

**DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S SPEECHES ON WOMEN
EMPOWERMENT: A CATALYST FOR
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CONSTITUTIONAL EQUALITY.**

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— ABSTRACT —

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and a relentless champion of social justice, viewed women's empowerment as inseparable from the annihilation of caste and the establishment of true democracy. Through his speeches, particularly at the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in 1942 and his parliamentary interventions on the Hindu Code Bill (1948–1951), Ambedkar articulated a radical vision of gender equality rooted in education, legal rights, and social reform. This article examines these key speeches, analyzes their core themes—such as the interdependence of caste and gender oppression, the necessity of women's education and economic independence, and the rejection of patriarchal Hindu legal traditions—and evaluates their enduring legacy in shaping India's constitutional framework and personal laws. Drawing on primary sources from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches (BAWS), the analysis underscores Ambedkar's insistence that no community or nation can progress without elevating its women.

KEYWORDS: *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Women Empowerment, Hindu Code Bill, Social Justice, Constitutional Equality.*

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Introduction

In a society marked by entrenched patriarchy and caste hierarchies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged as one of the most progressive voices advocating for women's rights in 20th-century India. He famously declared, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved." This statement, delivered in his 1942 address to the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, encapsulated his lifelong philosophy: women's emancipation was not a peripheral issue but the litmus test of social democracy. Ambedkar's speeches were not mere rhetoric; they were strategic interventions linking gender justice to broader struggles against untouchability, economic exploitation, and religious orthodoxy. Influenced by his analysis in *Castes in India* (1916), where he traced the origins of caste to the enforcement of endogamy and the subjugation of women, Ambedkar consistently argued that the Hindu social order-codified in texts like the Manusmriti-treated women as instruments for maintaining caste purity. His speeches advocated dismantling these structures through education, legal reforms, and political mobilization. This article focuses on two pivotal sets of speeches: the 1942 Nagpur address and his defenses of the Hindu Code Bill, synthesizing their content, context, and implications while avoiding any direct reproduction of secondary interpretations.

Historical Context:

Caste, Gender, and the Need for Reform Ambedkar's advocacy emerged against the backdrop of colonial India, where upper-caste reformers often limited their efforts to issues like widow remarriage or sati abolition without challenging caste itself. Women from depressed classes faced compounded oppression: denied education, property rights, and autonomy, they were further burdened by customs like child marriage, enforced widowhood, and restrictions on remarriage. Ambedkar critiqued these as mechanisms to preserve endogamy, arguing that caste could not be annihilated without liberating women. In his writings and speeches, he contrasted pre-Manu eras (influenced by Buddhism) with Brahmanical decline, where women lost rights to Vedic study, property, and personal freedom. His speeches urged women to reject inferiority complexes

and claim equality as partners in the anti-caste movement. This contextualizes his calls for women's organizations as agents of societal transformation.

The 1942 Nagpur Speech:

Empowering Depressed Classes Women On July 20, 1942, at the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in Nagpur (held alongside the larger Depressed Classes Conference), Ambedkar delivered a stirring address to an audience of approximately 25,000 women amid a gathering exceeding 75,000. The event highlighted the growing awakening among Dalit women, who participated in large numbers in temple entry movements and political conferences. In the speech, Ambedkar expressed profound optimism about women's potential, declaring: "I am a great believer in women's organization. I know what they can do to improve the condition of society if they are convinced. In the eradication of social evils they have rendered great services." He measured community progress explicitly by women's advancement, urging practical steps for self-reliance:

- Maintain personal hygiene and reject vices
- Prioritize education for children, instilling ambition and self-respect while eradicating inferiority complexes.
- Avoid hasty marriages, viewing them as financial liabilities; limit family size responsibly, as "to have too many children is a crime."

Above all, married women must "stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave."

These directives were revolutionary. Far from abstract ideals, they promoted tangible behavioral and familial reforms tailored to depressed classes' realities-poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion. Ambedkar linked women's roles to the broader "Educate, Agitate, Organize" mantra, positioning them as equal partners in the fight for dignity. The speech's emphasis on self-help and ambition directly countered Brahmanical norms that confined women to domestic subservience. By addressing women directly in a mixed public forum, Ambedkar modeled inclusive activism, fostering

organizations that amplified Dalit women's voices. This address was not isolated; it built on Ambedkar's earlier efforts, such as promoting female education through his journals *Mook Nayak* (1920) and *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927), and supporting women's participation in satyagrahas like the 1930 Kalaram Temple movement.

Speeches on the Hindu Code Bill:

Legal Foundations for Gender Equality Ambedkar's most substantive contributions to women's empowerment came through his role as India's first Law Minister and Chairman of the Drafting Committee. Between 1948 and 1951, he introduced and passionately defended the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly and Parliament. This comprehensive legislation sought to codify and reform Hindu personal law across marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and maintenance-replacing fragmented customary practices with uniform, egalitarian rules. In parliamentary speeches, Ambedkar meticulously outlined the Bill's provisions, arguing they would dismantle patriarchal inequities. On inheritance, he proposed granting widows, daughters, and other female heirs equal or near-equal shares with sons, converting limited "woman's estate" (life interest only) into absolute ownership. He explained: the Bill ensured daughters received half a son's share in paternal property while sons gained half in maternal stridhan (women's property), creating balanced equity. Stridhan was consolidated into a single category with uniform succession, and dowry was reframed as trust property accessible to the woman at age 18, protecting her from exploitation by in-laws. On marriage and divorce, Ambedkar advocated monogamy (abolishing polygamy), intercaste and sagotra marriages, and dissolution on grounds including desertion, cruelty, adultery, incurable disease, or conversion. Wives gained rights to separate maintenance for justified separation (e.g., husband's cruelty or concubine-keeping). These changes rejected the indissoluble sacramental marriage of orthodox Hindu law, empowering women to exit abusive unions. Ambedkar framed the Bill as essential to constitutional ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In one address, he warned that leaving "inequality between class and class, between sex and sex" untouched while pursuing economic reforms would render the Constitution a "farce" and "build a palace on a dung heap." When conservative opposition stalled the Bill in 1951,

he resigned from the Cabinet, declaring he could not remain in a government denying women's justice. Though the full Code was not enacted immediately, its principles influenced the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956), and related laws-granting women divorce rights, inheritance shares, and maintenance. His interventions in the Bombay Legislative Council (e.g., 1928 support for maternity benefits) and Constituent Assembly further emphasized labor protections, equal pay, and state welfare for women, aligning economic rights with social ones.

Thematic Analysis:

Interconnected Struggles for Liberation Ambedkar's speeches reveal recurring themes. First, education as emancipation: He viewed it as the antidote to ignorance and subservience, urging women to cultivate minds and instill ambition in children. Second, equality in personal relations: Rejecting the Manusmriti's portrayal of women as perpetual dependents, he demanded friendship and partnership in marriage. Third, legal and economic autonomy: Property rights, divorce, and maintenance were tools to break financial dependence. Fourth, caste-gender nexus: Women's subjugation sustained caste; their empowerment was key to its annihilation. Unlike liberal reformers, Ambedkar's feminism was intersectional, prioritizing Dalit and working-class women. His resignation underscored moral consistency: political democracy required social democracy.

Impact and Contemporary Legacy Ambedkar's speeches laid the groundwork for Articles 14, 15, and 39(d) of the Constitution, prohibiting discrimination on grounds of sex and ensuring equal pay. The partial codification of Hindu law post-1951 transformed women's legal status, enabling property ownership, divorce, and adoption rights. Dalit women's movements continue to draw inspiration from his 1942 address, while the Hindu Code Bill debates prefigured ongoing Uniform Civil Code discussions. In modern India, amid persistent gender gaps, Ambedkar's words remain prophetic. His emphasis on women's organizations prefigures self-help groups and feminist collectives. Scholars note his influence on global discourses linking caste, gender, and human rights. Yet challenges persist-unequal inheritance in practice, violence, and

cultural resistance-highlighting the unfinished task he outlined.

Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's speeches on women empowerment were blueprints for a just society. From Nagpur's call for self-respect and equality in 1942 to his unyielding parliamentary defense of the Hindu Code Bill, he insisted that women's progress defines national advancement. By integrating education, legal reform, and anti-caste activism, Ambedkar offered a holistic model of empowerment that transcended tokenism. His legacy endures in India's laws and the ongoing struggle for social democracy. As he envisioned, true freedom demands that every woman claims her rightful place-not as a subordinate, but as an equal architect of the nation's future.

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