

AMBEDKAR'S VISION FOR ECONOMIC LIBERATION OF WOMEN

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Abstract:

The present article strives to throw light on the ideas of Dr. BabasahebBhimrao Ambedkar regarding the empowerment of women through his works and his life. He dedicated his life to end the oppression of one fellow human being to another. As he himself was the victim of caste-ridden Hindu patriarchal society, he understood perfectly the plight of Dalits and women. Through the medium of his Hindu Code Bill, he aimed for a more egalitarian hindu law and religion which gives women an opportunity to stand on the same platform as his male counterpart. The article shows his intentions and stand and has used his words to back the same.

Keywords:Ambedkar, women's right, economic independence, egalitarianism.

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Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was indeed an emancipator of women who rose like a polar star from tatters in Maharashtra and strived tirelessly for the upliftment of depressed class, including women. He burnt the Manusmriti on 25th December, 1927 and blew bugle of fight against the Brahmanical patriarchy which placed women on the lowest rung of society ladder. He said, while addressing largely attended Depressed Classes Women conference on 18-19 July 1942 that, “He measured the progress of a community by the degree of progress made by the women of that community.” He understood very well that true equality will come only when the women were no longer be economically dependent on the men. On becoming Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee & First Law Minister of Independent Indian, he continued with zeal and dedication to frame laws to break the chains of age old religious customs which were limiting the women to reach their full potential as an equal citizen of free India. He understood that Hindu religion and laws are inextricably interwoven and so he tried to reform the religion by bringing the Hindu code bill.

“from a sociological point of view the variety of religions that we have in India or elsewhere seems to me to fall into two categories. There are religions which have as their part a legal system, which you cannot sever from those religions. There are religions which have no legal system at all, which are just pure matters of creed. The peculiarity about the Hindu religion, as I understand it, is this, that it is the one religion which has got a legal framework integrally associated with it.”¹

Dr. Ambedkar received the sobriquet ‘Modern Manu’ as he tried to restructure the links between caste, kinship and property which make the very core of Brahmanical patriarchy. By studying the dharmashastras, he had come to the conclusion that the patriarchal domination in the Hindu society was gradual and the position of women regarding property was not altogether pathetic.

“You examine the position of Hindu women. Our Hon. friend Dr. Maitra. I think, who was a member of the Rau Committee, for the purpose of a thesis for a Doctorate degree of the Calcutta University wrote a book called The Position of Women in the Hindu Shastras. Anyone who reads this book will find that women had an equal share in property with men. She was entitled to hold

¹Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, BAWs, vol. 14 part two, Government of Maharashtra, Department of education, Bombay, 1995, pp. 887.

property. Even in Manu you find this statement. Today, what do we find as a result of the changes that have taken place in the Hindu society? Women are completely deprived of property. Do you call this change progress or do you call it deterioration? Therefore, it is time, I think that we consider this question in a different light, the point on which I wish to proceed is the fact that unless law makes society move, this society will not move.”²

Ambedkar fought a difficult battle for the cause of women and to strike the last nail in coffin of discrimination against women he brought forth The Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly on the 11th April 1947. In his eyes, the codification of Hindu law was not only a tool for correcting the injustices done in the past, it was also the need of the hour as true integration of India could only be achieved when its citizens could live in peace and harmony among themselves. In his own words:

“The integration of India, therefore, has in a very pointed manner brought before us the problem of the codification and the modification of Hindu Law and what I want to suggest to the House is that this is a problem which could not be postponed nor could it be avoided if we want to bring about harmony among the variety of people who would be coming and becoming the citizens of the Indian Dominion.”³

The Hindu Code Bill was an also an attempt to organize the perplexing bundle of laws in smritis focusing on the matters on women’s property among other seven different matters of personal laws namely marriage, divorce, guardianship, maintenance laws, adoption and the minorities. The issue of women’s property was considered as the one of the most intricate and complicated issues as there were at least 137 smritis, variously opinioned on stridhan. This gave rise to utter confusion and constant litigation on part of the common man. As Ambedkar put it,

“Sir, this Bill, the aim of which is to codify the rules of Hindu Law which are scattered in innumerable decisions of the High Courts and of the Privy Council, which form a bewildering motley to the common man and give rise to constant litigation, seeks to codify the law relating to seven different matters. Firstly, it seeks to codify the law relating to the rights of property of a deceased Hindu who has died intestate without making a will, both female and male. Secondly, it

²Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, BAWS, vol. 14 part two, Government of Maharashtra, Department of education, Bombay, 1995, pp. 1160-61.

³ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, BAWS, vol. 14 part one, Government of Maharashtra, Department of education, Bombay, 1995, pp. 771

prescribes a somewhat altered form of the order of succession among the different heirs to the property of a deceased dying intestate.”⁴

He took up the unprecedented issues such as abolition of birthright to property, property by survivorship, half share for daughters, conversion of women’s limited estate into an absolute estate, abolition of caste in matters of marriage and adoption, and the principle of monogamy and divorce. His cherished ideal of equality was evident from the bill as it proposed the equality of inheritance for both men and women. He asked for equal share for the widow, the daughter, the widow of a pre-deceased son in the father’s property. These clauses of bill reiterate the Dr. Ambedkar’s stand for betterment of women on the economic front.

“In addition to this general change in the order of succession to a deceased Hindu, the Bill also seeks to make four changes. One change is that the widow, the daughter, the widow of a pre-deceased son, all are given the same rank as the son in the matter of inheritance. In addition to that, the daughter also is given a share in her father’s property; her share is prescribed as half of that of the son.”⁵

As is evident from the bill itself that Dr. Ambedkar were adamant about supplanting traditional structures of domination with political modernity but he founded equally intense opposition to the bill from the House. During discussion Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee said “The Hindu Code Bill would shatter the magnificent structure of Hindu culture---.” The opponents argued that the bill was a blind imitation of ‘uncontrolled western modernity’ and poses the imminent threat to ancient Hindu social structures. Rajendra Prasad said that his wife would never support it and it was only ‘over-educated’ women who favoured the bill. They pointed towards the antiquity of Hindu civilization and claimed the inherent rectitude being the reason behind the survival through time. To that Dr. Ambedkar reasoned,

“This is not the first time that I have heard this argument. I have heard this argument a long time ago and not only heard it from men in the streets, but men who have been occupying most eminent positions such as those who are called the historians of India. This is an argument which had been presented all the time by those who believe in the sanctity of the ancient structure of this society. I must very frankly say that I too have been a student of India’s history,

⁴Ibid, pp. 5.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 6

although I cannot claim that I am as good a student as many others who adorn the chairs of history in many of our universities. I believe, I have a sufficient understanding of the Indian history and the point that I would like to raise is this. Is survival enough or whether it is necessary for us to consider whether the plane on which we survived is more important than the mere survival itself? A man who mixes with his opponent in battle vanquishes him, obtains victory on him also survives. A man who meets his opponent, runs away from him like a coward and he also survives. Is the survival of the victor of the same value, of the same character as the survival of a coward? I think we ought to consider this question on what plane has the Hindu society survived.”⁶

The Hindu Code Bill was the protest against Manu’s code. Bitter opposition from congress members, the Hindu Mahasabha, and other Hindu religious leaders reiterates the Bill’s challenge to the very basis of Brahmanical patriarchy. They termed this code a manifesto of unfettered freedom for women and susceptible to dividing every family. He resigned from the cabinet law ministry on Sept., 27, 1951. In his resignation, he explained the delay for the action he took as well as the reasons why he relinquished.

“The Hindu Code was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature in this country. No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it in point of its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attached to the Hindu Code. It is for its sake that I stayed on notwithstanding my differences. So, if I have committed a wrong it is in the hope of doing some good. Had I no ground for such a hope, for overcoming the obstructionist tactics of the opponents?”⁷

Ambedkar’s statements in parliament in defence of the Hindu Code Bill and his statement in the explanation of his resignation from the cabinet need to be given their due recognition in the history of democratic struggles for women’s rights against the Brahmanical patriarchy of the state. In various speeches during this period, Ambedkar highlighted the importance of the bill for

⁶ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, BAWs, vol. 14 part two, Government of Maharashtra, Department of education, Bombay, 1995,, pp. 1158-59

⁷ Ibid, pp. 1325-26

women's freedom. In 1952, for instance, at a meeting organized by the Belgaum district of Scheduled Caste Federation in Kolhapur, he claimed: 'on wealth depends her independence and a woman must be very particular to retain her wealth and rights, to help retain her freedom.'

Although Dr. Ambedkar could not succeed in getting passed the full Hindu Code Bill, he successfully put the ball rolling & laid the foundation of equality for the women of India in all spheres of life.

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