

Ambedkar and the Struggle for Women's Equality

ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of
Women and Social Change
1(1) 5–9

© 2016 SAGE Publications
India Pvt. Ltd
SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav

DOI: 10.1177/2455632716645966
<http://jws.sagepub.com>



Ananya Vajpeyi¹

Abstract

The article highlights Dr B. R. Ambedkar's battle for equality and sketches out his political campaigns which were designed to boycott caste rules and allow 'untouchables' access to temples, wells and other civic resources—all with the intention to raise public consciousness against the practice of untouchability. And, importantly, the article talks about how women were included in these campaigns. It throws light on how Ambedkar addressed women as mothers and social change initiators; and how, as a lawyer and legislator, he engaged with the issues of not only the 'untouchable' women but also of women as a part of the labour force.

Keywords

Ambedkar, caste, untouchability, Buddhism, women's rights

Dr B.R. Ambedkar's greatest battle was for equality. We associate him with the struggle against the caste system, with his desire to render Hindu society genuinely egalitarian. It is inevitable that he would have had something to say about the inequality that women suffer and endure in the Indian context. He had a well thought-out stand on how to change the status of women oppressed in different ways by patriarchy, by caste norms and by religion.

Early Campaigns

Ambedkar became politically active in the mid-1920s. His first efforts at political mobilization in Bombay were among the communities that were then called

¹ Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.

Note: This article has been drawn from a talk the author delivered at Feminism Beyond Boundaries, a monthly talk series organized by Apne Aap Women Worldwide in Delhi on 2 March 2015.

Corresponding author:

Ananya Vajpeyi, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29 Rajpur Road, New Delhi – 54.
E-mail: vajpeyi@csds.in

untouchables. His early campaigns took the form of Satyagraha, following Gandhi. They were designed to boycott caste rules and allow untouchables access to temples, wells and tanks and other kinds of civic resources. There were a number of these campaigns in Amravati, Mahad, Poona, Nasik and so on.

Ambedkar's purpose was to raise public consciousness against the practice of untouchability. Between 1927 and about 1930, more and more untouchable women participated in these campaigns. This was the first time untouchable women came out in strength, and the numbers grew from 5 or 10 or 30 or 40 to about 500 or more. (By the 1940s, there were a large number of women, 25,000 at a time.) These women initially came as individuals or in small groups, but they eventually took on leadership responsibilities themselves and helped to mobilize campaigns on behalf of their communities, their towns and villages.

Ambedkar initiated the politicization, the creation of a political consciousness for untouchable women through these larger campaigns which were not specifically about women's issues. They were addressed to the bigger problem of untouchability and of the segregation of untouchable communities from Hindu society at large. They were designed to create awareness about the rights of untouchables and their equal status with the other Hindus. The important point is that women were included in these movements.

In 1927, Ambedkar famously conducted a campaign in Mahad, Maharashtra where he wanted untouchables to be able to drink from the Chaudhar tank. He conducted a peaceful, non-violent struggle in which a large number of people gathered and took water from the tank. After they had dispersed peacefully, caste Hindus conducted a purification ceremony, to rid the water of the pollution that untouchables had supposedly brought to that tank.

Ambedkar was infuriated. What he did next became a landmark in the history of the struggle against the untouchability. He held up a copy of the *Manusmriti*, the Hindu legal scripture, where so much of the stigma of untouchability has been articulated, and he publicly burned a copy of this ancient book. He identified the *Manusmriti* as the source of the anti-woman ideology pervasive in orthodox Brahminical culture. Burning the *Manusmriti* became a very important symbolic act of protest against religious orthodoxy, which created inequality based on both caste and gender.

This was the early stage of Ambedkar's engagement with political consciousness among women, especially Dalit women. In 1935, at Yeola, outside Nasik, he announced that he was born a Hindu but was not going to die a Hindu. He said the whole problem with Hindu society is that it is never going to let go of caste. It is better to leave the Hindu fold.

Women and Work

Throughout the late 1930s, Ambedkar was involved with workers' agitations and labour strikes in the city of Bombay. He set up the Independent Labour Party and he helped to create the All India Depressed Classes Association (AIDCA). The women's wing of the AIDCA was created in 1942—it met in 1942, 1944 and

1945. Here he began talking about women in a very big way, not only about untouchable women but also of women as a part of the labour force, as a part of the working class. And, as a lawyer and a legislator, he began to explore the possibility of writing laws to protect the rights of the women in the workplace. He introduced the maternity bill, so that working women could get maternity leave. He tried to introduce legislation dealing with birth control because he felt that if women were continually burdened with child-bearing, they could not lead productive lives.

He spoke about women's education, about ending child marriage and he continued to address himself to women of the depressed classes. He paid heed to the smallest details. He said to women—You must not carry yourself or dress in ways that mark you out as being from this or that caste, make sure that in your sartorial choices and your bodily comportment, in what you wear and how you live, you conduct yourself with dignity and confidence. Stop practicing meaningless rituals and stop believing in superstitions which have come down to you through your religion or caste. Take charge of your families. Refuse to have too many children, refuse to marry off your children at a young age, educate your children, and make sure you treat female children alike as male children.

In other words, he tried to address women as mothers and as the initiators of social change, within their families and their communities. Ambedkar was ahead of his times in thinking about women's equality in these terms. He went on to address the All India Women's Depressed Classes' women's conferences in the mid-1940s. And he, in turn, found himself deeply affected by the sight of thousands of poor uneducated women who gathered to hear him because they were truly interested in social and economic change.

Women and Religion

During the Quit India Movement, Ambedkar started to think carefully about the two-nation theory and the possible formation of Pakistan. He wrote a book about partition, in which he took up the condition of Muslim women. Thus he was not only concerned with the rights of women within the purview of caste, he also reflected on the condition of Muslim women. He noted that although Islam is an egalitarian religion and has better sense of gender justice than the Hindu caste system, nonetheless, practices like polygamy, burqa and purdah or veiling, and rules around *talaq* or divorce, all implicitly disempower Muslim women. For him, the eventual status of women in a Muslim country like Pakistan had to be a part of the debate on the merits and demerits of partition.

In 1946–1947, Ambedkar joined the Constituent Assembly of India, and became the chairman of the Drafting Committee. The Constitution is a thoroughly egalitarian document, which establishes equal citizenship for men and women, grants equal rights to both sexes and offers various kinds of protection to weaker sections of society, including women. However, there is a serious lacuna as far as women's rights are concerned. On the one hand, the Constitution ensures that gender is not a basis for discrimination. But the Constitution also grants the

freedom of religion and creates a regime of personal laws by which each religious community is allowed to protect its own customs, traditions and practices, without interference from the state. This means that within each religion (especially minorities) there can continue practices which are essentially discriminatory against women, and the state would not intervene.

After Independence

Ambedkar argued that in Hinduism, the crux of the problem of social inequality is that the caste system proceeds on the basis of endogamy—as a Hindu, you must always marry within your caste. Intermarriage across caste or religion is not allowed. This is the root of women's inequality, which keeps them trapped within the caste, religion and circumstances of their birth and limits the possibility of what Ambedkar, following John Dewey, called 'social endosmosis'.

After Independence, Ambedkar accepted the position of law minister in Nehru's first cabinet. His main goal was to propose the Hindu Code Bill, a piece of legislation designed to reform the Hindu religion from within, recalibrating its rules of marriage, divorce, property, inheritance, practices like widow remarriage, dowry, child marriage, birth control, abortion, freedom to choose whom you want to marry and so on. Ambedkar described the Hindu religion as a dilapidated house, which ought to be completely demolished—this was his call for 'the annihilation of caste'. But since Hindus were not willing to dispense with their religion, they could at least fix their broken house before they could live in it.

The Hindu Code Bill was designed for all Hindus, to rationalize and modernize Hinduism as a whole. And in this, Ambedkar failed, because other members of the Constituent Assembly, Congressmen and even the President of India at that time, Rajendra Prasad, found it to be too radical. They wanted gradual change rather than sweeping reform and the bill was not allowed to go forward. Nehru, who had brought Ambedkar in as law minister with the intention that together they would pass this bill, failed to garner the requisite support.

The first general elections were coming up in 1951 and there was a great fear that the Congress would suffer an electoral setback because of the Hindu Code Bill. Nehru allowed it to drop and Ambedkar was outraged. He resigned from the government, quitting his position as law minister. He wrote about his disappointment over the failure of the agenda that he and Nehru had set together, a big component of which was change for women and strengthening the rights of women.

After this, embittered, Ambedkar withdrew from national politics. Over time, different aspects of the proposed Hindu Code Bill Legislation were passed piecemeal, but the comprehensive reform that Ambedkar had envisaged, especially in regard to women, was not fully realized and has not been realized even today, mainly because personal laws and the freedom of religion still remain cornerstones of our Constitution. That contradiction has yet to be resolved.

Women and Buddhism

In the last years of his life, Ambedkar went back to his Yeola declaration of 1935, 'I will not die a Hindu.' He thought deeply about Christianity, Sikhism and Islam. Having considered all the options, he ultimately decided that he would become a Buddhist. In October 1956, he organized a mass conversion in Nagpur, inaugurating the *Navayana*, literally the new vehicle or way of Buddhism. There is a special place for women in this final chapter of Ambedkar's life.

Traditional Buddhism follows the *tri-ratna* (three jewels): the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha—the person of Siddharth Gautama, the enlightened one; the Dhamma, the Buddhist way; and the Sangha, the monastic community. But the Sangha itself was originally conceived of as a community of (male) monks. Ambedkar called for nuns as well as monks. He also recognized that most people are not going to take those vows and enter into monastic communities. For poor and illiterate people to identify with Buddhism, they have to continue with their life without actually becoming monks and nuns. He revolutionized the concept of Buddhist community itself. It cannot be restricted to the Sangha, it has to be open to everyone, to a laity, which must admit both men and women. Even the monastic community has to become fully co-educational.

Today men and women play an equal role in the *Navayana*. I have met many women who consider themselves as Ambedkarite Buddhists, who organize their communities and their families according to the principles of Ambedkarite Buddhism and who believe in the egalitarianism of this religion, which frees them from oppression and inequality of caste Hinduism. A protestant Buddhism was Ambedkar's final legacy to women.

Author's Bio-sketch

Ananya Vajpeyi is the author of *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Harvard University Press, 2012), which won the 41st Thomas J. Wilson Memorial Prize, the Crossword Award for Non-Fiction (2013) and the Tata First Book Award for Non-Fiction (2013). She is based in New Delhi, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. She is also a Global Ethics Fellow with the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, New York, and a founding member of the editorial board of *Antyajaa*. She writes regularly for *The Hindu*, *Foreign Affairs* and other Indian and international publications.