



Ambedkar as a great liberator of Indian women

Mahadevi

ICSSR Senior Fellow, Department of History, Karnataka State Open University, Mysuru, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Women empowerment has been a major issue of development across the world, and many attempts are being made for women empowerment in the developing countries like India. Since many years, in India many social reformers and organisations have been attempted to eliminate gender inequality and to liberate women.

The social reformers who struggled for women liberty and to rid of parochial customs in India were Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwarchand Vidyasagar, Swamy Dayananda Saraswathi, Jotiba Phule, Periyar Ramaswamy and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Among them Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar stands in front line as a liberator of women in India.

Ambedkar vision of women empowerment was different from other social reformers. He wanted a legal frame for ensuring rights and liberty to the women in India. Realising the worst position of women in rigid Hindu society, he brought an amendment to Indian Constitution by codifying Hindu Code Bill. He facilitated the legal recognition of women as equal citizen of India. In the beginning it was objected by many Parliament members. But, finally it was accepted by the Government of India. This bill brought radical changes in Indian society. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a great liberator of women in India, his works have been benefited very much to every women, regardless of caste or religion, rich or poor. They owe Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for enshrining as a fundamental right.

Keywords: women liberation, women rights, Indian society, Hindu code bill, empowerment

Introduction

Gender Equality

Women constitute equal share numerically, lacks equality in sharing the rights, enjoying liberty and positions. Women were deprived of equality since long time and gender inequality existed in Indian society. Gender equality is a state of equal case of access to resources and opportunities without discrimination of gender which includes economic participation and decision making and the state of valuing different behaviour aspirations and needs equally regardless of gender. As UNICEF define gender equality means that women and men, girls and boys enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protection. A healthy society needs to have equal opportunities to both men and women.

Empowerment of women was also one of the goals of millennium development. The goals of sustainable development include women empowerment. The practice of gender inequality has been practiced across the globe, particularly in the developing countries. In India right from the day of later vedic period gender inequality continue to be the stigma of society. Many social reformers and institutions fought for elimination of gender inequality. Among them Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stands in front line as a feminist icon in India. The great vision of Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar was on gender equality is more radical and envisaged the need for legal backup. Ambedkar realised that, earlier to Manusmriti practiced in India women were leading a honourable life. Early rulers had high respect to their queens, as well as in the society. Women enjoyed good position in the families. Ambedkar finds women of the days before the Manu's code leading a more honourable life. "Women in pre-Manu's days were highly respected cannot be disputed. Among them, Ratins who played so prominent

part in the coronation of the king in ancient India was the queen and the king made her an offering as he did to the others. Not only the king elect did homage to the queen, he worshipped his other wives of lower castes. In the same way the king offered salutation after the coronation ceremony to the ladies and the chiefs of the Shremes. In the later stage, the situation and position of women became worst with the orthodox practice of Indian society. Ambedkar thought of social reform approach after realising the conditions of women in India which were bounded by Manusmriti, where women were treated as slaves, they were regarded as objects of pleasure to the men. And the right of education and property rights for women were denied. According to Manu a woman is part and parcel of the property owned and is no better than a slave. Moreover she is subject to corporal punishment like any other slave as the husband is given the right. What is more, the women does not have a choice in selecting her life partner, the father has every right to settle the alliance even without the knowledge of his daughter. The evils practiced in the Indian Hindu society made Ambedkar to take strong step to bring changes in the rigid Hindu society and liberating the women. Realising the status of women in India Ambedkar says "Can anybody doubt that it was Manu who was responsible for the degradation of women in India". "Ambedkar details Manu's low opinion of women, specifically highlighting his commentary on the inherent seductions by women of men leading to deviance and disloyalty as necessitating control. To the frequent elucidation of Manu's injunction, Ambedkar posits the picture of a misogynist, whose law of divorce neither curbed a man from giving up his wife nor pre-empted him from abandoning and or selling her. Though there were few reformer who wanted to reform the Indian Hindu society it

was only by persuasion of the male who dominated the society. There was no legal framework to eradicate such inequality. "Ambedkar has taken up social approach at two levels: One of the levels of Hindu family and the other at the level of the Hindu society. Because he wants to reorganise and reconstruct level. The problems regarding child marriage, widow remarriage, concretion (sati) and post concretion relate to the reform of the Hindu family. The abolition of untouchability and the caste system and modification of the laws of adoption, marriage and succession relate to the reform of Hindu society". The liberation of women was much realised by looking at the western education system which was access to all irrespective of gender. His vision was imparting education to women which would enlighten the women of their rights. "Ambedkar in one of his early letter written to a friend of his father from New York, young Ambedkar laid special stress on education of women". He was well aware of the pioneering work done by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule for the emancipation of women. Throughout his struggle he fought for the liberation of women by giving equal rights which reflected in his writings like 'Mookanayak' and 'Bahiskrit Bharat' where Ambedkar focused the issue of oppression of women. Mookanayak and Bahiskrit Bharat predominantly used to cover issues related to women. "He involved women in all the struggles. In 'Mahad Satyagraha' women participated in large numbers. About 500 women marched at the head of the historical procession to assert the untouchable right to drink water from the public tank". Ambedkar concept of social engineering consist of upliftment of downtrodden and equal rights to women who constituted nearly half of the total population of India. Ambedkar wanted to uplift the status of women through legal support. Therefore he proposed the Hindu Code Bill. The proposed Hindu Code Bill by Ambedkar was a compromised the old and new. "While speaking about the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly he urged the members to have a common code which would replace the Hindu Law, scattered as it is then regarding seven important matters, i.e. (i) The right of property of a deceased Hindu who has died intestate without making a will, to both male and female. (ii) The order of succession among the different heirs to the property of a deceased dying intestate. (iii) The law of maintenance, (iv) marriage, (v) divorce, (vi) adoption, (vii) minority and guardianship".

Thus, Ambedkar vision of Hindu Code Bill comprised seven major reforms to Hindu law was a step to dismantle the age old rigid society, which bring equal rights to the suppressed women. However some fundamentalist like Shyama Mukherjee opposed the Hindu Code Bill with the misconception that the Hindu society and its culture would be shattered. Ambedkar inspite of strong determination accepted to amend the suggestions made by orthodox Hindus. The progressive Hindus welcomed the Ambedkar Hindu Code Bill proposal. He wanted women to have great participation in all walks of life, particularly in political arena. Therefore he advocated for voting rights to women.

One of the Justices of India P.B. Gajendragardkar had high praise for Ambedkar's proposal which implied in his statement. "The provision of the Hindu law put an end once for all to the age of miracles and paved the way for the age of legislature". Pained by the stiff opposition to the proposed Hindu Code Bill Ambedkar resigned as a Minister of Law in 1951. After over two decades of meaningless

debates, the Hindu Code Bill for the first time included the right of women to divorce, the right of inheritance to daughters, and the right of widows to equal property rights. Simultaneously, the regressive language around caste-specific rules was also deleted. This Bill, later, turned into a series of Acts, including the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, and forms the legislative bedrock of women's claims to shared property even today. Latter realising the need, India had accepted the Hindu Code Bill in 1955 with some modification. As the result of Dr. Ambedkar effort, pertained to women rights, equality and liberty laws formulated and implemented by the Government of India.

The landmark changes brought to Hindu law by Ambedkar has paved the way for heading towards gender equality in India. In India's development plan women empowerment has been focused. Several welfare schemes are launched in independent India. Govind Kelkar has stated that "there is need to first address questions of the empowerment of women and then well-being of their families and communities. Empowerment refers to the expansion in women ability to make strategic choices in terms of rights to assets markets and services. It is true that the possession of property and access to other services of women make them to be more self-reliant. That is the reason Ambedkar wanted the need for legal protection in terms of Hindu Code Bill. It was because of Dr. Ambedkar act and amendments brought to Indian Constitution which paved the easy way for framing relevant laws and implementing for the empowerment of women which ultimately leads to gender equality. At the global level the importance is given for the empowerment of women in developing countries for achieving the goal of development. With regard to women empowerment in India still we have to go long way to reach the gender equality. The current position of women depicts the existing gender inequality. Global Gender Gap Report of 2021 reveals that as far as women equality is concerned India is ranked 140th among 156 countries of the world and stand at 28th place in the key indicators like, Economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Despite Ambedkar continues struggle for women even after accepting the Hindu Code Bill the scenario of Indian women not up to the expected level. Apart from seven strong weapons proposed in the new bill, Ambedkar brought radical changes which ameliorate the welfare of the women. Emphasising the women safety and protection, Ambedkar introduced many welfare programmes, such as

1. Mines Maternity Benefit Act
2. Women Labour Welfare Fund
3. Women and Child Development Protection Act
4. Maternity Benefit for Women Labour
5. Restoration of Ban on Employment of Women on Underground Work in Coal Mines
6. Equal Pay for Equal Work Irrespective of Sex.

His influence also led to the passage of various other pro-women acts like the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, and The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1956, legally entitling women to equal wages and criminalising dowry, respectively. Ambedkar emphasised the need for safety and dignity of women. The all-round development was the agenda of gender equality. As Ambedkar pointed out "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of

progress which women have achieved”. His fore thoughts of India revealed in his statement.

Conclusion

Ambedkar vision and his thoughts which have been implemented for women empowerment is road map for sustainable development in India. Millions of women have occupied higher positions in every field in India. Women in India have been enjoying liberty, and equality. Thus Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged as a great liberator of women.

References

1. Ambedkar and Social Justice. Published by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, GOI,1992:1:43, 114, 117,160.
2. Azaad SM. Dr. Ambedkar and Gender Equality. Proceedings of the Third International Symposium, Seoul, 2013.
3. Bhatia KL, Chowdhary HR. Soil Justice of Ambedkar. Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p201.
4. Desai N, Thakkar U. Women in Indian Society. National Book Trust India, 2001.
5. Rameshchandra Mitra S. The Ambedkar Era. Common Wealth Publisher, New Delhi, 2003, 154.
6. Waghule Pandya. Why Ambedkar Matters to the Women’s Rights Movement, 111.
7. Yeasmin M. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s Vision for Women Empowerment. IJCRT, 2018, 6.