

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Feminist Praxis: Caste, Gender, and Widow Remarriage

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Abstract: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's feminist praxis represents a revolutionary intersectional framework that linked caste annihilation with gender justice, exposing how Brahmanical patriarchy weaponized widowhood to enforce caste hierarchies. This article examines his advocacy for widow remarriage as a radical intervention against Hindu socio-religious norms that stigmatized widows as "surplus women," arguing that his efforts transcended legal reform to dismantle the epistemic violence of texts like *Manusmriti*. Drawing from his 1916 essay *Castes in India*, the paper analyzes how Ambedkar theorized prohibitions on widow remarriage as a mechanism to preserve caste endogamy by controlling female sexuality and preventing inter-caste unions.

Key Words: Feminist, Castes, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's, sexuality.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's intellectual and activist legacy extends beyond his contributions to constitutional law and Dalit emancipation; he was also a visionary feminist who systematically critiqued the oppressive structures of caste and gender. While mainstream feminist movements in India often centered on elite women's issues, Ambedkar's feminism was rooted in the lived realities of Dalit and lower-caste women, who faced dual oppression under Brahmanical patriarchy. One of his key interventions was his advocacy for widow remarriage—a radical stance that challenged Hindu orthodoxy and sought to restore agency to marginalized women.

2. LIFE HISTORY OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR:

Bhart Ratna Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, an eminent Indian jurist, economist, politician, social reformer, educationist and the architect of the Constitution of India, was born in a Marathi lower class family (treated as untouchable at that time) on 14th April 1891 in the British-founded town and military cantonment of Mhow, Central Provinces (Madhya Pradesh). He was the 14th and last child of Ramji Maloji Sakpal and Bhimabai Murbadkar. Ambedkar's ancestors had long worked for the army of the British East India Company, and his father, Ramji Maloji Sakpal, served in the British Indian Army at the Mhow cantonment, rising to the rank of Subedar and therefore, his father was able to insist that his sons should be educated so Ambedkar was allowed to attend school. Although he attended school, Ambedkar was segregated and given little attention or help by teachers. He was not allowed to sit inside the class. When he needed to drink water, someone from a higher caste had to pour that water from a height as they were not allowed to touch either the water or the vessel that contained it. This task was usually performed by the school peon, and if the peon was not available then he had to go without water; he described the situation later in his writings as "No peon, No Water". He was required to sit on a gunnysack which he had to take home with him. Ambedkar faced the stigmas of caste discrimination and these things affected him deeply.

His father retired in 1894 and the family moved to Satara two years later. Shortly after their move, Ambedkar's mother died. Ambedkar with his two brothers and two sisters (rest died) were cared for by their paternal aunt and lived in difficult circumstances. He was the first in his community to qualify High School and went on to study for a BA in Economics and Politics at Bombay University, where he met Sayaji Rao III, the Maharajah of the princely state of Baroda. The Maharajah was an active advocate of social reforms, including the removal of untouchability. He sponsored Ambedkar's further education abroad, first at Columbia University in New York where he completed a Masters (M.A) and a PhD and later at LSE (London School of Economics). Ambedkar was influenced by John Dewey and his work on democracy. He has done three Ph.D. Dr. Ambedkar had knowledge of 9 languages like Hindi, Pali, Sanskrit, English, French, German, Marathi, Persian and Gujarati. His academic career tells us that he was a brilliant academician and

later when he came to India in 1917, he first served as Military Secretary in Baroda and later became the professor at Sydenham College, Government Law College and later became its Principal. He was also the fellow of University of Bombay. He has written so many books viz. The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and its Solution; Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development; The Annihilation of Caste; Who were the Shudras?; The Untouchables; Waiting for a Visa; The Buddha and his Dhamma; Philosophy of Hinduism; Caste in India; Pakistan or the Partition of India; The Constitution of India and many more. 'Mook Nayak' and 'Janta' were his two weekly papers to promote socio-political awareness among the Dalits. To intensify this campaign for social reform, he established the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in 1924 to promote socio-political awareness among the Dalits with his slogan "Educate, Unite, Agitate".

In 1935 Ambedkar's wife Ramabai died after a long illness and in the same year he converted into Buddhism. After independence on 15 August 1947, the new Congress-led government invited Ambedkar to serve as the nation's first Law Minister, which he accepted. On 29 August, he was appointed Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, and was appointed by the Assembly to write India's new Constitution. The Constitution was adopted on 26 November 1949 by the Constituent Assembly. After completing the draft of India's constitution he suffered from lack of sleep, had neuropathic pain in his legs, and diabetes and died in his sleep on 6 December 1956 at his home in Delhi.

3. GENDER EQUALITY:

Gender equality, a fundamental human right, is crucial for peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable societies, requiring equal opportunities and rights for all genders. It's about ensuring everyone can reach their full potential, free from discrimination and violence, and participate fully in all aspects of life.

For Ambedkar, caste and gender were inseparable. His interpretation of history and the place and role of marriage in social construction of graded inequality provide an important understanding of the issue of women's emancipation in the Indian context. Ambedkar pointed out that caste is endogamy and endogamy is caste and that the origin and reproduction of caste rested on gendered violence. He spent a lifetime challenging entrenched traditions and texts and wrote profusely on the ritual exclusion of women.

Ambedkar analysed the Hindu religious texts or shastras to unravel the roots of women's lowly status in contemporary society. In a paper presented for the anthropology seminar of Dr. A.A. Goldenweizer, Columbia University, USA, in May 1916 on "Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development," he scrutinized the genesis, mechanism and spread of caste system in India and its consequences for gender relations on the Hindu society. His main thesis is as follows: Caste in India means an artificial chopping off the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. Thus, the conclusion is inevitable that endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. The superimposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste. A caste is an enclosed class. In other words, caste system was created by preventing inter-marriage between different classes. The resulting disparity between marriageable units of the two sexes within a caste group (as a consequence of artificial parceling of the Hindu society) was resolved by observance of certain highly obnoxious and inhuman customs, namely, Sati or burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, enforced widowhood and child marriage. This consequently led to decline in the social status of women in the Hindu society. Ambedkar pointed out that the caste system and the customary practices associated with it were largely responsible for the degradation of women in contemporary Indian society.

In yet another significant work, The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women, published in 1951, Ambedkar compares Buddhist and Brahmanical texts and argues that the Aryan civilisation was a barbarian phase of Indian history which established the structures of women's subjugation, subsequently challenged by Buddhism. This was the first revolution against Hinduism, but eventually Hinduism through its counter-revolution again re-established the patriarchal social order which denied women the freedom that they enjoyed under Buddhism. Apart from these richly researched academic works, Ambedkar also wrote in his newspapers Mook Nayak (1920) and Bahishkrit Bharat (1927) about the significance of female education. He involved women along with the depressed classes in his political movements for social justice and equality. In March 1927, Ambedkar launched the Mahad Satyagraha to assert the right of Untouchables to take water from Chawdar tank at Mahad. Accompanied by thousands of men and women in this historic march, Ambedkar remarked that the movement was to liberate society from moth-balled traditions and evil customs imposed ruthlessly and upheld religiously by a vast society upon its weaker and helpless constituents and to restore human rights and dignity to them. On 25 December 1927, at a Conference of Depressed Classes held at Mahad, Ambedkar made a bonfire of Manusmriti in presence of more than fifty women to protest against the discrimination of women and Untouchables upheld by it. At the end of the Conference, Ambedkar also addressed a meeting of about three thousand women of the Depressed Classes, the first meeting of its kind in modern India and urged them to dress well and live a clean life. "Do not feed your spouse and sons if they are drunk. Send your children to schools. Education is necessary for females as it is for males."

4. AMBEDKAR'S FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS: FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS:

Legal Reforms: The Hindu Code Bill and Beyond

As Law Minister, Ambedkar proposed the Hindu Code Bill (1951), which sought to:

- Legalize widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage.
- Grant women property rights and divorce provisions.
- Abolish polygamy and child marriage.
- Though conservative backlash diluted the Bill, its principles later shaped the *Hindu Marriage Act (1955)* and *Hindu Succession Act (1956)*. Ambedkar's vision was clear: without economic and marital autonomy, women's liberation was impossible.

Social Movements: Educating and Organizing Dalit Widows:

Ambedkar established hostels and schools for Dalit women, notably the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (1924), emphasizing education as a tool for resistance. He also encouraged widow remarriage in Dalit communities, framing it as an act of defiance against caste norms.

Contrast with Upper-Caste Reformers:

While Vidyasagar's Widow Remarriage Act (1856) was groundbreaking, it primarily benefited Brahmin widows. Ambedkar, however, centered Dalit women—like Muktabai Salve, whose Mang Maharachya Dukhavishti (1855) exposed the hypocrisy of caste-based widowhood.

Contemporary Relevance: Ambedkarite Feminism Today

Modern feminist movements increasingly recognize caste as a critical axis of oppression. The Dalit movement and the fight for justice in cases like the Hathras gang rape underscore how caste and gender violence remain intertwined. Ambedkar's demand for widow remarriage was not just about marriage—it was about bodily autonomy, economic freedom, and the destruction of caste.

5. CONCLUSION:

Ambedkar's feminist praxis was revolutionary because it rejected incremental reform in favor of structural dismantling. His advocacy for widow remarriage was a direct assault on Brahmanical patriarchy, linking women's liberation to the annihilation of caste. Today, as India grapples with rising caste atrocities and gendered violence, Ambedkar's framework remains indispensable for an inclusive feminist future.

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