

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution for  
 Women's Rights**

**Dr. Vijay G. More:** Assistant Professor, Department of History, Swami Vivekanand Night College of Arts and Commerce, Dombivili.

The operation of caste both at the systemic level and at the functioning of patriarchy, the growing caste/class divide in feminist political discourses makes Ambedkar's views on women's oppression, social democracy, caste and Hindu social order and philosophy, significant to modern Indian feminist thinking. Although Ambedkar proved, himself to be a genius and was known as a great thinker, philosopher, revolutionary, jurist-par excellence, prolific writer, social activist and critic and strode like a colossus in the Indian sociopolitical scene unto his death, his thoughts never received adequate attention in the generality of Indian society just because he was born as an untouchable. However, the contemporary social realities warrant close examination of the wide range of his topics, the width of his vision, the depth of his analysis, and the rationality of his outlook and the essential humanity of his suggestions for practical action. Hence, for Indian women's movement Ambedkar provides a powerful source of inspiration to formulate a feminist political agenda which simultaneously addresses the issues of class, caste and gender in the contemporary socio- political set up, which still keeps conservative and reactionary values in many respects, particularly on gender relations. The Writings and Speeches of Ambedkar show what values India should develop and how they would modernize its social and political institutions. Here I do not intend to provide a comprehensive review of all his works on various areas, because of the voluminous nature of his work; but try to attempt only a profile of his perception on women's status and their rights. The Government of Maharashtra and Government of India have brought volumes of his published and unpublished works during the occasion of Ambedkar centenary celebrations. His works have been published in various regional languages also. Ambedkar saw women as the victims of the oppressive, caste-based and rigid hierarchical social system. He believed that socio-cultural forces artificially construct gender relations, especially by Manusmriti and Hindu religion. As Simone De Beauvoir observed, "Women are made, they are not born", Ambedkar also raised the question, "Why Manu degraded her (woman)?" In his *The Riddle of the Woman*, *The Woman And the Counter Revolution*, *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women*, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism Genesis and Development* and through the issues of his journals *Mooknayak* (1920) and *Bahishkrit Bharat* (1927), Ambedkar tries to show how the gender relations and differences are constructed by Hindu Brahminical order, which conditions women to conform a stereotype feminine behavior, requiring them to be passive and submissive, suited only to a life of domestic and family responsibilities.

In the *Women and 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 women are very important in moulding the Hindu attitude and perspective (Indian perspective) towards women, perpetuated and maintained through Hindu personal laws based on shastras, caste and endogamy, i.e. the base of Indian patriarchy. He attacked Manusmriti as a major source, which legitimizes the denial of freedom, self respect, right to education, property, divorce etc., to women by attributing a very lofty ideal to them. He observes in the law book of Manu that the killing of a woman is like the drinking of liquor, a minor offence. It was equated

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

with killing of Sudra. Manu even advises a man not to sit in a lonely place with his own sister, daughter or even mother. Some of the other laws Manu prescribed are:

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of their families), and, if they attach themselves to sexual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. Nothing must be done independently by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, even in her own house.

In the matter of property a wife was degraded by Manu just as a slave. He forbade women the study of Vedas, and performing Sanskaras uttering the Ved mantras because he projected women as unclear as untruth is. Manu instructs women: "Though destitute or virtuous or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. ...She must always be cheerful, clever in management of her household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economic in expenditure". Ambedkar cites evidences of higher status of women in the pre-Manu days. She was free and equal partner of man and had the right to education, divorce, remarriage and economic freedom. The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulabha, Yajnavalkya and Maitrei, Yajnavalkya and Gargi, and Sankaracharya and Vidyadhari show that Indian women in the pre-Manu period could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education. It is generally believed that Dr. Ambedkar had completed the books entitled *The Riddles of Hinduism*, *The Buddha and Karl Marx*, and *Revolution and Counter Revolution*. All carry chapters on women entitled *Elevation of Women and Degradation of Women* which expose how Chaturvarna prioritised "birth" instead of "worth," degraded women and is unable to explain the status and position of women, and endogamy.

He also suggests strategies for emancipation from oppression. He found their emancipation in Buddhist values, which promotes equality, self-respect and education. Ambedkar believes that Buddha treated women with respect and love, and never tried to degrade them like Manu did. He taught women Buddha Dharma and religious philosophy. Ambedkar cites women like Vishakha, Amrapali of Visali, Gautami, Rani Mallika, queen of Prasenajith who approached Buddha, as evidences of Buddha's treatment of women as equals. (Paul, 1993:383-84) It was mainly the Hindu culture and social customs, which stood in the headway of women's empowerment.

Like Ambedkar, *The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001*, also admits, "The underlying causes of gender inequality are related to social and economic structure... and practices. Consequently, the access of women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including Scheduled Castes/ Tribes Other Backward Classes and Minorities ... to education, health, and productive resources, among others is inadequate. Therefore, they remain largely marginalised, poor and socially excluded". (Govt. Of India, 2001: 2) Moreover, feminist scholars also realized the importance of caste in contemporary India. Many feminist scholars, especially after the Women Reservation Bill debate, agree that one cannot analyze Indian society without taking note of caste. Though patriarchy is pervasive in India, it varies in degree depending on the religion, region, caste, community and social group, maintained and perpetuated through endogamy. The contemporary situation warrants feminists to work for the emancipation of women based on the ground realities as experienced by all sections of oppressed and discriminated women, within the framework of the Indian context. Since Ambedkar himself

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

was a victim of oppression and discrimination in all its severity, his views about women's oppression and equal rights are more useful than anybody else's theory based on mere observation for the feminist movement to strengthen its strategy for approaching the systemic challenges and contradictions in a more pragmatic way to bring women to the mainstream. To understand Ambedkar's arguments and the ideals for which he stood, it is necessary to know some of his bitter and better life experiences that he underwent at the outset of the socio-political awakening from the time of his birth.

His experience of insults took the form of refusal of local conveyance, drinking water and the refusal of even a barber to cut his hair, caused to effervesce in him, anger against the cruel system of untouchability. He passed M.A. in Economics in 1915 and presented a thesis in the university on Ancient Indian Commerce, which was prepared under the able supervision of Prof. Edwin R.A.Seligman. Shortly after this, he was invited to a seminar of Dr. Goldenweiser in May 1916 and presented his paper on Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development. His main observations include "endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste; ...the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste; a caste is an enclosed class". (Ambedkar, 1987: 7-15).

The numerical sexual disparity in marriage, he observes as "the problem of caste, then, ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes within it". When woman and man became a surplus woman (widow), and a surplus man (widower) due to spouse's death, their existence was seen as a menace. To regulate them, the methods practiced in the mechanism of caste presents three singular uxorial customs, namely: "(i) Sati or the burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. (ii) Enforced widowhood by which a widow is not allowed to remarry. (iii) Girl marriage". (Ambedkar, 1987:12-13). Since man has traditional domination over woman, his wishes have always been consulted. On the contrary, woman has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic that are made by man. According to Ambedkar, the society must be based on reason, and not on atrocious traditions of caste system. Therefore, in *The Annihilation of Caste* he suggests as a means the annihilation of caste maintained through Shastras, "Make every man and woman free from the thrall of the Shastras cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras and he or she will interdine and intermarry". He found education, intercaste marriage and interdine as methods, which may eliminate castes and patriarchy, maintained through endogamy.

When he was in Columbia University, he wrote to a friend on the need to educate the depressed classes, especially the womenfolk. To quote him: "We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with female education". (Mathew, 1991:74). Ambedkar perceived education as a catalyst for a movement for self-respect and self help.

In 1916 Ambedkar joined the London School of Economics and Political Science for the degrees of M.Sc. and D.Sc. He also joined Gray's Inn for Bar-at-Law degree. However, he had to come back to India due to expiry of the fellowship. In July 1917 he returned to India and took up a job as the Military Secretary of the Maharaja of Baroda. Though the Maharaja wished to appoint him later as the Finance Minister, the oppressive and inhuman treatment of upper castes became so severe that he could not continue in service. His subordinates, even the peon, threw files on his table at a distance. He was not given drinking water at the office and was

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

denied accommodation anywhere in Baroda. When he managed an accommodation in a Parsi hotel, he was forced to vacate again, as the upper caste inmates resisted his stay. When the Maharaja referred the matter to the Dewan he expressed his helplessness. In 1917 he returned to Mumbai and did small jobs just for a means of survival. Even in great difficulties also he continued his intellectual pursuit. His articles were published in journals like Journal of Indian Economic Society.

By the mid 1910s, the Congress also started the movement against untouchability and worked towards constitutional reforms for them. Ambedkar criticized the proposed agenda of the Congress because under it the executive and legislature derived their mandates from and were responsible to different powers. Meanwhile Depressed Classes Mission Society of India held its first All India Conference in 23-24 March 1918 in Mumbai. Though prominent leaders like Vitalbai Patel, Bipin Chandrapal, B.G Tilak, and others participated in the meeting, Ambedkar did not participate in it since he was critical of those kind of activities started by leaders belonged to upper castes. In 1918, Ambedkar was invited to give evidence before the Southborough Franchise Committee. He demanded separate electorate and reserved seats for the Depressed Classes in proportion to their population. He argued that any scheme of franchise and constituency that fails to bring about representation of opinions, as well as representation of persons, falls short of a popular government. After fifty years of the working of the Indian Constitution, the Indian women's demand for political reservations and the lower status of other disadvantaged sections proves that his theory is correct.

Dr. Ambedkar started his movement in 1920. He started fierce propaganda 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 the gender equality and the need for education, and exposed the problems of the depressed as well as women.

It was a time when first wave feminism had been coming to an end with the achievements of franchise rights for women in Britain in 1918, and America in 1920 and Ambedkar's perception of the women question, emphasizing their right to education, equal treatment with men, right to property and involvement in the political process resembled the global feminist demands. It is well known that Ambedkar had the habit of working for more than eighteen hours a day without any difficulty. His reading habit helped him to understand the feminist developments in different cultures and countries around the world. As J.S.Mill expressed in the Subjection of Women, the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself and one of the chief hindrances to human development; and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no privilege or power on the one side, nor disability on the other, Ambedkar also holds the same views on work for the untouchables and women.

In 1923, he started practising law at the Mumbai High Court. In Ambedkar's movement launched from 1920 onwards, women actively participated and acquired the confidence to voice their issues on various platforms. Venubai Bhatkar and Renubai Shambharakar are worth mentioning. In 1924, Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha was formed to work for the socio-political equality of depressed people and promoting their economic interests. Women started participating in satyagrahas and also launched women's associations for untouchable women for spreading education and awareness among them. In the Mahad Satyagraha for temple entry in 1927, even caste Hindus participated. Shandabai Shinde was one such participant. In the Satyagraha it was decided to burn the Manusmriti, which humiliated women, and shudras. In the

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

demonstration after the bonfire of the Manusmriti more than fifty women participated. Ambedkar addressed the meeting thereafter and advised women to change their style of wearing saree, wear lightweight ornaments, not to eat meat of dead animals. It was upper caste women like Tipnis who taught them proper way of wearing sarees.

In January 1928, a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife, as its president. Along with the Depressed Classes Conference in Nagpur in 1930, women also had their separate conference. In the Kalram Temple Entry Satyagraha at Nasik in 1930 five hundred women participated and many of them were arrested along with men and ill treated in jails. To face tortures along with their men, women also organized their Samata Sainik Dal. When Ambedkar returned to India after attending the round table conference in 1932, hundreds of women were present for the committee meetings. At various places depressed classes women's conferences were held and they began to present their demands assertively. The encouragement of Ambedkar empowered women to speak out boldly their feelings. As Radhabai Vadale said in a press conference in 1931, "We should get the right to enter the Hindu temples, to fill water at their water resources. We call these social rights. We should also get the political right to rule, sitting near the seat of the Viceroy. We don't care even if we are given a severe sentence. We will fill all the jails in the country. Why should we be scared of lathi-charge or firing? On the battlefield does a warrior care for his life? 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." The credit for this self-respect and firm determination of women, goes to Ambedkar.

On 20th July 1942, The All India Dalit Mahila conference was organized and 25,000 women attended. Ambedkar was highly pleased with the awakening and activities of women. On 13th August, he wrote to one of his friends, Meshram about this. On 6th January 1945, the All India Untouchable Women's Conference was held in Mumbai. (Limaye, 1999:57-61). In the movement, his strategy was similar to Gandhian method though he had disagreements on many things with Gandhi. To him the emphasis was on reconstruction of the Hindu society on the basis of equality rather than the social reforms initiated by Brahma Samaj or Arya Samaj because their attempts were limited only to the upper strata of the society. His in depth study of Smritis and Shashtras and his experience from the response of upper castes during his temple entry movement crystallized his conclusions on Hindu philosophy and society.

Running newspapers, women's hostels, boarding schools participating in Sathyagrahas were some of the activities of woman for acquiring the personality development to secure efficient administrative and leadership capacity as men have. Gaining inspiration and encouragement from Ambedkar, many women wrote on topics like Planning, Buddhist philosophy and such other topics. Women also wrote plays, autobiographies, and participated in Satyagrahas. Tulsabai Bansode started a newspaper Chokhamela. This showed how Ambedkar created awareness among poor, illiterate women and inspired them to fight against the unjust social practices like child marriages and devdasi system.

Since Ambedkar was well convinced about the status of women, as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he tried an adequate inclusion of women's rights in the political vocabulary and constitution of India. Therefore, by considering women's equality both in formal and substantial senses he included special provisions for women while all other general provisions are applicable to them, as to men. Hence, there are Articles like 15(3), 51(A), and so on. His key work in the preparation of Indian Constitution made it to be known as a New Charter

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

of Human Rights. He looked upon law as the instrument of creating a sane social order in which the development of individual should be in harmony with the growth of society. He incorporated the values of liberty, equality and fraternity in the Indian Constitution.

Based on the belief that any scheme of franchise and constituency that fails to bring about representation of opinions as well as representation of persons falls short of creating a popular government, he submitted the Constitution with a warning. He said in his speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 25th November 1949, "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy." By social democracy he means a way of life, which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as principles of life. He further said: "On 26th January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this Assembly has so laboriously built up." The new social movements emerged especially from Dalits, women and peasants, to assert democratic rights and urged for a new path of development which legitimizes this warning of the Father of the Indian Constitution, when he submitted it to the nation.

Ambedkar's defense for women as the Law Minister of free India appeared in the form of the Hindu Code Bill in Parliament on 11th April 1947, which invited strong opposition from the Hindu orthodoxy in post-independent India. The Bill provided for several basic rights to women.

It sought to abolish different marriage systems prevalent among Hindus and to establish monogamy as the only legal system. It aimed at conferment of right to property and adoption of women. It provided for restitution of conjugal rights and judicial separation. It attempted to unify the Hindu code in tune with progressive and modern thought. (Mathew, 1991:73-73; Ahir, 1990).

In 1948 when the Hindu Code Bill was introduced in parliament and debated on the floor of the house, the opposition was strong against the Bill. Ambedkar tried his level best to defend the Bill by pointing out the drawbacks of Indian society and arguing that the ideals in the Bill are based on the Constitutional principles of equality, liberty and fraternity and that in the Indian society characterized by the caste system and the oppression of women since women are deprived of equality, a legal frame work is necessary for a social change in which women have equal rights with men. He also pointed out that the aim of the Bill was "to codify the rules of Hindu Law which are scattered in innumerable decisions of High Courts and of the Privy Council which form a bewildering motley to the common man". (Arya, 2000:63). However, the Bill could not withstand the opposition from the Hindu orthodoxy. Their major argument was that the Bill was an attempt at the "demolition of the entire structure and fabric of Hindu Society. The very foundations not only of one pillar but of all the pillars on which the Hindu society rests are shaken". In reality, the Bill was a threat to patriarchy on which traditional family structure, was bounded and that was the major reason behind the opposition. Therefore, on the eve of the

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

first elections in 1951 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru dropped the Bill by saying that there was too much opposition. On this issue, the then Law Minister Dr. Ambedkar resigned.

His explanations for resignation show how the parliament of independent India deprived its women citizens of even basic rights (*Haksar, 1986: 56- 57*) Although most of the provisions proposed by Ambedkar were later passed during 1955-56 in four Bills on Hindu 'marriage', succession', ' minority and guardianship' and 'maintenance,' and later in 1976 some changes were made in Hindu Law, it still remains true that the basic rights of women have yet to be restored to them even after fifty years of the working of the Indian Constitution based on the principle of liberty, equality and justice to all Indian citizens. 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. One can find an adequate answer for this in Ambedkar's analysis of the Hindu social order and its philosophy that perpetuates inequality, slavery, poverty, ignorance and powerlessness for the oppressed classes and also to women, which has its impact in modern times also. However, the Hindu Code Bill helped the resurgence of feminist movement in India. This crusade of Ambedkar to emancipate women from injustice inspires the women leaders in Parliament to keep the issue alive until its enactment. This was the starting point for women to recognize their position and pursue rights movement by acquiring strength from 'second wave feminism' started in the early 1960s. Women are still fighting issues such as rape, dowry death, communalism, fundamentalism, sexual harassment, violence-domestic and social, poverty and so on.

Dr. Ambedkar's strong disagreements with Hindu ideals compelled him to accept Buddhism as his religion. In a speech at Nagpur on 15th October, 1956 he said that according to the tenets of Hinduism only the so called higher castes have been benefited. Sudras and untouchables have nothing much to gain from it. "As soon as the wife of a Brahmin conceives, she thinks of the High Court whether any post of a Judge has fallen vacant but when our women become pregnant, she cannot think of anything better than a sweeper's post under the Municipal Committee". In contemporary India the globalization process has made this thesis applicable to all economically deprived sections irrespective of caste due to the trend of making the rich richer and the poor poorer and denying labour rights to them. He concluded that Hinduism will ruin the Hindus and ultimately India. The inclusion of Hinduism in politics is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship. He recalled Daniel O. Connell to caution India that "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 its liberty". The dissatisfaction with Hinduism which led to the mass conversion of 30000 untouchables into Buddhism even in the 21 century is a point to rethink about the manifestations of Hinduism in the post modern era. If not, as Ambedkar said, Hinduism will remain as a religion that glorifies ignorance and preaches inequality and hatred, divides people into multitudinous castes and sub castes, sanctions poverty and keeps majority of its followers poor, illiterate, ignorant, disunited and divided. Re-domestication of women will be the ultimate result. That women can be raped and paraded naked through the streets is a reality in contemporary India and is a symptom of restoration of Manusmriti Raj.

The Maha Parinirvan of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar who was recognized internationally as a crusader against caste system, a vigilant fighter for the human rights of all the oppressed and enslaved and the emancipator of humanity from social and economic injustice, occurred on 6th December 1956. In the condolence message, on Ambedkar's death in Parliament, Prime Minister

*Variorum, Multi- Disciplinary e-Research Journal*  
*Vol.-02, Issue-I, August 2011*

Jawaharlal Nehru said; “Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of the Hindu society”. His dream of society based on gender equality is yet to be realized and therefore his thoughts are important for the social reconstruction that favours women’s empowerment.

The Nation honoured Baba Saheb Ambedkar by offering Bharat Ratna posthumously to him which was received by his widow Savita Ambedkar in 1990. Dr. Ambedkar Foundation was set up under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on 24th March 1992 for the purpose of promoting and propagating his ideology of social justice so as to reach the common masses. The Foundation implemented Schemes such as Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial, Dr. Ambedkar National Public Library, Dr. Ambedkar Chairs in Universities/ Institutions, Dr. Ambedkar Award for Social Understanding and Upliftment of Weaker Sections and the Dr. Ambedkar International Award for Social Change. It made a feature film on Ambedkar and published 144 volumes of his speeches and writings so far in various languages. Dr. Ambedkar Chairs have been set up in nine universities/institutions. Baba Amte was given Dr. Ambedkar International Award for Social Change in 1999 and Remy Fernand Claude Satorre Bonhomme of Spain has been selected for the year 2000. As Lord Casey said, Ambedkar stands as the “fountainhead of wisdom and knowledge” in modern India also.

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