



Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Contribution to Women Empowerment in 21st century

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, was not only a jurist and social reformer but also one of the foremost champions of women's rights in modern India. His vision of democracy, equality, and justice extended to gender relations, making him a pioneer of women's empowerment long before it became a central theme in development discourse. Ambedkar challenged patriarchal traditions embedded in religion and society, fought for women's education, labour rights, and property ownership, and enshrined gender equality in the Indian Constitution. This paper explores Dr. Ambedkar's multidimensional contributions to women's empowerment through his writings, legislative efforts, and constitutional principles, and assesses their relevance in the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's role in shaping modern India extends far beyond his position as the architect of the Constitution. His intellectual, social, and political work addressed the systemic oppression of marginalized communities and women. In a society deeply divided by caste, class, and gender hierarchies, Ambedkar recognized that true democracy could not exist without the emancipation of women. He declared, "*I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved*" (Ambedkar, 1916). This assertion forms the philosophical foundation of his lifelong struggle for gender equality.



Dr. B R Ambedkar's contributions to women's empowerment were rooted in his conviction that social justice required the dismantling of patriarchal structures in religion, economy, and politics. Through his advocacy, legislative reforms, and educational initiatives, he sought to create a society where women could live with dignity, autonomy, and equality.

2. Status of Women in Pre-Ambedkar Era

Before Ambedkar's interventions, Indian women—especially among lower castes—suffered severe social and economic oppression. Patriarchal norms justified their subordination through religious texts like *Manusmriti*, which Ambedkar called “*the bible of slavery for women and Shudras.*” Women were denied property rights, education, and freedom of choice in marriage. Practices such as child marriage, sati, enforced widowhood, and lack of inheritance rights perpetuated gender inequality (Thorat, 2011).

Education for women was restricted largely to the upper classes, and even then, their roles were confined to domestic spheres. Lower-caste women faced triple discrimination—on the basis of caste, class, and gender. Ambedkar recognized this intersectionality long before it became a theoretical concept in feminist thought (Rege, 2013). He argued that any reform movement must simultaneously address caste and gender oppression.

3. Dr. B R Ambedkar's Philosophy on Women's Liberation

Ambedkar viewed the liberation of women as essential to human progress. His writings reveal a radical understanding of patriarchy as a structural issue rather than an individual failing. In his 1916 paper “*Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development,*” Ambedkar explained how endogamy led to the subjugation of women, as caste purity was maintained by controlling female sexuality. He wrote that women were made “*a closed door for the maintenance of caste*” (Ambedkar, 1916).

He firmly believed that gender justice was inseparable from social democracy. His vision aligned with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity—values later embedded in the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar's feminist perspective emphasized that women must have equal access to education, employment, and political participation to truly achieve empowerment (Zelliot, 2004).



4. Dr. B R Ambedkar and Social Reforms for Women's

Dr. B R Ambedkar's activism for women's rights began during his early years as a social reformer. As a member of the Bombay Legislative Council (1926–1937), he championed several measures aimed at improving women's lives. He supported the *Maternity Benefit Bill* (1928), which sought to provide paid leave and health care to working women. He argued in the Council that it was the moral duty of employers and the state to protect the health and welfare of women labourers.

He also advocated for equal pay for equal work and the abolition of exploitative labour practices affecting women in industries such as textiles and mining. In his journal *Mook Nayak*, Ambedkar encouraged women to educate themselves and participate in public life. He organized conferences such as the *Mahila Parishad* (Women's Conference) in 1942, where he urged women to assert their rights and fight social evils like dowry and child marriage (Keer, 1990).

Dr. B R Ambedkar's efforts inspired many women from marginalized communities to participate in social and political movements. His wife, Ramabai Ambedkar, and followers like Shanthabai Dani and Sulochana Dongre became symbols of emerging Dalit feminism.

5. Dr. B R Ambedkar Role in Constitutional Empowerment of Women's

Dr. B R Ambedkar's most enduring legacy for women's empowerment lies in the Indian Constitution. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he ensured that the Constitution guaranteed equal rights and opportunities for women. Articles 14, 15, and 16 enshrine the principles of equality before law, prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex, and equal opportunity in employment. Article 39 of the Directive Principles further mandates equal pay for equal work and protection of maternal health.

Dr. B R Ambedkar insisted that democracy must be both political and social. In his speech to the Constituent Assembly, he stated that "*political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of its social democracy*" (Ambedkar, 1949). For him, women's equality was a precondition for a functioning democracy. The Constitution thus became a transformative instrument for gender justice.

He also supported the reservation of seats for women in local governance and promoted their participation in legislative bodies—a vision realized decades later through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93) granting one-third reservation for women in panchayats and municipalities.



6. The Hindu Code Bill and Legal Rights for Women

Perhaps Ambedkar's most direct and controversial contribution to women's empowerment was his role in drafting the *Hindu Code Bill* (1948–1951). The Bill aimed to reform Hindu personal laws by granting women equal rights in marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance—issues long dominated by patriarchal interpretations of scripture.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar considered this reform “*a revolution in social legislation.*” He argued that women must have independent legal status and the right to choose their life partners, inherit property, and dissolve oppressive marriages. Despite fierce opposition from conservative members of Parliament, Ambedkar stood firm. He resigned as Law Minister in 1951 when the Bill was blocked, stating that “*to leave inequality between man and woman untouched is to violate justice.*”

Though only portions of the Hindu Code Bill were passed later (as separate Acts between 1955–1956), Ambedkar's vision laid the foundation for modern family law in India. The *Hindu Marriage Act* (1955), *Hindu Succession Act* (1956), and *Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act* (1956) all stemmed from his original draft and marked a turning point in Indian women's legal status.

7. Ambedkar's Vision of Economic and Educational Empowerment of women's

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar consistently argued that social and legal equality would be incomplete without economic and educational empowerment. He believed that education was the greatest weapon against social injustice. In his words, “*Educate, agitate, organize*” was not merely a slogan but a call for liberation through knowledge and unity.

He promoted women's education by supporting scholarships, establishing hostels for girls, and encouraging them to participate in public movements. Ambedkar also advocated for women's employment rights and inclusion in labour welfare legislation. As Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942–1946), he introduced measures for fair wages, maternity leave, and welfare funds for industrial workers, benefiting countless women laborers.

His economic philosophy emphasized land reforms, state socialism, and collective ownership, which would secure women's access to productive resources. Ambedkar's commitment to economic democracy aimed to dismantle the material basis of gender inequality (Omvedt, 1994).



8. Dr. B R Ambedkar's Influence on Women's Movements

Dr. B R Ambedkar's ideas inspired generations of women activists, particularly from Dalit and marginalized backgrounds. Post-independence, the rise of *Dalit feminism* drew heavily on Ambedkarite thought, emphasizing the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Scholars like Gopal Guru (1995) and Sharmila Rege (2013) highlighted how Ambedkar's legacy reshaped feminist discourse in India, making it more inclusive and socially grounded.

Women's organizations such as the *National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW)* and *All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch* continue to draw from his teachings. Ambedkarite women's collectives advocate for dignity, education, and representation, echoing Ambedkar's message that "*women must stand on their own feet and fight for their rights.*"

9. Relevance of Dr. B R Ambedkar's Ideas in the 21st Century

In contemporary India, Ambedkar's vision for women's empowerment remains profoundly relevant. Despite constitutional guarantees, gender inequality persists in many forms' unequal wages, gender-based violence, and under representation in politics and corporate leadership. Ambedkar's emphasis on social democracy, education, and legal equality provides a roadmap for addressing these issues.

His intersectional approach recognizing the intertwined nature of caste, class, and gender offers valuable insights for modern policy-making and feminist movements. As India advances technologically and economically, Ambedkar's insistence that "*freedom without equality is hollow*" reminds us that women's empowerment must be rooted in structural transformation, not token representation.

The resurgence of interest in Ambedkar's feminist thought among scholars and activists signifies his enduring relevance. His call for moral and constitutional reform continues to inspire campaigns for gender justice, from workplace equality to reproductive rights.

Conclusion:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a visionary whose contributions to women's empowerment transformed the moral and legal foundations of Indian society. Through his relentless struggle against patriarchy, caste oppression, and economic exploitation, he redefined the meaning of equality. His legislative work, constitutional ideals, and feminist philosophy laid the groundwork for modern gender justice in India.



Ambedkar's advocacy for women's education, property rights, labor protection, and legal equality marked a radical departure from the patriarchal norms of his time. His belief that women's liberation was essential for the progress of the nation continues to resonate. As India navigates the challenges of globalization, inequality, and cultural conservatism, Ambedkar's message—*educate, agitate, organize*—remains the guiding light for a more inclusive and just society.

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