

RECONFIGURING INDIAN FEMINIST THEORY THROUGH AMBEDKARITE LENS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines how mainstream Indian feminist thoughts are flawed in the epistemic formation itself. The paper situates women's liberation within the broader project of dismantling caste and class hierarchies. It argues that unlike earlier feminist movements in India, which largely focused on reform within existing social structures, Ambedkar identified caste as the foundational mechanism of women's oppression. Through a critical analysis of his writings, legislative interventions, and socio-political activism, the paper demonstrates that Ambedkar's feminist vision is inseparable from his critique of Brahmanical patriarchy. It further contrasts his approach with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformist and nationalist feminisms, which often failed to interrogate structural inequalities. Drawing on scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Gail Omvedt, the paper situates Ambedkar as a foundational thinker of Dalit feminism and intersectional critique in India. It concludes by critically examining why, despite significant legal and political interventions, the goals of women's emancipation and annihilation of caste remain only partially realized.

KEYWORDS: *Ambedkar, Caste, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Dalit Feminism, Women's Liberation, Social Transformation.*

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1. Introduction

The question of women's liberation in India has historically been framed within reformist, nationalist, and later liberal feminist paradigms. These frameworks, while important in specific historical contexts, often treated gender oppression as an isolated issue, neglecting its deep entanglement with caste and class structures. B. R. Ambedkar offers a radically different approach by locating women's subordination within the structural logic of caste. His analysis foregrounds the insight that caste is not merely a system of hierarchical stratification but a mechanism of social control sustained through the regulation of women's sexuality and labour (Ambedkar 1916). In this sense, the control of women becomes central to the reproduction of caste itself.

Ambedkar's intervention marks a decisive epistemic break in Indian feminist thought. Rather than viewing women's oppression as a secondary or parallel issue, he integrates it into the very foundation of caste society. Consequently, any meaningful project of women's emancipation must engage simultaneously with the annihilation of caste and the restructuring of class relations. This paper argues that Ambedkar's framework provides a more comprehensive and structurally grounded understanding of gender oppression than earlier feminist movements in India.

2. Early Feminist Movements in India: Limits and Blind Spots

Social Reform Movements (19th Century)

The early phase of feminist consciousness in India emerged within the nineteenth-century social reform movements led by figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. These reformers addressed issues such as sati, widow remarriage, and women's education, contributing significantly to the improvement of women's status within certain sections of society. However, these interventions remained confined largely to upper-caste Hindu communities and did not challenge the structural foundations of caste hierarchy. Women were treated as subjects of reform rather than as agents of transformation, and the reforms themselves sought to humanize rather than dismantle patriarchal structures. As a result, caste remained intact as an organizing principle of social life, and the deeper roots of gender oppression were left unexamined.

Nationalist Feminism

During the nationalist movement, women's participation in public life increased significantly, yet this inclusion was accompanied by ideological constraints. Women were often constructed as symbolic bearers of tradition and cultural purity, embodying the moral essence of the nation. While the figure of the "new woman" emerged as educated and politically aware, she

remained confined within the boundaries of domesticity and respectability. Structural inequalities of caste and class were subsumed under the broader rhetoric of national unity, thereby erasing internal hierarchies within Indian society. As Uma Chakravarti argues, this phase reproduced what she terms “Brahmanical patriarchy,” a system in which caste purity is maintained through strict control over women’s sexuality (Chakravarti 2003). Thus, rather than challenging caste, nationalist feminism often reinforced it.

Early Twentieth-Century Feminist Organizations

The emergence of women’s organizations such as the All India Women’s Conference marked an important development in institutional feminism in India. These organizations focused on issues such as education, legal reform, and women’s rights, contributing to the expansion of public discourse on gender equality. However, their leadership and agenda were predominantly shaped by upper-caste, middle-class women, which limited their engagement with the realities of marginalized communities. The experiences of Dalit and working-class women were largely excluded, and patriarchy was often treated as a universal condition rather than one shaped by caste-specific dynamics. As Sharmila Rege points out, such universalization obscures the differentiated experiences of women and reinforces existing hierarchies within feminist discourse (Rege 2006).

3. Ambedkar’s Theory of Caste and Gender

Caste as a System of Endogamy

In his seminal essay *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, B. R. Ambedkar identifies endogamy as the central mechanism through which caste is reproduced (Ambedkar 1916). Endogamy necessitates strict control over women’s sexuality, as the purity of caste depends on regulating marriage and reproduction. Practices such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, and restrictions on women’s mobility emerge as mechanisms to maintain this control. In this framework, women are not merely oppressed subjects but are positioned at the very core of caste reproduction. Their bodies become the site through which social boundaries are maintained and transmitted across generations.

Brahmanical Patriarchy

Building on Ambedkar’s insights, Uma Chakravarti conceptualizes Brahmanical patriarchy as a system in which caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy are mutually reinforcing (Chakravarti 2003). This framework highlights how the control of women’s sexuality is essential for preserving caste purity and social order. Ambedkar’s analysis anticipates this concept by demonstrating that gender oppression cannot be understood independently of caste ideology. The subordination of women is thus not

incidental but constitutive of caste society, making their liberation central to any project of social transformation.

4. Women's Liberation as Central to Annihilation of Caste

Annihilation of Caste and Gender Justice

In Annihilation of Caste, Ambedkar argues that social reform must precede political reform and that caste must be destroyed for true democracy to emerge (Ambedkar 1936). Within this framework, women's liberation becomes indispensable. Without dismantling caste, women cannot achieve genuine freedom, and without freeing women from patriarchal control, caste cannot be annihilated. This mutual dependence underscores the centrality of gender justice in Ambedkar's vision of social transformation.

Legal Interventions: Hindu Code Bill

Ambedkar's efforts to reform Hindu personal law through the Hindu Code Bill represent a significant attempt to institutionalize gender equality. The bill sought to grant women property rights, legalize divorce, and challenge patriarchal control within the family structure. As Gail Omvedt observes, these measures were revolutionary in their attempt to democratize familial relations and disrupt entrenched hierarchies (Omvedt 2004). However, the resistance faced by the bill also reveals the deeprooted nature of patriarchal and caste-based opposition to such reforms.

Education and Agency

Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a means of liberation reflects his broader commitment to empowering marginalized communities. By encouraging women, particularly Dalit women, to participate in public life and political movements, he sought to transform them into active agents of change. As Sharmila Rege notes, this emphasis on agency and participation redefines the role of women within both feminist and anti-caste struggles (Rege 2006).

5. Ambedkar and Class: Intersection of Caste and Economy

Ambedkar's analysis does not treat caste and class as separate domains but as intersecting structures that shape social inequality. The economic marginalization of lower castes reinforces their social exclusion, while the stigmatization of their labour perpetuates hierarchical divisions. Dalit women, in particular, experience a form of triple oppression that arises from the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Gail Omvedt argues that Ambedkar's vision integrates social and economic democracy, making his approach inherently intersectional (Omvedt 1994). This perspective challenges both class-reductionist and gender-exclusive analyses, offering a more comprehensive understanding of oppression.

6. Dalit Feminist Perspectives and Ambedkar's Legacy

Sharmila Rege and Dalit Feminist Standpoint

Sharmila Rege emphasizes the importance of Dalit women's testimonies in understanding the complexities of caste patriarchy. By foregrounding lived experiences, she critiques mainstream feminism for its tendency to universalize upper-caste perspectives. Rege positions Ambedkar as a foundational thinker for a Dalit feminist standpoint that integrates experience and theory, thereby expanding the scope of feminist discourse (Rege 2006).

Gopal Guru and the Politics of Difference

Gopal Guru highlights the importance of recognizing difference within feminist discourse. He argues that Dalit women articulate experiences that are distinct from those of upper-caste women, and that these differences must be acknowledged rather than sub-summed under a universal category of "woman" (Guru 1995). Ambedkar's framework enables the articulation of such differences, thereby enriching feminist theory.

7. Why Earlier Feminisms Failed to Address Root Causes

Earlier feminist movements failed to address the root causes of women's oppression because they remained caste-blind, class-biased, and reformist in orientation. By focusing on improving women's status within existing structures, they neglected the structural interplay of caste, patriarchy, and economic exploitation (Chakravarti 2003; Rege 2006).

8. The Incomplete Realization of Women's Emancipation and Annihilation of Caste

Despite the transformative vision of B. R. Ambedkar and subsequent legal and constitutional measures, the goals of women's emancipation and the annihilation of caste remain only partially realized. This incompleteness can be attributed to the deeply embedded nature of caste as a social and cultural system. While laws have sought to prohibit discrimination and promote equality, caste continues to operate through everyday practices, particularly in the regulation of marriage and kinship. The persistence of endogamy demonstrates that caste is reproduced not merely through institutions but through social norms and familial structures (Ambedkar 1916).

Moreover, the endurance of what Uma Chakravarti terms Brahmanical patriarchy ensures that control over women's sexuality and autonomy remains central to maintaining caste boundaries (Chakravarti 2003). Legal reforms such as the Hindu Code Bill have expanded women's rights, yet their implementation has been uneven due to social resistance

and entrenched patriarchal values. As a result, a gap persists between formal equality and lived reality.

Economic inequalities further complicate the realization of emancipation. As Gail Omvedt argues, caste and class are intertwined, and economic dependency often limits women's ability to exercise their rights (Omvedt 1994). Dalit women, in particular, continue to face multiple layers of oppression arising from caste, class, and gender.

Additionally, feminist movements themselves have not always fully addressed caste-based inequalities. Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru highlight the limitations of mainstream feminism, which has historically marginalized Dalit women's experiences (Rege 2006; Guru 1995). This has led to a fragmented feminist discourse that lacks the transformative potential envisioned by Ambedkar. Ultimately, the incomplete realization of women's emancipation reflects the absence of comprehensive social transformation. While political democracy has been institutionalized, social and economic democracy remain unevenly realized. Ambedkar's vision requires not only legal reform but also a fundamental reconfiguration of social relations, cultural values, and economic structures.

9. Conclusion

B. R. Ambedkar redefines women's liberation by embedding it within the annihilation of caste and restructuring of class relations. His approach is more comprehensive than earlier feminist movements, as it addresses the structural roots of oppression. However, the persistence of caste and patriarchy demonstrates that legal reforms alone are insufficient. The realization of Ambedkar's vision requires sustained efforts toward social transformation, intersectional feminist praxis, and the dismantling of entrenched hierarchies.

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