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Feminist reclamation of Ambedkar in Indian discourse

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Abstract

20th century India was riddled with clash of ideologies. People were divided on lines of their socio-political views on patriarchal structure of the Indian society, constantly critiqued by the newly emerging radical thinkers to abolish age-old, inane dogmas and superstitions with the reasoning of the west. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar's birth as an untouchable and in a society based on graded inequality and refutation of basic human rights to his community served as an impetus for him to bring changes in the system through legislation and social reforms. Through his scholarly reasoning and intellectual deliberations, Ambedkar brought his oeuvre which raised issues concerning caste, gender equality, social realism and legislation. His understanding of feminist concerns was a result of his exposure to the western philosophies and his question of their fundamental rights, political inclusion and advancement, fair treatment and right over inheritance mirrored the global feminist concerns. In the name of conforming to Hindu religion, women were trapped in the vicious circle of timidity, masculine subjugation, lack of awareness about their rights and no decision-making powers. He contributed in Hindu personal laws and introduced many women welfare provisions in Indian Constitution, generating consciousness among deprived, uneducated women and encouraged them to combat against discrimination and injustice. The present paper attempts to study his speeches and writings in the light of 20th century Indian feminist discourse and tries to position his indefatigable contribution to the emancipation of women today.

Keywords: Clash of ideologies, global feminist concerns, Hindu personal laws, women welfare, Indian constitution

Introductions

Iniquities prevalent in a society can be aptly spelt out by someone who has lived at the periphery and internalised social exclusion from the position of being an untouchable. Ambedkar opined that the hegemonic social order prevalent in India was caste-driven and the reason behind the growing divide and narrow, singular positions taken by various feminist groups leading to a difference of voices in discourses on women oppression, Hindu social structure, question of identity and representation. Reading his philosophy becomes crucial to understanding our social fabric and how caste politics has done us more harm than good. As a pupil at Cambridge and London School of Economics, he was highly influenced by the civil right movement and women's emancipation struggles in the West. The global feminist demands of placing women at par with men resonated with Ambedkar's own conceptualisation of an equal world. The Hindu Code Bill was the weapon that he brought to combat the injustices done with Indian women in the name of religion, piety and feminine decorum. He sought to acquire legal rights for women to inherit property and wed outside their caste by introducing reformatory measures and legislative act. His major concern for the status of women was reflected in the drafting of the protection Acts in the Indian constitution. In his 1916 paper presented at an Anthropology seminar at the Columbia University, Ambedkar offered an insight that the caste system propagates its values by navigating women's lives, and that caste is a result of sustained endogamy. He goes on to say:

Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. (*Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*)

“Brahmanical patriarchy” as famously coined by Historian Uma Chakravarti explains how certain dominant castes wield autocratic rule over less powerful groups, where castes/classes below one another feel more oppressed by the one above them.

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The Hindu society moderates its women's sexuality by proposing only three singular customs for them- Sati, enforced widowhood and girl-child marriage- to safeguard itself from exogamy. It is actually ironic to see the entire society being threatened by the sexuality of women alone and no policies and practices were offered to the menfolk to abstain themselves from licentious behaviour. Since time immemorial, these customs have been honoured but nothing could vouch for their origin and existence. They have been responsible for the continued subservience and voicelessness of women across castes, cultures and religions in India.

Poonam Singh demystifies Indian womanhood by referring to Uma Chakravarti where she contends that the Vedic period upheld a facade of Indian woman's magnanimous image. It is only the upper caste women who were categorised as respectable, learned Hindu women and the slave women folk remained at the tangent in those times, more profoundly than ever. The self-abnegating Indian womanhood was awe-inspiring for the western eye and the Indian Vedas were seen as the basis of Hindu religion where women occupied a sophisticated position. They were epitomised as the power-yielding women who would not shudder at the thought of displaying *jauhar* or climb the funeral pyre of the dead husbands. The question of agency in deciding their own fate remained elusive and this romanticisation only did well in keeping up the 'high' status of women in ancient India. Also, she cites nationalistic reasons against the foreign rulers to uphold this robust image to suit Indian "proto-nationalists" cause. The slave woman remained a non-existing entity in the mainstream discourse of Indian woman's question, because validating their experiences as important and impactful would have been highly uncomfortable for the Hindu social reformers. They could neither claim equity in the society nor had viable caste status to be regarded as the emblematic Indian woman against the counter forces. To see it in its entirety, Indian women of all classes/castes lived a dubious existence, their identity pivoted around the conditions laid down by the dominant social order. (Singh, 2020, p. 19-20) [11].

The status of women deteriorated in the later Vedic period because of gender biases and imposition of stringent rules on them by the lawgiver, Manu in his code of conduct book, *Manusmriti*. It was one of the first Sanskrit texts on laws for expected virtues of Brahmins and Kshatriyas to govern the society. The revered Hindu scripture divided the social fabric into four broad groups on the basis of their vocations. This hegemonic placement displaced humans of their basic rights to survive and lauded as the "just" system to govern. In his book, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar expostulates the self-aggrandisement of Hinduism:

I think that breaking-up of Caste amongst the Hindus is well-nigh impossible. At any rate, it would take ages before a breach is made. But whether the doing of the deed takes time or whether it can be done quickly, you must not forget that if you wish to bring about a breach in the system then you have got to apply the dynamite to the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*, which deny any part to reason, to *Vedas* and *Shastras*, which deny any part to morality. You must destroy the Religion of the *Shrutis* and the *Smritis*. Nothing else will avail. This is my considered view of the matter. (Ambedkar, p. 74-75)

Ambedkar held *Manusmriti* responsible for the plight of Indian women. The notion that women should not be given freedom and be made subservient to masculine assertion was advocated in it. Women had to face various deprivations in matters of their basic human rights. The caste Hindu women bore the baggage of their religion and remained dispossessed subaltern in the social order until Ambedkar brought the armour of legal rights to counter atrocities meted out to Indian women in the early 20th century.

Ambedkar's quest for equality

Indian women's reform movement gain momentum in the 19th century when radical figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahadev Gobind Ranade, Swami Dayanand Sarwaswati along with Mrityunjay Vidyalkar addressed the plight and injustices done to women of various social groups. Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated for reformist laws to abolish Sati, Hindu women's inheritance rights, condemned child-marriage, polygamy and sought right to education to civilise human behaviour. However, Roy's emancipatory efforts remained limited to the issues of caste Hindu people and the depressed classes remained at the bottom of the social rung in a deplorable, parasitic state. Untouchability was widely practised and women of the lower castes faced double marginalisation on the caste/class axes. Therefore, reform groups like Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others lacked the strength to address the injustices prevalent in Indian society that is based on age-old 'Chaturvarna' system. Jotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule's efforts at establishing schools for untouchables and other girls and eradication of untouchability and the caste system laid the foundation for reform movement in Maharashtra. Dr. Ambedkar's advent in the sphere of struggle for gender equality began with his legislative stance against the social order which taught submission to women and forced them to remain subjugated to male domination and adhere to a typical feminine behaviour. He believed in a link between caste and gender and asserted that elimination of gender is a natural corollary to annihilation of caste. He maintains,

Ethnically all people are heterogeneous. It is the unity of culture that is the basis of homogeneity.

And continues to posit,

Caste is a parcelling of an already homogeneous unit, and the explanation of the genesis of caste is the explanation of this process of parcelling. (*Castes in India*)

Ambedkar presents in his treatise a long argument and factual reasoning to prove how patriarchy operates in a society based on the caste-based social division of work, furthering inequality amongst different sub-groups. He started his movement with the release of his journals *Mook Nayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat*, emphasising on gender parity and the need for education to eradicate darkness from the lives of the deprived social groups, including women. He urged them to register oppression and to be educated, agitated and organised in their struggle. The Hindu code bill was a series of laws that aimed to codify and repair Hindu

personal law, to annihilate the caste system and grant a chance at life to women. But, unfortunately, his Dalit identity hindered its execution and the parliament stalled his draft of the bill, following which he resigned from the Nehruvian cabinet in 1951, only to witness it pass smoothly between 1955 and 1956, however in an abridged version and in four separate Acts bringing new rules in matters of marriage, succession, adoption and maintenance and minority and guardianship during Nehru's second term as the Prime Minister.

The laxity in reception of Ambedkar's feminism

Ambedkar was a protean scholar who theorised how the intersection of gender and caste was imperative for the survival and flourishing of the Brahmanical patriarchy. He informs that it was the "infection of imitation" that caught all the non-Brahmin social groups to go their separate ways and form various endogamous castes. Referring to French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde, he explains that the castes closest to the Brahmins imitated all the three customs of Sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage and ensured to protect women from succumbing to the temptation of forming bonds outside their own castes. The ones who were less near, maintained the patriarchal system by imposing widowhood and girl marriage; and others, a little further off, had only child marriage; and those furthest off ensured that they do not defy the law of the father by transgression. (*Castes in India*) He laments that the whole caste privilege is an exercise of power of the oppressor on the oppressed. Caste Brahmin or the servant of the God served as the pattern for the rest to follow in a theocratic society and non-caste communities like Mohammedans, Jews, Christians and Parsis became 'castes' with respect to each other. Subsequently, if one caste wanted to be endogamous, another one had to be so by sheer force of circumstances. This was the root cause of all the discrimination of lower castes. In his book, *Waiting for a Visa*, Ambedkar enlists a few incidents of discrimination that happened to him and others. He restates the fact that untouchables are considered untouchables across all religions. Even a Parsi or a Muslim thinks low of an untouchable though they do not practice Hinduism. Similarly, women have been considered 'inferior' across all religions and every religion has its own way to unleash its sexism. Ambedkar, the reformist, cannot be pigeonholed only as a Dalit leader, but a visionary who lived for all the marginalised.

Despite his keeping the egalitarian battle above his own failing health, Ambedkar's ideology has not been completely understood by Indian feminists and his original insights have been neglected by the mainstream women activists. Academia as well as feminists remain unresponsive and detached to credit his exhaustive labour to comprehend the inadequacies in the system. In her book, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Sharmila Rege commends Ambedkar's feminist view on caste. She provides a theoretically advanced interpretation of Babasaheb's thinking on the intersection of the cast and gender questions. She provides us the logical argument to study the cross-currents of caste with gender and to reclaim Ambedkar's writings and speeches as feminist viewpoint on Brahmanical patriarchy. He believed that the concept of endogamy is a political move to maintain the equilibrium and absolutely no justification for perpetration of caste-based violence and

injustices. The gender struggle has been registered and recorded in the feminist writings of 19th and 20th centuries. As Rege says,

The dominant narrative of gender and modernity, that has concealed the complicity of Brahman women in class privilege and Brahmanical patriarchy, highlights privileged caste women's struggle with tradition and their desire to be modern. (26)

The defining tropes of iniquities need a close examination to study the nexus between caste and gender operations in Dalit feminist writings. The utopian, glorious images of celebration of feminine identity cannot feature as the lived experiences of the hapless, ostracised women.

Quoting Ambedkar without quoting the strength portrayed by Dalit women is an instance of a grave erasure of them from the history of caste oppression and feminist liberation at the same time. Sulochnabai Dongre and Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife, were associated with *All India Women's Congress* prior to the inception of *All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference*. However, she along with Ramabai and other Dalit feminists, left the *All India Women's Congress* as a result of social exclusion in a conference where Savarna feminists asked them to dine on a separate table put out for them. Their casteist nature travelled far beyond their "sisterhood" or any sort of feminist sensibility. To put it simply, they did not have a concept which acknowledges the subjectivity of Dalit women. Shailaja Paik recounts the struggles for Dalit women's access to education and reveals the contradictions between Dalits' and upper castes' agendas of education, *streeshikshan* (women's education) and the reform of women. Dalit feminism entails questions to rethink and revitalise feminist theory and praxis, by centering Dalit women's lived experiences under excess discrimination, hurt and humiliation. In her first book, *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (2014)^[6], Paik locates Dalits' experiences as epistemic spaces to create conceptual and theoretical frameworks to analyse the materiality of caste, class, gender, sexuality and power relationships, both within and outside the Dalit community. Sumita Puri in her essay, "The Politics of Patriarchy: A Case Study of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*" alludes to an account from Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* in which the protagonist, Stephen Rojackat, first kills his wife for happily "enjoying" marital infidelity, and then asserts himself sexually on an unyielding maid-servant when she refuses to give in to his physical brutality. Having molested the woman, his male ego finally soothes when the woman's initial resistance turns into a willing demand. The maid, Ruta, not only succumbs to the sexual politics at play, but also behaves in conformity with patriarchal perceptions of lower class women. Puri defines it as a United States congressman's "racial revenge" on a Nazi servant, performing a "patriotic act". (Puri, 2016)^[8] The dominant man exercises his authority and sexually oppresses the labour woman. Here, the

sexual intercourse becomes a display of sexual politics, where caste and class decide the gender roles to be played, making the one with the higher caste and class the master, and the other strive to 'surrender', 'serve' and be 'satisfied'. (Ibid, p. 41-42)

It is assumed that a lower caste woman would easily give in or her sexuality is publicly available and hence, a prey for *savarna* male consumption. Talking about the “difference” in articulation of Dalit women’s experience, Rege admits,

Issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste and addressal of sexual politics without a challenge to brahmanism results in lifestyle feminisms. (Rege, 1998, p. WS-43) ^[9]

In a society based on graded inequality, a woman’s treatment is first accorded by her caste and then her gender. The upper caste Hindu women get the privilege of inclusion of their voices in the ‘mainstream discourse’, but confronting casteism remains a sole responsibility of Dalit women. Classic Hindi writer, Premchand in his cult novel, *The Gift of a Cow* shows how a Dalit girl, Siliya is sexually exploited by Matadin, the Brahman boy she loves. She cannot be accepted as a daughter-in-law in the upper-caste household. Siliya’s father demands for Matadin’s Brahman caste in exchange of robbery of their honour. Her father, Harkhu, is aware of the Brahmanical hierarchy at work and openly challenges Matadin’s father, Datadin if he would accept Dalits in his Brahman caste. He agrees that they cannot become Brahman but can make a Dalit out of Matadin. It is a society where one can be doomed by slipping down the social ladder but cannot do the reverse. Her mother rebukes Matadin:

You’re so pious—you’ll sleep with her, but you won’t drink water from her hands.
(*The Gift of a Cow*, p.305)

Her kins defile Matadin’s religion by enforcing a piece of bone in his mouth, which ironically, is restored after spending a huge chunk of money in purification rituals. A Brahman can return to his religion after purchasing penance but can a woman’s chastity be restored?

Caste plays a significant role in

The collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault, and physical violence at the workplace and in public. (Rege, 1998. P. WS-43) ^[9].

Being at the bottom of the social ladder, Dalit women are most vulnerable and exposed to caste and gender oppression. This intersectionality needs to be studied as to how sexual violence is exercised along the lines of one’s caste, religion and ethnicity. A case of Dalit woman’s rape is not an attack on her identity alone, but a choice of power display on her entire social clan as an assertion of a dominant caste’s sway over the meek lower-caste people. The upper-caste attackers know that the society will not let them be penalised so they do not see it as a crime against someone’s modesty. The ruthless Hathras Gang-Rape case, 2020 of a Valmiki girl by four upper-caste men failed to generate the media coverage and social protest for justice and law-making because the subject matter was irrelevant and Dalit people’s responsibility alone. No one raised any question on whether her name should have been revealed in public and why her body could not be reclaimed by her family. On the other hand, an earlier case of gang-rape of 2012, Nirbhaya’s rape case witnessed the entire country coming out in solidarity, creating a major shift in the history

of the struggles for gender justice, being thoroughly pursued until the rapists were hanged till death. The category of rape was redefined by public outcry and pressure through rebellion when the subject in question was a non-Dalit. The collective consciousness that needs to annihilate the vicious interlinkage between caste and patriarchy needs questioning. Validating Gopal Guru’s assertion of Dalit women’s “difference”, Rege critiques how “Masculinisation of Dalithood and Savarnisation of Womanhood” obliterated the Dalit women’s experience from the canon of Indian feminist discourse, leaving “Brahmanism unchallenged” (Rege, 1998, p. WS-42-43) ^[9]. Ambedkar believed in inclusion of women in issues concerning them. He was an inspirational figure whose words made women understand oppression and the need to educate and agitate to be able to carve a niche for themselves. The only possibility of an egalitarian society, as envisaged by Ambedkar in his philosophy, rests on according a “Dalit feminist standpoint” to create an emancipatory Indian feminist identity. Rege also underlines the danger of Dalit feminists succumbing to narrow “identity politics” if their experiences do not contribute to the larger, shared experience. A non-Dalit feminist’s reinvention as Dalit feminist would be emancipatory when she rejects

more completely the relations of rule in which we participated (i.e, the brahmanical, middle class biases of earlier feminist standpoints are interrogated). (Ibid. WS-45)

Dalit feminism needs to explore the possibility of an impartial, humanistic and non-judgemental approach of non-Dalit feminists to address their concerns and empathise with their “different” set of experiences and life histories. Together their writings can emerge as the new, shared identity of the Indian woman discourse.

Conclusion

Ambedkar’s life and philosophy is symbolic of his quest to strive for equality, fraternity and justice for all human beings, irrespective of their caste, class, religion and gender. The true spirit of Ambedkarite ideology lies in activism to manifest an egalitarian nation. Denigrating Dalit feminist writings as narratives of simple recounting of oppression and crisis will only serve as politicisation of the feminist discourse. A true inclusion would mean equal and liberal rights to cohabit the space of intellectual and theoretical frameworks. Marking 130th birth anniversary of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, i.e, 14th April 2021 as ‘Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Equality Day’ does invoke us to strive to protect and ensure tolerance and acceptance of multiple standpoints as one collective Indian viewpoint.

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