

Seeing Ambedkar as Dalit icon is narrow. Understand his feminist vision for Indian women

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April 14, 2022



Representational image | Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad holds up a copy of the Constitution during a road show in Varanasi | ANI Photo

Recently, a [video](#) of a young girl named Swara Vanvi paying her tribute to Babasaheb Ambedkar went viral on social media. Videos like Vanvi's have become popular in recent times, a sign of cultural symbolism developing around Dr B.R. Ambedkar's contribution to the women's movement and their emancipation in India. The cultural reverence towards him, particularly by Dalit-Bahujan women, is a consequence of Ambedkar's genuine efforts toward women's emancipation.

Ambedkar was a great nation-builder who considered women to be the lynchpin in the country's overall development. "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," he had said at the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference held in Nagpur in July 1942. His approach toward women's emancipation was progressive and liberal as he believed that social justice is possible only within a modern institutional framework. Thus, he promoted the spirit of constitutionalism that ensured equal rights and dignity for women.



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The Hindu Code Bills and his conversion to Buddhism are significant reminders of Ambedkar's efforts. It is an irony, though, that some feminists claim that the Hindu Code Bills were 'political stunts'. It reflected a caste bias among savarna feminists in accepting Ambedkar as a feminist philosopher. Indian sociologist and scholar Sharmila Rege has pointed out that Ambedkar's vision was guided by rethinking Indian modernity from the women's perspective. He wanted to create a new space where women could voice themselves, particularly those from the oppressed castes.

Ambedkar was a pragmatist who believed in realistic, rationalist, and practical ways to liberate women. He used constitutional philosophy to give women a level-playing field that was historically denied to them.

Liberator of Hindu women

Ambedkar's contribution to women's emancipation is reflected in his works and writings, including *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India* and *Riddles of Hinduism*. The question of social justice was central to his writings, which talked about women's rights at a time when social structures were still traditional and deeply caste-driven. Dalit and other oppressed caste women were doubly marginalised in this social structure.

Ambedkar argued that the debauched status of women came from the laws of *Manusmriti* that denied them access to education. His work *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman* quotes the law of *Manusmriti* (IX.18): "Women have no right to study the *Vedas*. That is why their *sanskaars* (rites) are performed without *Veda* mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the *Vedas*. The uttering of *Veda* mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the *Veda* mantras; they are as untruth is." [BAWS, Volume 17 (2), page no. 119]

According to Ambedkar, before *Manusmriti*, women enjoyed a respectable position in society. They had access to education as is mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* and the *Shrautasutras* (Volume 17(2), page 122). He even acknowledged female figures of ancient India like Rishi Gargi, Vidhyadhari, and Sulabha Maitreyi who were great intellectuals of their time and are mentioned in pre-Manu literature.

In his criticism of texts like *Manusmriti* lies Ambedkar's spirit to promote education for women. Shailaja Paik, associate professor of history at the University of Cincinnati, in her discussion on Ambedkar's commitment to women's education, has discussed that Babasaheb believed in the principle of '*Sudhaaranaa*', or improvement, which meant cultivating women's intellect and self-development through education. In the 3 February 1928 edition of *Bahishkrut Bharat*, a newspaper founded by Ambedkar, he wrote, "Knowledge and learning are not for men alone; they are essential for women too...if you want *sudhaaranaa* for future generations, educating girls is very important. You cannot afford to forget my speech or to fail to put it into practice."

The watershed contribution of Ambedkar to women's rights was his efforts in the passage of the Hindu Code Bills during the 1950s.

Ambedkar's zeal for the Bills came from his desire to ensure women's right to property that was denied to them in ancient Hindu law codes of *Manusmriti* and *Dharmashastras*. The only property that women traditionally owned was '*Stridhan*', which restricted rightful access and was only possible within an endogamous marriage social structure. Through Section 14 of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, a woman became the absolute owner of her property. Section 6 of the Act also dissolved the exclusive inheritance of property by male family members and extended the right to Hindu women as well.

With the Right to Property granted to Hindu women, Ambedkar wanted to ensure that women have agency and control over material resources. Thus, his approach towards female emancipation wasn't simply rhetorical but a realist vision to ensure equal bargaining power in the socio-legal framework.

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Contemporary cultural practices

For women from the caste margins, Ambedkar is a symbol of social change unlike any other. The cultural production of songs, images, and writings around Ambedkar shows his acceptance by Dalit-Bahujan women.

It is ironic that while Ambedkar was a significant feminist leader, he is largely reduced to a 'Dalit icon'. Such a narrow view fails to encapsulate his vision of modern nation-building. As the chief architect of India's Constitution, Ambedkar redesigned the paradigms of citizenship and justice by including people from the margins, particularly women.

Today, on Ambedkar Jayanti, when there is a cultural carnival around Babasaheb Ambedkar, one needs to understand the kind of struggle he had to undergo to bring women to the centre of India's development stage. To establish a socio-legal justice framework for women's

emancipation, Ambedkar had critically engaged with Brahmanical power structures, which were at the root of women's degraded position in society.

After B.R. Ambedkar, many Dalit and oppressed caste women came out and spoke against injustices perpetuated and normalised by the savarna community. They asserted themselves by participating in the anti-caste struggle in various social and political capacities. Prominent authors Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon have discussed several women from the Dalit community who showed solidarity with Ambedkar in his struggle for social justice.

Only when we acknowledge Babasaheb's feminist perspective in its true essence can we rightfully offer tribute to him as a visionary for Indian women and their rights.

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(Edited by Humra Laeeq)

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