And no nation can be grateful at the cost of his liberty."

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