

DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S CONTRIBUTION TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In the Indian male-dominated society, women faced terrific problems since the Vedic period due to superstitions and misguided rituals. The women have been victimized through different ways, like child marriage, Sati Pratha, Purdah Pratha, restriction to widow remarriage, widow's exploitation, Devadasi system, etc.. So, incidentally taking birth as a woman had been treated as a curse for the woman. That system impeded the women and brought an inferiority complex which proved a big hurdle in their social, economic, and personal development. During British rule in India and after independence, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar fought for the rights of women and made such provisions in the Constitution of India so that women must be treated equally in the society. The provision of equality to women was made for all streams whether it is education, employment, social, or economic rights. It is only due to Dr. Ambedkar that today women feel self-confident and self-dependent. The implementation of many articles of the constitution and laws brought self-confidence, individuality, self-respect, and overall empowerment for women. The empowered women have proved themselves better than men in all fields be it education, entrepreneurship, medical, engineering, and defense, etc.. The old ill-trusted traditions disappeared to a large extent gradually from the society only due to the hard efforts put by Dr. Ambedkar. However,

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due to the absence of a strong judicial and administrative system and ignorance of laws, women become victimized by various social evils such as child-bearing, family care roles, deep-rooted cultural norms, etc., and become targets of discrimination, exploitation, and domestic violence. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. This present paper attempts to examine the status of women in India and their empowerment through Dr. Ambedkar in India. It tries to highlight the issues and challenges related to women in Indian society and the eradication of such impediments through the Ambedkarite approach. Through this paper, it is tried to verify the relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's approach for the upliftment of the economic, social, and political status of women.

KEYWORDS: *Women empowerment, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Indian society, superstitions, misguided rituals, equality, constitution, laws, discrimination, exploitation.*

I. Introduction

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender, or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (urban / rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local (Panchayat) levels in many sectors, including health, education, economic opportunities, gender-based violence, and political participation. However, there is a significant gap between policy advancements and actual practice at the community level. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of the economic, social, and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination, and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a

traditionally male-dominated structure.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown a disproportionate sex ratio whereby the female population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal rights and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has been such that she was sometimes considered a Goddess and at other times merely as a slave. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia and has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the Opposition, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers, and Governors. Women's rights are secured under the Constitution of India - mainly, equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination; further, India has various statutes governing the rights of women. As of 2011, the President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the parliament) were women. However, women in India continue to face numerous problems, including violent victimization through rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, and the forced prostitution of young girls. In 2012, India was ranked by the Thomson Reuters Foundation as the worst G20 country in which to be a woman.

A. Status of Women in India During and After the Vedic Period

Women of specific sections of society (namely Brahmanas and Kshatriyas) during the early Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life, but such rights were not available to all sections of society due to superstitious and male-dominated scripture of Manu. The status of women was on a declining trend. The reform movements such as Jainism allowed women to be admitted to religious orders, but by and large, women in India faced confinement and restrictions. The practice of child marriages is believed to have started around the sixth century. Few texts exist that specifically deal with the role of women; an important exception is the *Stri Dharma Paddhati* of Tryambakayajvan, an official at Thanjavur c. 1730. The

text compiles strictures on women's behavior dating back to the Apastamba sutra (c. 4th century BCE). Women are enjoined to be of service to their husbands.

The status represents the position of an individual in the group. The word status denotes the position of an individual in a system with attendant rights and duties. It is the position which the individual occupies in the group by virtue of his or her sex, age, family, occupation, marriage, and achievement. The status of women refers to her position in the network of social role structure, privileges, rights, and duties. It refers to her rights and duties in family and social life. The status of a woman is generally measured in the comparative amount of prestige and respect accorded to her with that of a man. The status of Hindu women in India has been fluctuating. It has gone through several changes during various historical stages. Historically speaking, women in India have passed through two phases of their life – the period of subjugation and the period of liberation. At times she has been suppressed and oppressed and at times she is regarded as the deity of the home. From the Vedic age till today, her status and position have been changing with the passing of time.

The Rig-Vedic society was a free society. The Aryans evidently preferred male child to female child. However, females were as free as their male counterparts. Education was equally open for boys and girls. Girls were permissible to them (sic). In the family, they enjoyed complete freedom and were treated as Ardhanganinis. In domestic life, women were considered to be supreme and enjoyed freedom. Home was the place of production. Spinning and weaving of clothes were done at home. Women helped their husbands in agricultural pursuits also. The husband used to consult his wife on financial matters. Unmarried daughters had a share in their fathers' property. Daughter had full legal rights in the property of her father in the absence of any son. Mother's property, after her death, was equally divided among sons and unmarried daughters. However, married women had no share in their father's property. As a wife, a woman had no direct share in her husband's property. A widowed mother had some rights. The woman was regarded as having an equally important share in the social and religious life because a man without a woman was considered an inadequate person. She

regularly participated in religious ceremonies with her husband. There were many scholars who composed hymns of the Rig Veda. Lopamudra, Gargi, and Maitreyi were the pioneers among them. Lopamudra, the wife of Agastya rishi, composed two verses of Rig Veda.

Traditions such as Sati, Jauhar, and Devadasi among some communities have been banned and are largely defunct in modern India. However, some instances of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The purdah is still practiced by Indian women in some communities. Child marriage remains common in rural areas, although it is illegal under current Indian law.

Sati: Sati is an old, almost completely defunct custom among some communities, in which the widow was immolated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although the act was supposed to be voluntary on the widow's part, its practice is forbidden by the Hindu scriptures in Kali yuga, the current age. After the foreign invasions of the Indian subcontinent, this practice started to mark its presence, as women were often raped or kidnapped by the foreign forces. It was abolished by the British in 1829. There have been around forty reported cases of Sati since independence.

Jauhar: Jauhar refers to the practice of voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated warriors, in order to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. The practice was followed by the wives of defeated Rajput rulers, who are known to place a high premium on honor. Evidently, such practice took place during the Islamic invasions of India.

Purdah: Purdah is the practice among some Hindu and Muslim communities requiring (sic).

Devadasis: Devadasi is often misunderstood as a religious practice. It was practiced in southern India, in which women were "married" to a deity or temple. The people of the temple used to rape and physically and mentally harass the beautiful girls of lower caste in the name of God. The ritual was well-established by the 10th century A.D.. By 1988, the practice was outlawed in the country.

B. Contribution of Dr. Ambedkar for the Upliftment and Empowerment of Indian Women During British Rule and After Independence

Dr. Ambedkar, a determined fighter and a deep scholar, has made significant efforts to lead the society on the path of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. He was the first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of the advancement of women in India. He stated that women should be given all-round development, more importantly social education, their well-being, and socio-cultural rights. He emphasized that each and every section of Indian women be given their due share and it is a must to maintain and protect the dignity and modesty of women. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar always believed in movements led by women. He insisted that every married woman must participate in her husband's activities as a friend. But she must show the courage to deny the life of slaves. She should insist on the principle of equality. If all the women follow it, they will get the real respect and their own identity. He stated, "We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is persuaded side by side with female education.". He started a strong movement against the Hindu social order and launched a journal Mook Nayak in 1920 and Bahishkrit Bharat in 1927 for this purpose. Through its issues, he put due stress on gender equality and the need for education and exposed the problems of the depressed as well as women. In January 1928, a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife, as its president. The encouragement of Dr. Ambedkar to empower women to speak boldly was seen when Radhabai Vadale addressed a press conference in 1931. She said, "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.". Dr. Ambedkar believed in the strength of women and their role in the process of social reform. He said, "I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women had achieved. Let every girl who marries stand by her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his honor and glory to yourselves.".

The constitution has laid down as a fundamental right the equality of sexes. But the change from a position of utter degradation and subjugation of women in the nineteenth century to a position of equality in the middle of the twentieth century is not a simple case of progress of women in the modern era. Revolutionary changes have taken place in the position of women in India after independence.

The Constitution of India provided for special steps to be taken by the government to improve the condition of women by separate institutions. A quick and effective change in the status of women was contemplated through social legislations. The Constitution of India guarantees certain fundamental rights and freedoms such as the protection of life and personal liberty. Indian women are the beneficiaries of these rights in the same manner as the Indian men. Article 14 ensures equality before the law and Article 15 prohibits any discrimination. Article 16(a) forbids discrimination in any respect of employment of office under the state on the grounds only of religion, caste, sex, descent, and place of birth, residence, or any of them.

In post-independent India, we had a series of laws passed for the upliftment of women. These legislations have been brought in order to give equal rights and privileges with men, to eliminate discriminations against women, remove inequality between sexes, and remove external barriers coming in the way of their self-realization and development. The important Acts passed for the upliftment of women are:

The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955: This Act provided equal rights to women to obtain divorce and also maintenance in certain cases.

The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956: By virtue of this Act, a woman can adopt a boy or a girl as her son or daughter.

The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956: This Act provides that a woman is entitled to act as the natural guardian of her minor children.

The Hindu Succession Act of 1956: As a result of this Act, a woman has got equal rights in the inheritance of family property. This Act is a landmark in the history of Hindu law.

The Hindu Women Right to Property Act of 1973: This Act has given more facilities to women. According to this Act, the daughter, the widow, and the mother can inherit property of the deceased simultaneously. Now women will hold her property absolutely with full right to sell, mortgage, and dispose of as she (sic) Succession Act, 1956, woman has only to enjoy her husband's share in coparcenary property for her lifetime without any right to

alienate property.

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961: According to this Act, taking or demanding dowry is an offence punishable by imprisonment and or fines.

The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976: This Act does not permit wage discrimination between male and female workers.

Impact of Dr. Ambedkar's Efforts for the Empowerment of Indian Women: Considering the guidelines, recommendations, suggestions, and statutes given by Dr. Ambedkar, the Government of India and other State Governments have implemented a large number of schemes for the empowerment of women in India. On Dr. Ambedkar's death, in the condolence message in parliament, then Prime Minister Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru said, "Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of Hindu society". His dream of a society, based on gender equality, is yet to be realized and therefore his thoughts are important for the social reconstruction that favors women empowerment.

a. Laws for Women Empowerment in India

Here is the list of some specific laws which were enacted by the Parliament in order to fulfill Constitutional obligations of women empowerment:

- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
- The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961.
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971.
- The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987.
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.
- The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994.

b. Government Schemes for Women Empowerment

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different departments and

ministries. Considering various articles in the constitution, many schemes for empowerment have been launched by the past and current governments. Like - Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, One Stop Centre Scheme, Women Helpline Scheme, UJJAWALA: A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation, Working Women Hostel, Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme For the Children of Working Mothers, Ministry approves new projects under Ujjawala Scheme and continues existing projects, SWADHAR Greh (A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances), Revision under IGMSY in Accordance with National Food Security Act, 2013 in XIIth Plan, Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP), Nari Shakti Puraskar, Awardees of Stree Shakti Puraskar, 2014 & Awardees of Nari Shakti Puraskar, Awardees of Rajya Mahila Samman & Zila Mahila Samman, Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY) - A Conditional Maternity Benefit Scheme, Mahila Police Volunteers etc.. The efforts of the government and its different agencies are ably supplemented by non-governmental organizations that are playing an equally important role in facilitating women empowerment. Despite concerted efforts of governments and NGOs, there are certain gaps. Of course, we have come a long way in empowering women, yet the future journey is difficult and demanding.

c. Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution of India contains various provisions, which provide for equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. The salient features are:

- Article 14 guarantees that the State shall not deny equality before the law and equal protection of the laws;
- Article 15 prohibits discrimination against any citizen on the ground of sex;
- Article 15(3) empowers the State to make positive discrimination in favor of women and children;
- Article 16 provides for Equality of Opportunity in matters of public employment;

- Article 39 (a) and (d) enjoins the State to provide equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work;
- Article 42 enjoins upon the State to make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work, and for maternity relief;
- Article 51A (e) imposes a Fundamental Duty on every citizen to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women;
- Article 243D (3) provides that not less than 1/3rd of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat to be reserved for women, and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat;
- Article 243T(3) provides that not less than 1/3rd of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality;
- Article 243T (4) provides reservation of offices of Chairperson in Municipalities for SC, ST, Women in such manner as the legislature of a State, may by law provide;

In pursuance of the above Constitutional provisions, various legislative enactments have been framed to protect, safeguard and promote the interests of women. Many of these legislative enactments have been in the sphere of labor laws to ameliorate the working conditions of women labor.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar sacrificed his whole life for the betterment, rights, and justice to underprivileged sections of society. He made such provisions and included such articles in the constitution of India which helped a common man to fight against injustice. Woman is treated as a source of enjoyment and exploited by man in Hindu culture prevalence during and after the Vedic period because the society moved according to Manusmriti at that time. Due to Ambedkarite reforms and Ambedkarism, women got independence and learnt to live with honor and pride. With self-confidence, women started getting education, employment, and become a part of the whole system like men. It is only due to the efforts and contribution of Babasaheb that women are self-dependent today and the government has initiated many schemes and implemented many

laws for the empowerment of women (on Dr. Ambedkar's death) in parliament, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, "Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of Hindu society". His dream of a society, based on gender equality, is yet to be realized, and therefore his thoughts are important for the social reconstruction that favors women empowerment.

Dr. Babasaheb expressed his views on the state of life of all women. He stated that women must be treated equally and given equal prestige. He insisted on the Hindu Code bill suggesting the basic improvements and amendments in the assembly. He also insisted and evoked all the parliamentary members to help to pass the bill in parliament. Eventually, he resigned for the same. The teachings and thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar are useful not only for women but also all the Indians even today. His deep concern and feelings for the all-round development of women are expressed in a maximum of his speeches. In his last speech in the Indian Parliament, we can know his feelings and respect shown towards women. He quoted the famous thoughts of an Irish Patriot Daniel O'Connell as, "No man can be grateful at the cost of his honor, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity. And no nation can be grateful at the cost of his liberty.". Towards all the women, irrespective of their religion, castes, and class, Babasaheb had a particular humanitarian view. He frequently raised his voice against all sorts of injustice towards women. In order to convert the dreams of Babasaheb into reality, it is necessary to improve the Support System for working women.

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