

Social Justice for women: An overview of Ambedkar's perspective

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Ambedkar was a strong critic of social inequality on the basis of caste, sex, colour, race etc. He outrightly criticised Karma theory and its divine explanation. He gave primacy to human being and his/her righteous action. He advocates that a good society should be based on the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was anxious about the secondary position of women in society. Dr. Ambedkar tirelessly worked hard to ensure justice to women in Indian society. Dr. Ambedkar took up the cause of women empowerment as an academician; a legislator; a social reformer and an erudite constitutionalist. He comes with a different explanation of widowhood system in Hindu society than contemporary thinkers. He states that problem of widowhood has been preserved to maintain endogamy in Hindu society. He criticised veil system and polygamy among Muslim women. He asked to provide equal status to women in every field of life. He supports her liberty to choose her profession, life partner etc. He legislated Maternity benefit bill etc. and also wanted to legislate Hindu code bill to avail justice to women. As a constitution framer, Dr. Ambedkar provided different rights to women in Indian constitution. He also participated and supported different social movements for the rights of women. This paper is an assessment of Ambedkar's perspective to ensure justice to women in Indian society. It uses analytical method for its assessment.

1. Introduction

Social justice for women has remained a considerable issue throughout the ages. Every period of social history witnessed the plight of women in the patriarchal society. Women have been subjected to cruelty and ill-treatment since very beginning of society. The origin of such a treatment to women can be seen into the existing social structure of the various period of the entire social history.¹ At the time social structure simply denoted, among other things, social hierarchy where in women were placed to an inferior position, or women were subordinated to men. The condition of women began to deteriorate ever since, among other things, sexual division of labour started. With the sexual division of labour, women were assigned those work which needed less physical strength and but more care and protection. These work included child rearing, cooking, and petty household works. Men on the other hand assigned themselves works, which needed muscular strength and wisdom. This division of labour led to development of a sense of superiority among male members of society, which in turn led to the development of dictatorial attitude of men towards women.

The sense of superiority and the dictatorial attitude inspire men to prevent women from competing with them. And this is why women in every age were prevented from engaging themselves in social affairs. For centuries, social affairs remained the masculine thing. Women were never recognized in the field of administration, science, literature, and arts. That is why women used to express their creativity under pseudonym. Greek political philosopher Plato doesn't allow women to participate in the deliberative affairs of the state.² Aristotle also considers women incapable of dealing with politics. In similar way many social thinkers did not allow women to step outside the four walls of house and participate in day-to-day affairs. In Indian sub-continent women were also

disallowed to cross the threshold of the house they inhabited. Manu has considered status of women as like shudra.³ These all sorts of restrictions against women were in conformity with the norms of society. These norms were in fact the social fact and violation of which attracted punishment or social disapproval.

2. Objectives, Method and Materials

The present paper examines the perspective of Dr. BabasahebBhim Rao Ambedkar on social justice for women. It uses analytical method for its study. It collects data mainly from secondary sources like books, journals, published papers, etc.

3. Analysis and discussion

Social justice simply means equal treatment with all citizens without any social discrimination based on caste, sex, race, religion etc. It prohibits privileges to any particular section of society. However, it advocates some special privileges for the development of disadvantaged sections. The first initiative to provide justice to women started in Europe when the women's liberation movement began to gain momentum. It was John Stuart Mill who tirelessly fought for the women cause took the first serious attempt toward women's liberation. John Stuart Mill along with his lifelong companion Harriet Taylor wrote the *Subjection of Women*, the book that deals with problem faced by women at length. Mill demanded the suffrage right for women and it was because of his effort, women were given right to vote in England.⁴

In France, it was Simone de Beauvoir, a lifelong companion of Jean Paul Sartre, who championed the cause of women. In her celebrated work the *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the term gender is a cultural construct, and the women are not born, rather they are made. That is to say, women are women not because they are differently born,

rather they are asked to behave differently. Right from her very childhood, women are socialized differently as compared to men. Girls, in a given family, are supposed to behave in a manner, which is considered suitable for women only, and the boys on the other hand are asked to behave in a masculine manner. Childhood play is also determined on the basis of physical strength required by certain play. Plays which require less effort and conforms to moral boundaries drawn for women, is usually assigned to girls whereas play which requires strength and assertion is assigned to boys. Not only play but the work also assigned to boys and girls are found to be of different nature and it is where the sexual division of labour takes place. Again the talent of women is subjected to prejudice and stereotyped thinking as women are supposed to be incapable of making decision of their own and therefore are not free to decide what they would study and which career they would pursue.⁵

In Indian subcontinent the condition of women began to deteriorate in the post-Vedic period, and following the Islamic invasion of the country it became worst.⁶ Women were not as free as men were, and by the same token, women did not have enough rights as compared to their male counterparts. The caste hierarchy and patriarchy had gripped the social system to such an extent that the free flow of ideas and thought were not possible, let alone their dissemination and assertion. Because of caste hierarchy and patriarchal society, the voice and desire of women were never heard. Within the system of caste hierarchy, women belonging to *dalit* community are subjected to oppression at two levels. Firstly, being women, they are discriminated against and, secondly, being *dalit* or tribes they are subjected to ill-treatment. So the women in general and the *dalit* women in particular were never ever allowed to stand in society at par with men. While analysing the condition of the women in Indian society, it can safely be inferred that women, barring few exceptions, have never been active member of the society who could ever be relied upon or given opportunities to partake in the deliberative affairs of the society.

Against this backdrop, saviour like Phule emerged on the scene to redeem women from age-old chain of oppression and subjugation⁷. He occupies a unique as a saviour of Indian women. He was pioneer of untouchable women's education in particular and education of men and women Shudratishudra communities in general. Among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never wavered in his quest for truth and justice. Being influenced by Thomas Paine's 'Rights of Man', he developed a keen sense of social justice and became an ardent champion of anti-caste movement. He fought against sati system, child marriage, and keshamundan, and encouraged widow remarriage. He believed that women emancipation was possible only by educating women and bringing about social reforms. He founded 'SatyashodhakSamaj' to do away with social evils and to liberate underprivileged from age-old oppressing traditions.

Dr. Ambedkar as a thinker was inspired with western values and great persons like Jyotiba Phule etc. Having been inspired by the contribution of Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule who made an invaluable contribution in the field of women education and they were the first to run school for women from every segment of society, Dr. Ambedkar wholeheartedly extended his support for women education. Ambedkar, having imbibed the Western Philosophy,

attempted to inject western values within the Indian social system. He states that there is graded inequality in Indian society. Ambedkar advocated that a good society should be based on the principle of equality, liberty and fraternity⁸. He considered equal status for women in every field of life. He says that women have been subjugated not only from men in India but also from other women according to their caste, class, colour etc. He argues that women should have liberty to choose their profession, life partner etc. A female should participate in husband's activities as a friend, not as a slave. He comes with a different explanation of widowhood system in Hindu society than contemporary thinkers. He states that problem of widowhood has been preserved to maintain endogamy in Hindu society. He says that widowhood creates surplus female in Hindu society. He criticised veil system and polygamy among Muslim women⁹. He tells that there are three demerits of veil system. It becomes a barrier against her social identity. Veil system keeps women separate from the outer world at resultant women engage themselves in family tension. It also creates skin problem among women.

Ambedkar also legislated different bills for the welfare of women as a legislator. As a member of Bombay presidency, he introduced 'Maternity benefit bill'¹⁰. Some monetary benefit has also been provided with Pre-natal and Post-natal leave in this bill. He introduced some amendments in this bill as a labour minister of executive council of governor general in 1942. Leave period has been done now for eight weeks, four weeks for pre-natal and four week for post-natal. Ambedkar has also legislated some family planning measures as a member of Bombay legislative assembly. He considered that right to conceive should be a personal decision of women. Becoming a law minister in independent India, Ambedkar came with a proposal of 'Hindu code bill' in Indian parliament. In this bill, he wanted to introduce minimum age limit for marriage of Hindu girl. Monogamy for Hindu women has also been proposed. Ambedkar also wanted child adoption right for single women. He advocated for the right of share in father's property in this bill. Divorced women should get maintenance from husband. This bill was a long-time dream of dream of Dr Ambedkar. But, country wide agitation started against this bill and finally Ambedkar resigned from law minister post.

Dr. Ambedkar vigorously advocated equal rights for women in the constituent assembly debate as a constitution framer. Article 14 of the constitution of India ensures to women the right to equality. He outlaws that state will not discriminate women on the ground of sex in Article 15(1) of Indian constitution. The state is authorized to make any special provision for women. In other words, this provision permits the state to make affirmative discrimination in favour of females in Article 15(3). He made provision that no citizen shall be segregated against or be unsuitable for any office or employment under the state on the basis of sex in Article 16(2). Enforced labour has been banned in Article 23(1). The state has been made liable to secure sufficient means of livelihood for male and female both in Article 39(A). Ambedkar also made provision for equal work for equal pay in constitution in Article 39(d). In Article 39(e) of Indian constitution, the state has been asked to ensure that the strength and health of women workers are not abused and that they are not obliged by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their strength. Ambedkar also advocated for humane condition of

work for all in Art 42. Adult franchise has also been provided to all women with men in India¹¹.

Ambedkar participated and supported in different social movements for the rights of women¹². He worked for the betterment of life of prostitute of Kamathipura. He believed in the strength of women in social movements. In his Mahad movement 3000 women participated. In his Kalaram temple entry satyagraha at Nasik around 500 women participated. He inspired several women to fight for their rights. A woman started Chokhamela magazine inspired with his teachings. Ambedkar wrote about the social evils his magazines Mooknayak & Bahiskrit Bharat and exhorted women to fight against them.

4. Conclusion

Women in every age and society were subjected to violence; however, what differed was the form of violence. The meaning of the term violence should not be taken here literally; rather its wide connotation should be understood while using it in the context of violence against women. Women were never born free and she is everywhere in chains. Like Mill and other advocates of rights of women, Dr. Ambedkar also expressed his anguish over the condition of the women. He rejected the Varna System because he considered it as a sole reason behind segregating women from men and making them as category. He also accused Varna System for ill-treatment, violence, and discrimination against women. He came According to him, Varna System had degraded the life of women and had reified them. He comes with a different explanation of widowhood system in Hindu society than contemporary thinkers. He states that problem of widowhood has been preserved to maintain endogamy in Hindu society so that Varna system could be maintained. He exposed Varna System for being a regressive system, as it did not have welfare provision for deprived section of society. Women were also deprived section because they were not allowed to receive education, to engage in economic activities, to demand

property, to participate in rituals, and so on. He also criticised veil and polygamy system among Muslim women.

In Indian context, it was Dr. Ambedkar's effort, which brought about emancipation for women. What differentiates the contribution of Dr. Ambedkar from other champions of social reform towards women emancipation was Dr. Ambedkar's tireless effort that ultimately led to codification of women's right in Indian constitution. Dr. Ambedkar was of the view that women can never be liberated unless and until their existed mechanism to ensure their liberty in the event of their infringement. Dr. Ambedkar also supported the property rights of women, and in the constituent assembly debate, he brilliantly put up the cause of women in relation to property rights. Unfazed by the criticism he could attract by conservatives for his unconditional support to women rights in relation to property, Dr. Ambedkar went ahead and supplied justification for so doing. He ensured equal pay for equal work. He provided adult franchise to all women with men in India. Dr. Ambedkar wholeheartedly extended his support for women education.

The issue of family planning was also contentious as it was coming in the way of religious tenets and age-old desire for son. But whatever may have been the reasons for longing for a son, these were the women who had to pay the price in terms of health. Consent of women was never considered desirable for conception. Dr. Ambedkar was aware with the risk of not supporting family planning as it involved life of a woman and pressing social problems. He strongly opposed the Gandhiji's views related to spiritual measures of population control i.e. celibacy/continence (Brahmcharya) and self-restraint¹³. Population problem can be solved with the help of scientific instruments and scientific methods of abortion, operation, medical treatments etc. Family planning is boon to poor and women. Ambedkar also introduced 'Maternity benefit bill' as a legislator.

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