

An Analytical Study On Dalit Women And Contribution Of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar To Their Empowerment

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Abstract:

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar ardently sought to improve the conditions of Dalit women, historically oppressed within the Indian society. Esteemed for his intellect, he championed equality, drawing inspiration from Western philosophies on human rights. Recognising the necessity for constitutional measures to uplift Dalits, he ensured their incorporation as head of the post-independence constitution committee. The study critically assesses the socio-cultural evolution of Dalit women before and after India's independence, emphasising Dr. Ambedkar's transformative influence. Using a range of primary and secondary sources, the study attributes the contemporary rights of Dalit women to his visionary leadership. Despite the political adversities he faced, his legacy stands as a beacon for the rights and empowerment of this historically voiceless group. The study further analyses Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's strategies, spotlighting his holistic approach towards elevating every aspect of Dalit women's lives, from education to societal roles, underscoring the belief that a nation's treatment of its women reflects its core values.

Keywords: constitution, Dalit women, empowerment, equality, human rights, legacy, post-independence.

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a towering figure in modern India, ardently battled against entrenched caste, class, varna, and gender disparities. He envisaged an India founded on principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity, not just among men, but between the sexes. Despite the significant presence of other transformative leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel in the 20th-century Indian sociopolitical landscape, Ambedkar's unique emphasis was on rectifying deep-rooted social structures that perpetuated inequalities. A core component of Ambedkar's philosophy was the empowerment of women, with particular attention to Dalit women.¹ Historically oppressed by societal, cultural, and political constructs, these women were doubly subjugated: first for their gender, and secondly for their Dalit identity.² Through rigorous analysis, Ambedkar identified the entrenched norms and religious tenets that perpetuated their subjugation, such as the hierarchical varna system³ in Hinduism that inherently valued Brahmins while relegating Shudras, often synonymous with Dalits, to servility.⁴ Through understanding this complex societal framework, Ambedkar posed that true empowerment must be both mental and tangible. He asserted that liberation from oppression is not merely sought but earned through collective endeavours and visionary leadership. He contended that educating a woman is the cornerstone of empowerment, enabling her to make informed choices.

Ambedkar's comprehensive understanding of global jurisprudence equipped him to instil robust provisions for women's rights within the Indian constitution. By examining constitutional frameworks internationally, he ensured that Indian women, especially those from voiceless backgrounds, were afforded unprecedented economic and social empowerment. His leadership extended beyond mere legislative changes. Emphasising the transformative power of belief systems, Ambedkar, with millions of his followers, converted to Buddhism. This mass conversion, significantly influenced by Dalit women, signified a collective renunciation of a system that historically oppressed them. These women, acting as catalysts, spurred their communities to rally against ingrained exploitative practices and adopt a new faith that echoed their aspirations for equality.⁵ In the context of pre and post-

independent India, numerous leaders aimed to uplift Dalits, especially women. However, what set Ambedkar apart was his profound understanding of the intricate social dynamics underlying their plight. He navigated the complexities, not just within Hindu communities but also among Muslim Dalit women. Systems like the Varna and institutionalized untouchability had especially adverse effects on Dalit women, a challenge Ambedkar met head-on.

Objectives

The study seeks to explore the movements spearheaded by Dr. Ambedkar, focusing on the emancipation of Dalit women. It endeavours to elucidate the practical solutions proposed by Dr. Ambedkar to address the challenges faced by Dalit women, contextualised within his broader socio-religious reforms. Further, the research aims to contrast the status of women pre- and post-independence and to delineate the socio-economic conditions of Dalit women prior to Dr. Ambedkar's transformative interventions. An important aspect of this investigation is to delineate Dr. Ambedkar's contributions to the empowerment of women, with an emphasis on Dalit women.

Methodology

The methodology for the study utilises an analytical approach to scrupulously analyse the issues faced by Dalit women. Predominantly anchored in a review of secondary sources from existing literature, the study also integrates primary sources to ensure a holistic understanding. An explorative design has been chosen to identify both historical and contemporary challenges Dalit women confront and to formulate strategies that might protect them from forthcoming challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the social structure of India, the intersectionality of being both a Dalit and a woman means facing compounded discrimination and adversity. A Dalit woman, by virtue of her caste and gender, grapples with manifold challenges posed by both societal prejudices against Dalits and the deeply ingrained patriarchy that discriminates against women. During the 19th-century British India era, literacy rates among women were lamentably low, with Dalit women facing near-total exclusion from educational opportunities. While the freedom movement of India saw

participation from iconic women such as Kasturba Bai, Kamal Nehru, and Sarojini Naidu, the conspicuous absence of Dalit women's voices speaks volumes. Following independence in 1947, attention finally turned to the rights of Dalits, with particular focus brought to them through the Constitution under Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's stewardship. The subsequent categorisation of these communities as Scheduled Castes, or S.C, sought to bring them into the mainstream, although M.K. Gandhi's terming them 'Harijan'⁶ or 'Children of God' was seen as patronising by many, including Ambedkar himself.⁷

The economic plight of Dalit women is particularly dire. Even within their community, they frequently earn less than their male counterparts. The deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes of the Hindu society and historical gender biases exacerbate their economic and social marginalisation. Before the dawn of independence, Dalit women, often alongside their families, were ensnared in the oppressive bonds of servitude under the feudal system, leading to generational entrapment. Dr. Ambedkar, recognising these oppressive systems, championed the abolition of the feudal system and untouchability. The scale of discrimination was such that even the mere shadow of a Dalit was considered contaminating to upper castes.⁸ This discrimination extended to basic rights, like access to clean water; Dalit women could be responsible for digging a well but be prohibited from drawing water from it. Amidst this backdrop, the Hindu social system, guided by the ancient text *Manu Smriti*,⁹ played a significant role. This document, for a considerable period, served as a kind of constitution for Hindu society.¹⁰ Unfortunately, it held a dismal view of women's rights, relegating them to subordinate roles, entirely dependent on men. Practices such as Sati, which involved the self-immolation of widows, child marriages before puberty, and inhumane treatments during menstruation, were prescribed or condoned.¹¹

Dr. Ambedkar's opposition to the regressive tenets of *Manu Smriti* was emphatic. His disapproval was so profound that his followers today symbolically burn copies of the *Manu Smriti* to protest its misogynistic principles.¹² Dr. Ambedkar's activism did not stop at criticism; he took a proactive approach, opposing regressive practices like untouchability, Sati, and child marriage, while championing progressive ones like inter-caste marriages, equal wages,

and widow remarriage. He regularly engaged with the Dalit community, advising them on hygiene, education, and personal development, laying special emphasis on education for girls. The intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women in India have deep historical and cultural roots. However, the indefatigable efforts of leaders like Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar have paved the way for social reform, offering hope for future generations of Dalit women. The transformative efforts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar towards the emancipation of the Dalits are noteworthy, particularly in the context of his 1923 mass movement. This mobilisation, aimed at granting Dalits unhindered access to all public water sources, bore fruit when the Bombay Legislative Council acceded to his demands.¹³ One of the central tenets of Ambedkar's philosophy was the imperative of educating Dalit women. He postulated that educating a Dalit woman had a ripple effect, ultimately enlightening an entire family.¹⁴

However, Ambedkar's sharp critiques of Hindu scriptures didn't sit well with many of his contemporaries, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel, among others. Yet, undeterred by opposition and consistently authentic to his principles, Ambedkar consistently prioritised the rights and dignity of Dalits over appeasing the larger Hindu community. Today, the influence of the oppressive *Manu Smriti* on contemporary Indian society has significantly diminished, a testament to Ambedkar's efforts. Modern legal provisions have been crafted to eradicate wage disparities, and the protection of Dalits, including Dalit women, has been enshrined in the STSC Act. Ambedkar's vision for India was not merely of an egalitarian democracy. It was about creating a society cemented on the principles of equality and fraternity, devoid of discrimination stemming from caste, creed, or gender. His relentless efforts against regressive societal norms instilled a renewed sense of pride and dignity in countless Dalits across India.¹⁵ He empowered them to stand tall, assert their rights, and take pride in their inherent skills and capabilities. Recognising the symbolic power of clothing in signifying social standing, he advised Dalit women to adopt the sari, the traditional attire of caste Hindus. This was not merely a superficial change; it was a potent message of assertion and identity.

Dr. Ambedkar's belief in the transformative power of education was unwavering. He maintained that the path

to emancipation and empowerment for Dalits, especially Dalit women, lay in education. Holding the highest degree in Law, he was well-versed in diverse subjects, leveraging this knowledge to propagate his revolutionary views through publications such as 'Mooknayak' and 'Bahiskrit'.¹⁶ Through these mediums, he showcased real-life accounts of Dalit women, outlining pragmatic solutions to challenges that had been their albatross for generations.¹⁷ His writings served as conduits, disseminating his progressive ideologies to the masses. As a compelling orator, Dr. Ambedkar was a force to reckon with in the 20th century. His speeches had a magnetic pull, drawing vast audiences who hung onto his every word, often in rapt silence. Post-independence, his advocacy extended to the realm of marriage. With the Hindu Marriage Act, he laid the legislative groundwork for monogamy and ardently supported the right to divorce for women.¹⁸ His conviction was steadfast: an educated Dalit woman would be autonomous, making informed decisions across every facet of her life.¹⁹

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar ardently believed that the progress and vitality of a society were intricately tied to the empowerment of its women. This deep-seated conviction formed the backbone of his advocacy for the Hindu Succession Act, which sought to embed equality between genders in the domain of inheritance rights. The act was peppered with several provisions specifically crafted to elevate the position of women, granting them rights previously denied. This wasn't just a legislative pursuit for Ambedkar; it was a fervent moral crusade. This intensity of purpose was manifest when he chose to resign from his ministerial post in 1948, a consequence of the rejection of the Hindu Code Bill, which stood for women's property rights, in the Indian Parliament.²⁰ Dr. Ambedkar's life's mission orbited around the upliftment of the downtrodden and disenfranchised. Yet, his resolute commitment to women's emancipation holds a unique place in his illustrious legacy. This unwavering dedication birthed four seminal legislative acts. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, for instance, acted as a bulwark against child marriages by prescribing a clear age threshold for marriage. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 was a watershed moment in levelling the inheritance field for women, ensuring them equal rights in property matters. The 1956 Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act fortified the rights of girl children within

Hindu families, guaranteeing their entitlement to responsible adult guardianship. The Adoption and Maintenance Act, introduced the same year, laid the foundation for the secure adoption of children, catering to the child's holistic well-being.²¹

What emerges from a thorough analysis of these acts is the image of Dr. Ambedkar as a profound social and political thinker. His unparalleled understanding of the labyrinthine complexities of Hindu society enabled him to draft transformative laws that had the power to radically alter the destinies of India's disenfranchised women. Laws, like society, are not static. They evolve in response to the changing societal milieu. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 stands testament to this dynamic nature. Amended in 1976, it ushered in several progressive provisions, such as recognising children born outside marital bonds, penalising bigamy, and more.²² The act was also instrumental in eradicating an age-old distinction between unmarried women and widows, highlighting Dr. Ambedkar's intent to obliterate regressive societal norms. Dr. Ambedkar's journey towards women's empowerment can be discerned in two distinct phases. Before India's independence, he emerged as a vociferous activist, endeavouring to mould the societal and political landscape in favour of women's rights. The subsequent phase, following India's tryst with independence, witnessed Dr. Ambedkar transitioning from promises to palpable legislative action, ensuring these commitments found resonance in the Indian Constitution.

The Belgaum District Bahishkrit Social Conference of 1929, presided over by Sri Sitaram Namadev Shivatarakar, became a pivotal moment in addressing the systemic discrimination faced by the untouchables in India.²³ Analysing the main crux of the conference reveals a concerted effort to challenge the existing oppressive norms and to pave the way for a more inclusive future. At the heart of the conference's message was the assertion that the Dalits' backwardness was not self-inflicted but rather a product of a hostile environment. Namadev Shivatarakar's stance, which argued that the untouchables were not inherently inferior but had been actively suppressed by the Chaturvarnya system, was revolutionary. This sentiment highlighted the deep-rooted bias against Dalits perpetuated by the varna system.

The resolutions passed during the conference painted a picture of a community yearning for change. The demand to make untouchability a legal offence and the rejection of religious texts that upheld birth-based hierarchies underscored the collective desire for legal and socio-religious reforms.²⁴ What was particularly notable was their appeal for governmental intervention in religious matters to address the grievances of the Bahujans, an audacious move in a country where religious matters often remain beyond state intervention. The resolutions concerning marriage were a testament to the forward-thinking nature of the conference.²⁵ By recommending an increase in the marriage age for men and women and promoting inter-caste marriages, the conference sought to challenge rigid caste-based boundaries. Their suggestion to minimise marriage expenses, with the intent to redirect funds towards education, was an indication of the premium they placed on enlightenment and progress.

Dr. Ambedkar's subsequent speech presented a clear roadmap for Dalit emancipation. His twin strategies – acquiring rights through struggle and gaining political power – emphasised the multifaceted approach needed for true liberation. His message, that salvation was inextricably linked to political empowerment rather than mere religious rituals, was an eye-opener. The anecdote involving Dr. Ambedkar and the Devadasi woman from Athani highlighted his unparalleled empathy and vision. While many leaders might have responded with disdain or judgment to the woman's justification for her participation in the Devadasi system, Dr. Ambedkar offered compassion and understanding. His pragmatic approach transformed the woman's perspective, leading her to contribute to the socio-religious movement. This singular incident is a testament to Dr. Ambedkar's unparalleled influence and his authentic commitment to women's emancipation. Women, indeed, held a special place in Dr. Ambedkar's vision for an equitable society. In his address at the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in 1942, he notably discussed the institution of marriage, challenging the traditional power dynamics and advocating for an egalitarian relationship between spouses. However, despite Dr. Ambedkar's groundbreaking efforts, many women, even today, remain shackled by tradition and ignorance. Even educated Dalit women, as the analysis suggests, are largely

uninformed about Ambedkar's teachings and the historical injustices perpetuated by the Hindu religion against their communities. This lack of awareness, however, cannot solely be attributed to the women. Their men, who often perpetuate these outdated norms and beliefs, are equally to blame. Yet, hope is on the horizon. In Maharashtra, inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's movement, women have not only formed their own organisations but are also actively challenging societal norms. This stands in stark contrast to other regions, especially the Hindi-speaking states, where women's collectivisation remains limited.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, a visionary and a reformer, had, at the heart of his convictions, a commitment to the welfare and empowerment of the oppressed classes. His impassioned speech in Bombay in 1936 was emblematic of this belief. Addressing a gathering largely composed of people from the Devadasi patraje, Bhute, and Aradhi communities, he made a fervent call for the rejection of customs that pushed them into ignominy and degradation. In this meeting, his emphasis was not solely on the much-debated topic of religious conversion, but it rather shifted to the gravity of eradicating shameful practices. His argument was not rooted in condescension but was rather a plea for the dignity of those oppressed. "Whether you change your religion along with us, or not, it does not matter to me,"²⁶ he began, indicating that religious conversion was not his primary concern. His focus was on the emancipation of these women from practices that relegated them to prostitution and disgrace. His critique of the Chaturvarna system of Hinduism was scathing. He observed that it made the oppressed classes "slaves" to the higher castes. The religious narrative of deities taking various incarnations to protect the virtuous and punish the wicked was, according to him, mere fabrication. It was this very system, which, in the name of religion and divinity, was responsible for the subjugation and discrimination against the Dalits.²⁷

Ambedkar posed a poignant question to underline the inherent discrimination in the religious practices: "If Yallamma of Savadatti and other Gods and Goddesses will be pleased and satisfied and they bless you for practising the Devadasi system among Dalits, then, why don't caste Hindus practise it to receive blessings from Gods and Goddesses?"²⁸ Through this, he made a strong case against

the selective imposition of degrading customs on the Dalits. Another core argument advanced by Dr. Ambedkar was the significance of educating women. Echoing a sentiment that has since become a globally acknowledged principle, he believed that the education of women was pivotal to the upliftment of a community. "If you want to educate your children, first educate women," he proclaimed, affirming the central role women play in shaping the future of a society.²⁹ In his eyes, an Ambedkarite, one truly devoted to his vision, would prioritise the education and welfare of Dalit women. Dr. Ambedkar's deep understanding of the plight of the Dalits was not superficial.³⁰ He had witnessed the dire state in which women, who were as oppressed as the Shudras and the Untouchables, lived. He did not merely advocate for passive resistance or subtle reform. He believed in confronting the established norms of the Hindu society head-on. This was based on his belief that positive change could only occur when oppressive traditions were directly challenged. Dr. Ambedkar was not merely content with critiquing the regressive customs; he also offered solutions. Central to his recommendations was the importance of education. He saw it as the panacea for the multitude of problems faced by the Dalit community. To him, education was not just about literacy but also about fostering critical thinking. He wanted the oppressed classes to be empowered with knowledge, so they could challenge and overcome the shackles of discrimination.

CONCLUSION

In the annals of Indian history, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, often referred to as Baba Sahib, stands as a monumental figure championing the cause of the voiceless. His visionary approach extended beyond mere ideation; he actively sought avenues to translate these visions into reality. Significantly, his endeavours towards the empowerment and emancipation of women, especially Dalit women, underscored his commitment to ensuring dignity for this often-neglected segment. While history recognises Ambedkar primarily for his work with Dalits, his contributions for the upliftment of the entire women demographic in India are equally paramount. He eloquently emphasised the need for adaptive change in society, urging the Hindu community to repair and renew outdated cultural constructs. His leadership was instrumental in mobilising Dalit women, ensuring their participation in the broader

Dalit Movement. The progression of a nation is intrinsically tied to the status and inclusivity of its Dalit women. Without their upliftment and equal societal participation, claims of national advancement and development ring hollow. The study examines the importance of Dr. Ambedkar's contributions and serves as an invitation for further scholarly exploration and analytical ventures in this domain.

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³ Caste is a hereditary social group linked to occupation and status, while class is based on wealth and social standing. Varna is the traditional Indian hierarchy with categories like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

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¹⁶ "Mooknayak" was a Marathi newspaper founded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1920, advocating for Dalit rights. "Bahiskrit" referred to the excluded status of Dalits in India, emphasizing their need for social justice and inclusion.

¹⁷ Ambedkar, Dr. B.R.; *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman*, Dr. Ambedkar Publication Society, Hyderabad, 1965, p-p18-23.

¹⁸ By advocating for monogamy and supporting women's right to divorce, he aimed to challenge the patriarchal norms prevalent in Hindu society. His legislative efforts not only addressed issues of gender equality but also disrupted traditional power dynamics, empowering women to assert their autonomy within the institution of marriage. This analytical approach underscores Ambedkar's commitment to social reform and the advancement of women's rights in India.

¹⁹ Ambedkar, Dr. B.R.; *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman*, Dr. Ambedkar Publication Society, Hyderabad, 1965, p-p18-23.

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²¹ *Ambedkar and Social Justice, Vol-1*, the Director Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1992, p.119.

²² B.R.Ambedkar, 'Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto' in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5, Bombay: Govt. Of Maharashtra, 1989, pp.101-2.

²³ The Belgaum District Bahishkrit Social Conference of 1929 was significant as it marked a pivotal moment in India's social reform movement. It aimed to address the issues faced by the marginalised and oppressed communities, emphasising their rights and dignity. This conference laid the foundation for greater social and political awareness among Bahishkrit communities, contributing to their empowerment and eventual inclusion in the nation's social fabric. Its impact resonated beyond Belgaum, influencing similar movements across the country.

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