

# Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar: Journey of Women's Freedom, Equality and Participation

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## Abstract

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar recognized as a prominent figure in the context of social reform in India. He dedicating himself to the improvement of women's status. His unwavering commitment involved leading marginalized communities towards the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Dr. Ambedkar advocated ardently for the dignity of oppressed women, earning recognition for his commitment to human rights. His sensitivity towards women's rights marked him as a stalwart in the pursuit of social justice, consistently working to empower women. He initiated various endeavors for women's liberation and rights, emphasizing the principle of equal treatment in all aspects of life such as race, religion, or gender. Dr. Ambedkar laid a solid foundation by integrating the Hindu Civil Code into broader segments of Indian society. This paper endeavors particularly to underscore Dr. Ambedkar's perspective on women's issues in pre- and post-independence India and its continued relevance in the contemporary context.

**Keywords:** Justice, Equality, Liberty, Human Rights

## Introduction

Approximately half of the global population comprises women across various societies. However, women are often the most vulnerable members of society, subject to multiple disabilities, discrimination, and exploitation in social, political, and economic realms. Their oppression is rooted in Hindu religious texts, which deny them rights for social and economic development, restricting their autonomy in various spheres of social and cultural life. Particularly in India, Dalit women, in particular, have been facing various kinds of discrimination among the community due to mass poverty, low economic status, and limited access to education. They bear a triple burden of nationality, class, and gender, placing them in a distinct social category in Indian society.

Recognizing these injustices, Dr. Ambedkar raised awareness among impoverished and uneducated women, motivating them to challenge the existing social practices like child marriages and the devdasi program. Ambedkar advocated for women's political rights and played a crucial role in shaping the Indian constitution. Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the significance of the Hindu Code Bill, highlighting its crucial role in advancing fundamental reforms and amendments within Hindu personal laws. He urged his fellow parliamentarians to lend their support to ensure the bill's passage, stressing its importance for broader societal progress and legal modernization. Dr. Ambedkar's advocacy for this bill underscored his

commitment to promoting social justice and equality through legislative measures, encouraging a collective effort towards transformative legal reforms. Despite ultimately resigning from his position, Ambedkar's profound concern and dedication to women's progress are evident in every sentence and word, reflecting his commitment to addressing gender-based inequalities and injustices.

### **(1) Women's Status in Ancient India**

Initially, women held esteemed positions in ancient India, but over time, their status deteriorated, leading to a loss of identity and human rights. Women's empowerment aimed to provide them with greater influence over various aspects, including intellectual, human, and financial resources such as expertise, intelligence, ideas, and financial control at both personal and societal levels.

#### **(1.1) The Vedic Period**

During the Rig-Vedic Society, women enjoyed equal treatment with men, possessing all the rights and educational opportunities available to their male counterparts. Both boys and girls received education, with girls learning the art of Veda. Education was even considered crucial for a girl's marriage. Women had the freedom to choose their life partners, and their lives post-marriage were characterized by love from their in-laws, as they were regarded as Ardhangini. Unmarried daughters inherited property from their fathers, and families without sons had legal rights to claim the father's estate. Widowed daughters also had a share in the family land. Harmful practices like Sati, Child Marriage, Preventing Widow Marriages, and the Purdah system were rare. Women could freely choose their life partners, and widows were allowed to remarry, either to the brother of their deceased husband or a chosen partner.

#### **(1.2) Thoughts on Women in Manusmriti**

Manusmriti presents a nuanced view on women, reflecting both respect and conflicting notions. It emphasizes the importance of honoring and adorning women within the familial context, suggesting that when women are respected, the entire household thrives. The text advocates for continuous reverence towards women through gestures such as holidays and ceremonial gifts, recognizing their significance in fostering familial well-being.

However, within these positive sentiments, Manusmriti introduces provisions that seem to contradict the interests of women. One such perspective contends that women should not pursue education, asserting their perceived vulnerability and the need for protection from detrimental influences to prevent familial sorrow. According to Manusmriti, the responsibility of safeguarding women extends from fathers to husbands and, in the event of widowhood, to their sons. A notable aspect of Manusmriti is its conservative stance on widows, discouraging remarriage and deeming even contemplation of a second marriage as sinful. This perspective reflects a traditional outlook that places societal expectations and moral considerations above personal choices for women. Certain shlokas within Manusmriti undermine the status of women, perpetuating gender inequalities. For instance, the text suggests that regardless of a man's moral standing, women should always serve and please their husbands, perpetuating a patriarchal hierarchy. Additionally, some shlokas restrict women from participating in religious rituals, taking oaths, or fasting, confining their roles to obedient service to their husbands for the promise of heavenly elevation.

### **(1.3) Post Vedic Era: A Downfall in Women's Status**

During the Post Vedic or Later Vedic Period, there was a noticeable deterioration in the status of women, marked by the arrival of the Aryans and the establishment of different social classes, namely the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Undesirable practices such as sati pratha, child marriage, dowry systems, prohibition of widow remarriage, and polygamy became widespread. The Atharvaveda (VI, 2,3) even includes a prayer for the birth of sons, reinforcing the preference for male offspring.

Women faced challenges regarding property inheritance. The right to inherit property was denied to them, and the use of Stridhan (women's personal wealth) was restricted. Only daughters without brothers were occasionally granted a share of the property, but such instances were infrequent and lacked legal recognition. In contrast to Vedic times when widows received a share of the property, Post Vedic society considered them ineligible as heirs, further restricting their economic independence.

## **2. Status of Women in the Mughal Period**

During the Mughal period in India, the arrival of the Mughal people introduced numerous challenges for women within society. Women were often viewed as mere objects of sexual gratification by the Mughals, especially after their victories in wars, where women from the defeated groups were taken as prizes. This exploitative attitude towards women contributed to the emergence of the Jauhar culture, previously prevalent among the Rajput Kshatriyas. Jauhar, a ritual where the wives, daughters, and even the queen of the defeated kingdom immolated themselves to evade capture and maintain their purity, became increasingly widespread as a tragic means of protecting women's honor.

The Mughal soldiers and officials frequently resorted to kidnapping young girls for their own desires, leading to a surge in child marriages. Girls as young as six to eight years old were forced into marriages out of fear of abduction. This fear also perpetuated the practice of the Purdah System, where women were secluded and veiled from public view within the Mughal Harem. The Mughal influence inadvertently fostered the practice of dowry, where wealthy families bestowed gifts, valuables, and money upon their daughters at marriage, inadvertently leading to the commodification of women. This tradition, while initially stemming from noble intentions, eventually morphed into a burdensome system where the inability to meet dowry demands resulted in societal stigma and discrimination, particularly against baby girls. This societal pressure sometimes culminated in extreme measures such as female genital mutilation.

## **3. Status of Women in the British Period**

During the British colonial period, notable social activists including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Justice M.G. Ranade, Annie Besant, and others dedicated themselves to women's reform. Their efforts led to the British Government passing various Acts aimed at empowering and improving the status of women in society. Social and religious transformations occurred during the British rule, accompanied by legislative initiatives aimed at enhancing women's roles within society.

Women's resistance against imperialism played a significant role in the liberation movement during the British era. Six women participated in the Bombay conference of the Indian National Congress in 1889, prompting the Calcutta session of the Congress, led by President Annie Besant, to advocate for women's international rights in the then-elected state. Concurrently, women's movements like Sahi Samity (1887)

under Swarnakumari Devi's leadership and Bharat Sree Mandal (1910) led by Salala Devi Chowdhurani emerged within the Tagore family.

A pivotal moment occurred during Gandhi's leadership of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the 1930s and the Quit India Movement. Women played instrumental roles in these movements, with figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Pravabati Devi, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamala Nehru, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, Latika Ghosh, Ashalata Devi, Neli Sengupta, Captain Laxmi Saigal, and Aruna Asaf Ali making notable contributions.

During this period, many women actively participated in Gandhi's Indian National Movement against British rule, engaging in movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930), Quit India Movement (1942), and notable freedom fighter Matangini Hazra, who sacrificed her life for India's independence.

#### **4. Post Independent Period for women**

After independence, various laws were enacted to improve and empower women. Articles 14, 15, and 16, which provide for the equality of law before it, state that "the State shall not deprive any person of an equal opportunity before the law or the equal protection of the laws of India." Article 15 states: "The prohibition against discrimination based on religion, race, nationality, sex or birthplace." Article 16 states: "Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment." Other laws passed were the Maternity Benefit Act of 1861, the Special Marriage Act of 1954, the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, and The Hindu Succession Act of 1956. 1956, The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Indian Divorce Act of 1969, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971, The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1973, The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, and many more. Although these laws provided protection for women and improved their standing in the eyes of the law, these laws failed to elevate the status of women in the public eye. The public deprives women of the right to education as guaranteed by Article 21 (A) of the Constitution of India. Since women were illiterate, they did not know much about their rights. Although child marriage was not legalized, it continued in many rural areas. The concept of the Patriarchy was deeply rooted in society. The idea was that women should not study very well, should marry early, serve her husband and in-laws, and take care of their children. The idea that her husband's house belonged to her had been ingrained in the minds of the girls since she was very young. Although the Female Infanticide Prevention Act of 1870 and the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 were passed, people continued to kill baby girls before and after birth because people believed that girls were a burden. Although giving and taking lobola was prohibited by law but many families of the bridegroom are demanding and the bride's family lives in fear that if they do not donate then their daughter will have to suffer. Therefore, it becomes a burden for people who are not financially stable. In many families women should eat after men, get food, or whatever is left over. This leads to malnutrition. About 500 women die every day from malnutrition. Therefore, it is fair to say that even after India gained Independence women did not gain independence. Although laws and regulations were passed, women were retained by the Patriarchal Society.

#### **Contribution of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to the Empowerment of Women**

In 1920, Dr. Ambedkar initiated a campaign advocating for women's rights. He expressed optimism about imminent improvements and the hastening of progress by promoting both men's and women's

education. Dr. Ambedkar ardently championed gender equality and underscored the importance of education, shedding light on the challenges faced by women in India. His perspective on women's issues emphasized their entitlement to education, equal opportunities in all aspects of life, property rights, and active participation in the political arena, aligning closely with the global aspirations of women.

In January of 1928, a women's association was established in Bombay, led by Ramabai, the wife of Ambedkar, who served as its president. During the Kalram Temple Entry Satyagraha in Nasik in 1930, around five hundred women took part, many of whom were arrested alongside men and subjected to mistreatment in prison. Dr. Ambedkar's advocacy for empowering women to speak fearlessly was evident in these events. In a press conference in 1931, RadhabaiVadale conveyed a powerful message, stating, 'It is preferable to die a hundred times than to live a life of dishonor. We are prepared to sacrifice our lives to secure our rights.' Credit for fostering this sense of self-respect and unwavering dedication among women is owed to Ambedkar."

Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the empowerment of women and recognized their pivotal role in societal transformation. During the "Mahad Satyagraha," around 300 women, along with their male counterparts, actively participated in the movement. Addressing a gathering of approximately 3000 women, Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the societal progress measured by the success of women. He urged married women to stand as equals beside their husbands, rejecting a subservient role, and expressed confidence that such empowerment would bring honor and glory.

Dr. Ambedkar actively supported family planning for women in the Bombay Legislative Assembly and introduced the Maternity Assistance Bill in 1942 as the Minister of Labor. This bill included constitutional provisions safeguarding the welfare and rights of women. Despite facing opposition to the Hindu Bill he introduced in Parliament addressing women's rights, Dr. Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet due to dissatisfaction with the lack of parliamentary acceptance of women's rights.

Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar addressed issues concerning Muslim women, focusing on topics such as the Purdah Ve (Veil) system, religious reform, and legal rights. Overall, his commitment to the liberation of all women, particularly those from oppressed classes, is evident in his ideas and actions.

He focused on revitalizing Hindu traditions with an emphasis on equality rather than solely relying on the social reforms advocated by groups like Brahma Samaj or Arya Samaj, which primarily targeted the upper echelons of society. His extensive examination of Smritis and Shashtras, along with his observations of elite reactions during the inaugural meeting, informed his insights into Hindu philosophy and society. Many women draw inspiration from Ambedkar, with individuals like Tulsibai Bansode founding newspapers like 'Chokhamela.' This illustrates how Ambedkar brought attention to the plight of poor, uneducated women and empowered them to challenge unjust social practices such as child marriages and the Devdasi system.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar passionately asserted, "I firmly believe in the empowerment of women. If they are brought in with genuine confidence, they can revolutionize the current negative perception. Throughout history, women have played a pivotal role in uplifting the status of marginalized segments and classes. Dr. Ambedkar consistently admired women for their contributions and resilience. When addressing gatherings with women, he exhibited a courteous and conversational demeanor, effectively connecting with them. He encouraged women with the following advice: "Never attire yourself in a



manner that undermines your dignity. Refrain from excessive jewelry and nose piercings. Let go of customs, practices, and lifestyles that complicate life." Remarkably, even illiterate women wholeheartedly embraced his counsel. Dr. Babasaheb dedicated his life to empowering women, including those engaged in unfavorable practices such as prostitution, as evident in the notable example of Kamathipura. Serving as the first Minister of Justice in India and chairing the Writing Committee of the Constituent Assembly, Dr. Ambedkar took the initiative to draft and present a Hindu bill in the Constituent Assembly.

Dr. Ambedkar tried an adequate inclusion of women's rights in the political vocabulary and constitution of India. i.e.,

Article 14 - Equal rights and opportunities in political, economic, and social spheres.

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex.

Article 15(3) enables affirmative discrimination in favor of women.

Article 39 – Equal means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work.

Article 42 – Human conditions of work and maternity relief.

Article 51 (A) (C) – Fundamental duties to renounce practices, derogatory to the dignity of women.

Article 46 – The state to promote with special care, the educational and economic interests of weaker sections of people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.

Article 47 – The state to raise the level of nutrition and standard of living of its people and the improvement of public health and so on.

Article 243D (3), 243T (3) & 243R (4) provide for the allocation of seats in the Panchayati Raj System.

As the first Legal Minister of Independent India, Ambedkar recognized the need to liberate women from the constraints imposed by Hindu religious texts, particularly the rules outlined in Manu's writings. In keeping with this commitment, he drafted and presented the Hindu Code Bill to the Council of Unity on April 11, 1947. The key provisions of the Bill aimed at (1) abolishing various forms of marriage prevalent among Hindus, establishing a monogamous system where a woman is the sole legal entity in a household; (2) addressing property rights and acknowledging women's recognition; (3) eliminating discrimination in matters of marriage and adoption; (4) restoring the right to association and legal separation. These efforts sought to harmonize Hindu laws with contemporary and progressive ideologies.

The provisions of the Bill were far-reaching. Ambedkar wanted to change and alter Hindu law because, before the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, and Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 Hindu law was not guaranteed on a large scale, although some branches were subject to legal intervention i.e. Hindus Women's Property Rights Act, 1937. Ambedkar thought it was because of the dispersed nature of the countless decisions of the Supreme Court of India and the Council of Governors, that it was necessary to provide the status and form of the form in the Hindu Law by incorporation and coding. <sup>25</sup> In his lecture at Siddharth College on 11 January 1950, Ambedkar said the new Constitution of the Republic of India provided a good guide that the government should try to prepare the Civil Code for the benefit of the whole country. He also said that the purpose of the Hindu Code Bill "was to compile a code and change some branches of the Hindu Law. Focusing on its importance, he said that it was beneficial for the unity of the world that those laws were the same and should govern Hindu social and religious life. He also told his audience that Hindu laws were revised not because the Hindus were weak people who were against their rivals but because of similarity. The Hindu code was a fitting step towards the Civilization Code.

## Conclusion

Dr. Babasaheb conveyed her thoughts regarding the well-being of all women, stressing the importance of treating them with equality and respect. She highlighted the Hindu Code Bill aimed at fundamental reforms and amendments, urging fellow Parliament members to support its passage. Eventually, she stepped down from her position. Dr. Ambedkar's principles are relevant not only to women but to all Indians today, reflecting his profound concern for women's progress in every word and sentence. Quoting Daniel O Connal, she emphasized the universal value of honor, innocence, and freedom. In his book "Pakistan and Partition of India," Dr. Ambedkar addressed the oppression faced by Muslim women due to religious traditions like veiling and weddings. Regardless of religion or caste, Dr. Babasaheb advocated for women's rights, consistently opposing all forms of injustice against them. With increasing access to education, women have made strides in various fields such as politics, science, medicine, law, and literature, exemplified by figures like Pratibha Patil, Sushma Swaraj, Sheila Dixit, Nirmala Sitaram, Smriti Irani, Shobhaa De, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Nita Ambani, and Sharmila Tagore. Thus, although progress may be gradual, there is ongoing empowerment of women.

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