

Emancipation of Dalit women and Baba Sahib Bhim Rao Ambedkar.

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Abstract

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar made continuous and concerted efforts to elevate the lives of Dalit women who were being exploited by social, cultural and religious institutions of Hindu society. He was one of the brilliant minds of his time and believed in the principles of equality and fraternity. He was deeply influenced by the western thoughts of gender equality and equality among all human beings. He was the beacon of jurisprudence and believed that the deplorable condition of Dalit and Dalit women could be improved only with tough constitutional provisions. To enshrine these provisions in the Indian constitution was his priority which he made as the head of the constitution committee of India after the independence. The objective of this article is to explore social condition of Dalit women of India before and after the independence and to find out how Dr Ambedkar emancipated Dalits and Dalit women with his Multi-thronged efforts.

The present study is chiefly based on secondary sources available in relevant literature, research journals, books and websites etc. Dr Ambedkar not only dreamed emancipated and dignified life for these deprived sections of Indian society but also realized his dreams with his meaningful efforts. The rights and privileges that Dalit women and Dalits have today is the results of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar's missionary effort that he made selflessly without caring for political disadvantages that he had in his life. Posterity will remember him as the true well-wisher and Messiah of Dalits and Dalit women,

Key Words – Dalit, Emancipation, Women Untouchability, Varna System

Introduction

20th Century India is full of various political, social and cultural upheavals that influenced the Indian subcontinent immensely. The list of leaders that brought in these changes includes Mahatma Gandhi, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel and others. Unfortunately, some of these leaders have been pigeonholed as representative of a particular section of society. One of many memorable contributions of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar made many efforts to empower women of India, especially Dalit women who were exploited at different levels by social, cultural and political institutions. He was deeply influenced by the western principles of equality, fraternity and brotherhood and advocated for equality between man and man, man and woman. He also believed that slavery is a mental state and he or she who doesn't want to be slave can never be enslaved. Social just is never demanded, it is earned with collective efforts under the dynamic leadership that comes from within. He knew it well that a Dalit woman suffers on two counts. First she suffers for being a woman and secondly she suffers due to being a Dalit woman. (Dr. Ramesh Kamble 2017). He traced out the cultural and social causes that were historically responsible for the social and cultural backwardness of these women. He challenged the cultural institutions like Varna and caste of Hindu religion that advocated the superiority of Brahmins due to their birth in Brahman family. He promoted inter-caste marriage and emphasized the need of woman education. Once a woman is educated, she is empowered and an empowered woman will take her own decisions. He declared that untouchability is curse on Hinduism and as long as this menace is not eradicated Hindu society will never progress. Dr Ambedkar raised strongest voice to eradicate untouchability because he himself had suffered from this menace as a child. He rejected the Varna that divided Hindu society into four sections namely

Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Every varna (section) was assigned a particular task in the society. Brahmins were supposed to produce, preserve and disseminate knowledge for the welfare of society while Kshatriyas were ordained to defend the society and country. The Vaishyas were ordained to provide the commodities for other varnas and manage the economy. The Shudras were supposed to serve the rest of the varnas. Traditionally the term 'Savarna' is used for all Hindus except Shudras. They are called Avarnas and Dalits, schedule caste and scheduled tribes fall in this category. (Dr. Salagare M B 2017). Baba Sahib challenged this system and provided leadership to overhaul this exploitative social provision. Dr Ambedkar was well versed in jurisprudence and had studied the provisions made for women in the constitutions of other countries. As a head of the committee that was to prepare and propose Indian constitution, he made many constitutional provisions for India women that empowered them economically and socially.

Dr. Ambedkar had a well laid down blue print for the empowerment of women specially dalit women. He provided leadership to Dalits and accepted Buddhism along with his millions of followers. This could be possible because his call was well taken by the Dalit women and they motivated their men to renounce Hinduism and accept Buddhism. He was always of the view that Dalits as well as women should unite on a common platform to raise their voice against the exploitation that they face at different levels.

He proposed his full strategy to empower the women in the 'All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference.' The conference was organized at Nagpur on 20th July, 1940. In that conference he declared, "we want improve the condition of the society, first we should women educate."

As mentioned earlier, before independence and immediately after independence there were many freedom fighters who were working hard to improve the conditions of Dalits and specially Dalit women. All these leaders were honestly working for Dalit women but Ambedkar was the only leader who understood the complex social metrics that is responsible for the sorry condition of Dalit women. He spoke authentically and worked honestly for the empowerment of Dalit women from Hindu as well as Muslim communities. The social evils of Hindu society like Varna System, untouchability etc played havoc on Dalit women.

Objectives

1. To explore the condition of women before and after independence.
2. To know the social and economic condition of Dalit women before Ambedkar launched his reforms of women empowerment.
3. To trace out Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to women empowerment, especially Dalit women.

Methodology

The present study is mainly based on the secondary sources available in relevant literature in research journals, books, and websites etc.

Discussions

1. Condition of women, specifically Dalit women before Ambedkar's arrival on the political horizon of India.

In the 19th century India, i. e, British India the literacy among Indian women was very low and the Dalit women in general were illiterate. During freedom movement of Indian certain prominent women actively participated in political activities. Prominent among these women were Kasturba Bai, Kamal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu and others but none of these were from Dalit community. After India got freedom in 1947 the Dalits and Dalit women caught the attention of nation builders and special provisions were made in Indian constitution for them under the supervision of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Because they were mentioned under a special schedule they came to be known as Scheduled Caste, popularly known as S.C. Before independence M. K. Gandhi called them 'Harijan' which literally means Children of God. Ambedkar did not approve of this idea and said that not only the Dalits but we all are the children of God. He further said that special drives for their upliftment must be made for these Dalits, more especially for Dalit women to improve their social and economic condition so that they can live with dignity.

The Dalit women are economically most burnable group as they are not paid the wages as the Dalit males are paid. Historically the Hindu society has been gendered biased and patriarchal where women in general do not have the same privilege as the men. These Dalit women suffer on two counts, first being a woman and secondly being a Dalit. These women are exploited economically, socially and politically. Before independence under feudal system these women were employed as bonded laborers. In certain cases, the entire Dalit family was kept as a bonded laborer for generations. Dr. Ambedkar raised these problems prominently and fought for the abolition of feudal system in India.

The legislation to abolish untouchability from Indian society was proposed by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and it was strictly promulgated because of his tireless efforts. There was a time when even the shadow of these people on the path on which the caste Hindus walked was considered inauspicious and they were forbidden to tread these paths. The caste Hindus did not receive from their hands and in the hotels and in the houses of caste Hindus separate utensils were kept for these Dalits. Lower cast women were not allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies of high caste Hindus though the menial works like cleanliness and garbage management are done by these Dalit women. All the civil amenities were restricted for them though these amenities were made possible only due to their hard work. They dug the wells but were not allowed to drain water from it. The best of the civil amenities was used by the caste Hindus

Hindu social system is the oldest living social system of universe and *Manu Smriti* is considered as the oldest social manual that talks about the rights and duties of individual in a society. For a long time, *Manu Smriti* was the Magna Carta of Hindu society. This Hindu Law Book does not give any right to women. They were deprived of even the basic rights of human beings. Her life depended on the life of the male of the family at every stage. As a girl child she was the responsibility of parents, as a grown-up woman she depended on her husband who ought to be regarded as God for her. After her husband's death she was condemned to Sati- a practice in which she was burnt alive with the dead body of her husband on the pyre. Later on, during the middle age girl child was married before the puberty to avoid any eventuality. To keep a girl child in the home after puberty was considered sin. Even in their day today life they had to face strict routine. To see or to touch a woman during menstruation 1period was considered inauspicious. During this period, they were confined to solitary life in most unhygienic conditions.

The *Manu Smriti* considered women as property that was to be owned by men. She was considered seductress whose main task was to seduce men. The term 'slave' was used for women who were to work and live under the vigil of men. Dr. Ambedkar chastised the followers of *Manu* and condemned the *Manu Smriti*. Even today the followers of Ambedkar burn the *Manu Smriti* publicly to express their resentment. Dr Ambedkar vehemently opposed untouchability, Sati, polygamy, child marriage, unequal wages and supported inter-caste marriages and widow marriages. He regularly met Dalit leaders and counseled them to observe cleanliness in personal life and send their children, especially girl child to educate.

2.Dr. Ambedkar Struggle for Women Emancipation -

Babasaheb successfully spearheaded many movements launched for temple entrance and access to public amenities like village ponds and wells for Dalits.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's efforts were well materialized when he organized the Dalit rally and launched a massive social movement to open all public water places for Dalits in 1923. As a result of his massive protest The Bombay Legislative Council passed the famous resolution that opened all public water places for Dalits. (Lajwantsing 2016). He emphasized that every Dalit woman should be educated because if a Dalit woman is educated then a Dalit family is educated. Although his condemnation of Hindu Scriptures was not liked by other national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel and Hindus excepting Dalit, he never gave any importance to these elements.

The modern Indian society is almost free from many of the taboos and discriminatory provisions institutionalized by the *Manu Smriti*. Indian law makers have made laws that ensure equal wages to all and Dalits and Dalit women are protected under STSC Act. The egalitarian democratic society that India wants to become was the vision of Baba Sahib Ambedkar. He envisioned a society that was based on equality and fraternity, where women have equal right and where no one is discriminated in the name of caste creed or gender. His struggle against regressive social forces infused enthusiasm and gave sense of dignity in millions

of Dalits of India. He taught the Dalits to be proud of their skill and ask for their legitimate right that they have been deprived since centuries.

Ambedkar who always appeared in branded suit in public new it well that apparel speaks a lot about man's social status. Keeping this in view he asked Dalit women to wear sari like the women of the caste Hindus. He advocated what he believed in and fought till last. He urged the Dalits to respect their women first so that others may not dare to disrespect them. Likewise, he believed that Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular could be emancipated and empowered through education.

Dr Ambedkar had highest degree in Law; read a lot and propagated his revolutionary views in the news publications like 'Mooknayak' and 'Bahiskrit'. He presented case studies of Dalit women in these publications and suggested how Dalit woman could come out of poverty squat had been their lot since centuries. Through these newspapers and books, he conveyed his messages among the common man. Dr. Ambedkar is one of the well-known public speakers of 20th century India. People in multitude gathered to listen to him and observed pin drop silence during his powerful speeches.

After independence Dr Ambedkar came out with well-drawn legislative provisions for monogamy under Hindu Marriage act that institutionalized it. He also advocated for divorce as a right for women. He declared and was deeply convinced that once Dalit women were educated, they will exercise their choice in every walk of life. Dr Ambedkar was of the opinion that no society can make progress without empowering women.

The Hindu Succession Act that was his brainchild ensures equal right to male and female in inheritance. Different provisions of the act empower women and grant equal rights to them. Dr. Ambedkar was not ready to compromise on the issue of equal rights to women. In a rare gesture he resigned from ministerial position in 1948 when the Hindu Code Bill that ensured property rights to women was rejected in Indian parliament.

Dr. Ambedkar's life was dedicated to the emancipation of deprived humanity but his efforts that he made for the emancipation of women will always be remembered. His greatest contribution to the cause of woman emancipation has been the four great acts that he introduced in the parliament. These acts are as below

- i) The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. The act ensured marriageable age for women and proved to be a strong blow to child marriage.
- ii) The Hindu Succession Act, 1956. This act empowered Hindu women by ensuring equal property in inherited movable and immovable property of Hindu family.
- iii) The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956. This act empowered girl child in Hindu family and ensured them right to live under the guardianship of the adult of the family.
- iv) The Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956. This act ensured safe adoption of children.

A close study of the above acts will evidence that Dr. Ambedkar was a social and political scientist and his wide range in-depth knowledge of Hindu society helped him to frame such laws that helped deprived woman of India. In the due course of time these acts were amended to incorporate new provisions. For example, The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 was amended in 1976 to include provisions like legitimization of illegitimate children (Sec.16), Punishment-bigamy (Sec.26), Custody of children (Sec. 26), Marriageable age of females raising to 18 years and Provision for alimony (Sec. 25). The Act abolished the difference between a maiden and a widow.

Ambedkar's efforts that he made to empower Indian women may be divided into two parts. In the first part come his efforts that he made as an activist and created congenial social and political environment before the independence of country. In the second part of his efforts Dr. Ambedkar fulfilled his promises made to the Dalit women by making provision in Indian constitutions.

Conclusion – Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, popularly known as Baba Sahib is counted among the prominent nation builders of India. He not only dreamed but also got opportunity to materialize his dreams. His contribution to woman empowerment and woman emancipation is one of the many great tasks that he performed to restore dignity to women in general but Dalit women in particular. Posterity will remember him as the true well-wisher of Dalits and Dalit women.

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