

Women's Rights in Modern India: The Perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

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Abstract:

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, one of India's foremost social reformers and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, He envisioned a society based on equality, liberty, and fraternity. His fight for women's rights was a vital part of his broader struggle for social justice and the removal of caste discrimination. The purpose of this paper is examines Ambedkar's philosophical, legal, and political contributions to gender equality. It draws on his speeches, the Hindu Code Bill debates, and constitutional provisions to place his ideas within both feminist and socio-political contexts of modern India. The paper argues that Ambedkar's support for women's education, property rights, and political participation marked a bold challenge to the patriarchal norms of Indian society. It also discusses the continuing importance of his ideas in present-day feminist and social justice movements. Through an intersectional approach, this study highlights the lasting impact of Ambedkar's vision in building an inclusive social development of Indian society.

Introduction:

B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), principal architect of the Indian Constitution and first Law Minister of independent India, saw women's emancipation as central to the project of social democracy. He famously suggested that the progress of a community should be measured by the condition of its women — a statement that frames his lifelong concern for gender equality. Babasaheb Ambedkar's contribution towards women's rights is often overlooked, he needs to be recognized as a champion of social justice, a visionary, and a philosopher for all marginalised community of India including women. He advocated for women's equal participation in both personal and professional spheres, He was instrumental in drafting legislation to protect women's rights, and played a key role in draft Hindu code bill, reducing working hours and improving working conditions of women. This paper synthesizes primary and secondary sources to analyse how Ambedkar combined constitutionalism, statute law, and social reform to advance women's rights

Methodology

This paper examines Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's contributions to women's rights to shape modern India. The paper is based on qualitative data analysis using document such as Ambedkar's speeches, legislative work (notably the Hindu Code Bill), and secondary literature, the paper argues that Ambedkar situated women's emancipation within a broader project of social democracy: legal reform was necessary but not sufficient; structural change required education, economic opportunity, and dismantling caste patriarchy. The study reviews

Ambedkar's legal proposals, political struggles to pass reform and his long-term legacy for gender justice in India.

Ambedkar's Advocacy for Women's Rights:

As Labour Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–46), Ambedkar introduced several laws protecting women rights:

- Maternity Benefits Act
- Equal pay initiatives for women labourers
- Protection against hazardous work conditions
- Welfare funds for women in industries such as coal and textiles
- The Hindu Marriage Act

His policies laid the groundwork for modern labour rights legislation.

Equal participation of women:

Ambedkar advocated for equal participation of women in both personal and professional spheres. He was the first man to raise his voice against the unequal treatment of women in factories and other workplaces. He was instrumental in reducing working hours and improving working conditions. Ambedkar drafted legislation such as the Mines Maternity Benefit Act, which demanded equal pay and equal rights for coal mine workers, ensuring that the question of maternity leave for women was brought up and they were protected under labour laws. The influence of these reforms led to other pro-women Acts such as the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, which brightened the dark roads of women's struggles.

Hindu Code Bill:

Ambedkar's most important contribution to the cause of women's rights was the Hindu Code Bill (1951), which revolutionized property and marriage practices and established laws of maintenance for women. He argued in the assembly with words describing Significance of the Hindu Code “ No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it (Hindu Code) 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.”

—Dr. Ambedkar on 'Hindu Code'

(Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar : Writings and Speeches Vol. 14 (Part-1))

The Bill proposed

- Equal property rights for women
- Abolition of coparcenary restrictions
- Rights to divorce and remarriage
- Adoption rights for women
- A unified legal framework for Hindu family law

Despite political resistance leading to his resignation, Ambedkar declared that he would be remembered “for the Hindu Code Bill more than anything else”

Resulting from the Bill, Four acts were passed:

1. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, which gave women the right to divorce and maintenance;
2. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, which gave them the legal right to inherit property;
3. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, which allowed women to legally adopt a child; and
4. The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, which allowed women to be the natural guardian of their children.

Ambedkar described the Code's reforms as constituting a charter for women's rights in independent India: he believed that equal legal status would provide women with the autonomy needed to participate fully in civic and economic life. This rhetoric underscores how Ambedkar linked personal law reform to citizenship in a constitutional republic

Ambedkar's Philosophical Framework on Gender

Ambedkar's understanding of women's oppression was inseparable from his critique of the caste system. Thus, his approach to women's liberation was both **anti-caste and feminist**.

- He argued that **endogamy was the foundation of caste**, and women were made custodians of caste purity through strict social control.
- He viewed gender inequality as **structurally embedded**, not merely cultural.
- His philosophy drew from **Buddhist principles**, emphasising compassion, rationality, and justice.

Intersectionality: caste, gender, and class in Ambedkar's thought

Ambedkar consistently argued that caste and gender oppression were mutually reinforcing. He emphasized that reforms for women could not be abstracted from the caste question: Dalit and lower-caste women faced specific disadvantages in access to property, education, and social mobility. Ambedkar's emphasis on universal legal codes (applying to all Hindus) and on measures such as educational empowerment reflect an intersectional sensibility before the term was coined. Scholars have pointed out that Ambedkar's legalism paired with

social measures (education campaigns, labour reforms) attempted to address multiple, overlapping forms of marginalization. His arguments against caste patriarchy remain highly relevant as contemporary India continues to grapple with gender violence, labour exploitation, and caste-based discrimination.

Legacy and contemporary relevance

Ambedkar's twin insistence that law must guarantee formal equality and that social policy must enable substantive equality remains central to contemporary gender justice debates in India. Ambedkar's theory of social change and justice combined political democracy by constitute with the social democracy (changes in social relations and material conditions). He viewed women not merely as beneficiaries of charity but as rights-bearing citizens whose equality required both legal safeguards and social transformation in education, labour protections, and property rights. This integrated approach differentiates Ambedkar from reformers who treated legal change as sufficient in itself. His emphasis on education, labour protections for women, and robust property and divorce rights continues to inform feminist legal reform and policy. Measuring social progress by the status of women, as Ambedkar urged, remains a vital evaluative principle for policymakers and scholars.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's contribution towards women's rights is often overlooked, and he needs to be recognized as a champion of social justice, a visionary, and a philosopher. His work to empower all sections of marginalized communities needs to be acknowledged, and his vision of equality despite caste, gender, race, and ethnicity differences is a pioneering thought of social justice. Women's rights and their liberation are crucial for building a progressive society, and Ambedkar's values and vision continue to guide feminist principles in India,

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remains one of the most influential thinkers on women's rights in Indian history. His comprehensive approach combining constitutionalism, social reform, and intellectual critique laid the foundation for a gender neutral Indian society.

B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to women's rights combined visionary legal reform with a commitment to social democracy. The Hindu Code Bill though politically contested and ultimately modified represented a landmark attempt to enshrine gender equality in statute and to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. The paper suggests that Ambedkar's legacy is best understood not merely as the content of reform but as a model: pairing constitutional guarantees with social strategies education, labour reform, and attention to caste to achieve substantive equality for women.

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