

The Relevance of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Ideals in Feminism

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“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.”¹

A man is measured not by his class, but by his thoughts, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts were nothing short of **revolutionary**. The Father of Indian Constitution was not only a renaissance jurist, but also an economist, and social reformer who was instrumental in developing India's **socio-political landscape** and in the struggle against social discrimination. In a society where women, regardless of their caste, class, or religion, were suppressed and treated as inferiors—to the extent of being beaten down by their husbands for the mistakes that weighed nothing. Dr. Ambedkar chose to fight a battle for them to be treated as equals and not as some creatures who exist to cater to the **patriarchal norms** of society and the needs of the so-called “**male heads**.” Besides, his noteworthy contribution as the maker of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar infused provisions of **equality**, **non-discrimination**, and the safeguarding of **women's rights**. His multi-dimensional perspective was not limited to just how women are treated in society, but also how to articulate and infuse the **wave of change** towards a strong and progressive stance on women's rights. His feminist philosophy took embraced the principles of social justice, equality, empowerment, and emancipation of women from **social, economic, and cultural oppression**, which till date forms the basis of contemporary feminism.

Ambedkar's Core Feminist Ideals:

Intersectionality and the Rise of Dalit Feminism: The word intersectionality² was coined by **Kimberlé Crenshaw**³ in the discourse of Black women and demarginalizing the *intersection of race and sex*. However, the Indian socio-political scenario diversified intersectionality and enlarged its ambit. Ambedkar placed the intersectionality of caste and gender at the centre of **feminist discourse**,



challenging both patriarchy and caste oppression simultaneously. He often criticised how **Savarna-centric** (upper-caste) systems used women's sexuality and labor to protect their purity while completely disregarding their well-being and liberty. These prejudiced practices prevalent in mainstream Indian feminism laid bare their inability to address caste-based violence, exclusion, and social stratification. It foregrounds the lived experiences of Dalit women, "who face **double marginalization**- being women in a patriarchal world and as Dalits in a casteist social order". Dalit feminism, which draws heavily from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste and pro-women philosophy, challenges the **stratified axes** of social exclusion, seeking recognition of caste as an **ontological⁴ category** in gender justice discourse. It places the embodied experiences of the marginalized at the center, including sexual violence, exploitation in the **vocational domain** and socio-economic **disenfranchisement**, which are usually made invisible in **elite feminist articulations**.

With the rise of feminism, these movements have expanded the scope of feminism beyond **urban narratives**. Post this development scholars like **Dr. Ruth Manorama, Sharmila Rege, Gail Omvedt**, and various others have emphasized Ambedkar's legacy of **Mahad Satyagrah⁵** through slogans like, *"My caste is not my crime. My voice is my revolution,"* *"From margins to the frontlines – Dalit women lead!"* and *"Educate, Agitate, Organize – and uplift Dalit Women!"* His ideology is not only inculcated in the form of slogans but can also be witnessed through the use of symbols, **murals, graffiti**, and even **digital art**. Whether it is the increased use of murals of **Savitribai Phule, Fatima Sheikh**, and other Dalit heroines alongside Ambedkar, or the use of the **Ashoka Chakra, Dhamma Wheel, or Bodhi Tree** as emblems of spiritual liberation, peace, and resistance to patriarchal society, or the digital illustrations often showing intersections of caste, gender, and activism with aesthetic defiance.

Legal Parity and Juridical Non-Discrimination: Dr. Ambedkar proposed a comprehensive set of laws in the **late 1940s** and **early 1950s** known as the **Hindu Code Bill⁶**. This bill aimed to reform and modernize **Hindu Personal Laws**, especially to give equal rights to Hindu women in matters of **marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property**. This bill gave daughters **equal rights** in terms of **property**, the same as sons. It allowed both men and women to seek **divorce on specific grounds**, declared **monogamy mandatory** for Hindus which gave women the **right to oppose second marriages**. As well, tried to remove outdated customs that discriminated against women or reinforced caste/gender hierarchies.



It was among **India's first attempts** at **gender equality** and **justice in family law**. Though the bill faced massive **opposition** from **conservative** and **religious** groups in Parliament and was not passed in its full form by **Nehru's government**⁷. Meanwhile, it still forms the base of several major acts such as **the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), Hindu Succession Act (1956), Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), and Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act (1956)**. These acts are the **foundation** of **women's legal rights** and represent the first legal steps toward gender equality; but, they are still to be seen as the starting point and not the end goal.

Education and Economic Independence: Dr. Ambedkar believed that education is the first step towards empowerment, especially in the case of women from **marginalized communities**. He consistently emphasized the impact of education and how its absence would result in women enduring oppression and dependency. He also advocated for **equal access** to education, not only in terms of literacy but also **higher education** and **political awareness**. He believed that educated women can challenge **patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and religious orthodoxy**. He urged women to not remain subservient to their husbands and to understand that economic independence is essential for women to **break free** from **male domination** and **domestic servitude**. To cure this disparity between men and women, he laid emphasis on educational reforms. Even the impact of those attempts can till date be seen in government schemes like **"Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao,"** the **"UJJWALA Scheme,"** and several others.

He conveyed his ideologies on different fronts. In his path-breaking speech at the **All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference in Nagpur (1942)**, Dr. Ambedkar urged women fervently to seek education, develop political awareness. He also challenge blind compliance with **reactionary rituals** and **religious traditions** that reinforce patriarchal domination. In his writings in **Bahishkrit Bharat**⁸, he shed extensive light on women's causes, denounced repressive practices like **child marriage**, and vocally called for **resistance** against **domestic violence**. He unflinchingly criticized the **poisonous behavioral standards** rooted in society and demanded a **paradigm shift** in family structures—based on **mutual respect** and **equality**. Additionally, he urged women to **organize in groups**, develop strong character, and move beyond **societal approval** to become **pioneers of social change**. In order to demand and achieve their rightful place in an equitable society.

Humanitarian Reformative Measures: Dr. Ambedkar dreamt of **jurisprudence** as a powerful driving force for gender equality and **social liberation**. His advocacy for **juridical non-discrimination** emphasized that gender must never constitute grounds for **exclusion** or **subordination** within the **legal**



domain. As the **chief architect** of the **Indian Constitution**, Dr. Ambedkar enshrined both **formal** and **substantive equality**. This ensures not just equal treatment under the law, but **equitable outcomes** for women in the **social structure** as well. Through the incorporation of gender-neutral legal provisions, he endeavored to **dismantle** entrenched patriarchal norms. While **reconfiguring** the relationship between the state and its female citizens via a **framework grounded** in justice, inclusion, and equal right at the same time. Unyielding in his position, he condemned reactionary practices such as **child marriage, the devadasi system**⁹, and deep-rooted patriarchal institutions, promoting instead women's education, economic independence, and political awareness. His long-standing call to **educate, agitate, and organize** continues to mobilize modern feminist and Dalit women's movements, placing them as powerful vanguards of socio-political change. He proposed universal and comprehensive education to extend beyond caste and gender lines and **public involvement** for women, agitating for reforms that confronted both legal and social facets of inequality. *He once stated: "I strongly believe in the movements run by women."* In his pursuit, he urged women to become competent, fight their own battles and to break free from blind traditions that keep them subjugated. He emphasized **rational thinking** and **social reforms** over **ritualism**.

"We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with female education."^{10 11}

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's **long-lasting legacy** isn't just historical but also a **beacon** of **modern feminist philosophy**—grounded in the values of justice, equality, and social liberation. His uncompromising struggle to uproot the dual complementary systems of caste and patriarchy remains a unifying force for Dalit and marginalized women's movements throughout the country. Initiated in that era, these reforms and philosophies still **ignite combats** against the **gender pay gap, underrepresentation of women in the workforce**, and the not-so-subtle **workplace harassment**. His visionary statements ring with **eternal pertinence** and call upon us to take the transformational torch forward and not just rest in the comfort of what we've achieved.

References

¹ Source: Dr. Ambedkar's speech at First All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, Nagpur, July 20, 1942

² According to **Oxford's Advanced learner's dictionary** – The network of connections between social categories which may result in additional advantage or discrimination



³ American civil rights advocate and a scholar of critical race theory

⁴ (OED) – branch of metaphysics concerned with being or existence

⁵ Laid the foundation of anti-cast activism

⁶ First introduced in 1948

⁷ Indian National Congress

⁸ Marathi weekly magazine

⁹ Practice where young girls were married to deities

¹⁰ Ambedkar expressed this sentiment in a letter written during his time in Columbia University, emphasizing the importance of educating both men and women.

¹¹ This perspective is also documented in Mathew's 1991 work