

Discuss Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to the empowerment of women OR to economic thought in India during his lifetime.

Dr. Ambedkar had a significant and unprecedented contribution to the empowerment of Indian women in his lifetime. By enshrining women's rights in the Indian Constitution and challenging religious and socio-cultural norms, Ambedkar instigated women's political consciousness. Thus, his life's contribution to the empowerment of women exceeded his physical actions, and endure through his legacy of social reform and activism.

To consider the extent of Ambedkar's contribution, empowerment must be defined. Empowerment may be considered enabling "those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices" (Kabeer 1999). Hence, it may be measured in terms of "access" and "future claims" to human and social resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer 1999). Empowerment can also be measured by the overcoming of situational and structural obstacles (Narasaiah 2004). Situational obstacles are burdens of responsibility and circumstances, often manifesting in dependence on male figures. On the other hand, structural obstacles relate to societal attitudes regarding women assuming positions of responsibility (Narasaiah 2004). Ambedkar's activism and legal contributions clearly enhanced female agency, as he advocated egalitarianism. By challenging socio-cultural and religious norms, Ambedkar weakened structural obstacles. This simultaneously improved the education, economic and labour rights of women and undermined situational obstacles such as dependency on males. It is clear therefore, through his address of the multi-faceted nature of empowerment, Ambedkar significantly contributed to the empowerment of women.

It is often argued that Gandhi, as opposed to Ambedkar is the most influential figure in the empowerment of Indian women. Due to his high-profile opposition against social injustices such as child marriage, the dowry system and enforced widowhood, Gandhi's contribution is often considered peerless (Tendulkar 1952). This is illustrated in praise of his role in the upliftment of women as "unsurpassed in terms of impact and influence" (Kishwar 1985). Furthermore, Gandhi is considered an advocate for gender equality as he believed neither man nor woman "should be regarded as superior or inferior" (Iyer 1973). However, Gandhi's vision of social equality did not align with the true empowerment of women, and served to undermine it. Gandhi believed in the compartmentalisation of gender roles where women should be limited to the domestic sphere. Consequently, he encouraged women to be passive whereas men were

called to be active in the public domain (Gandhi in TPD 1965). Therefore, though Gandhi may have advanced specific Indian women's rights, his compartmentalisation of gender roles simultaneously undermined female agency, subverting the true empowerment of women. Conversely, Ambedkar was an advocate of complete egalitarianism (Das 2015). He promoted true equality including equal socio-cultural, political and economic status for women. These ideals were espoused through political activism and his input to the Constitution and other legislation. Therefore, Ambedkar's instrumental contributions to the empowerment of Indian women must be recognised as unprecedented.

By challenging the caste system and the civil rules it prescribed, Ambedkar initiated significant social reform, which was instrumental to the empowerment of Indian women. Ambedkar inherited an India inundated by social injustice which he believed to be perpetuated through Hinduism and the caste system (Majumder and Singh 1997). Though Ambedkar's main purpose was the removal of caste inequality and promotion of egalitarianism, by advocating against caste inequality he empowered Indian women. Despite equal rights in the Rig Vedic period, the status of women was degraded and subverted throughout history as Hindu. Laws were coded following Manu's teachings (Altekar 1956). As such, women's status at the end of the nineteenth century was historically "at its lowest point" in factors such as literacy, individuality, social status, freedom, economic status and power (Cousins 1947). Thus, Ambedkar observed that the imposition of orthodox Hindu principles had deprived women's rights, and understood the need to challenge orthodoxy (Das 2015). His context and ideology were incompatible: in his period female literacy was considered dangerous, sati was prevalent, child marriage was encouraged amongst higher castes and widows' conditions were deplorable (Altekar 1956). This was compounded by the British colonial rule as Victorianism had led to the model of domesticated Indian women (Chaudhuri 2012). Therefore, in his early 1917 work, 'Castes in India', Ambedkar emphasised how the caste system controlled women and their sexuality (Ambedkar in Pritchett 1979). Ambedkar perceived caste to be perpetuated through endogamy, leading Hindu society to the "*surplus woman*" problem which occurred when widows had the option of remarriage. He discerned the solutions to the problem were culturally embedded through the customs of sati, enforced widowhood and girl marriage (Ambedkar in Pritchett 1979). Consequently, Ambedkar engendered awareness amongst poor and illiterate women as he urged them to rebel against the socially unjust practices (Singarariya 2014). This fostered his liberation movement which was based upon the slogan of "Education, Agitation and Organisation" (Bajpai 2017). He addressed women as social initiators, and encouraged

female participation in his campaigns which raised consciousness about the endorsement of untouchability (Vajpeyi 2016). Through campaigns, the creation of the All India Depressed Classes Association (AIDCA) and Article 16 of the Constitution which outlawed discrimination against lower castes, Ambedkar empowered women (Vajpeyi 2016). Despite this, by addressing the inequality of marginalised women of the lower caste at an unprecedentedly large scale, Ambedkar significantly contributed to the empowerment of Indian women.

Ambedkar also empowered Indian women through his conjunctive opposition to the Hindu religion and the cultural norms it imposed. The *Manusmriti*, was considered by him to be the genesis of Brahminical culture, creating caste and gender based inequality (Vajpeyi 2016). Consequently, Ambedkar tried to “rationalise and modernise” Hinduism, as he considered it a “dilapidated house, which ought to be completely demolished” (Vajpeyi 2016; Ambedkar in Vajpeyi 2016). This led to his drafting of the Hindu Code Bill which strengthened women’s position in society through its reform of traditional Hindu practices (Singariya 2014). Due to strong political opposition which considered the Bill an “attack” on the “sanctity of Hinduism”, it was not passed and Ambedkar resigned in symbolic protest (Singariya 2014). However, his proposal was not futile as the ideals set a precedent and were later passed in four acts. The legislation codified and modified Hindu Law, promoting rights regarding widows, guardianship, adoption, divorce and complete property ownership (Hari et al. 2003). As the predominant proponent of the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar mitigated situational obstacles such as dependency on male figures, liberating women and empowering them. Through advocacy against what he considered superstitions imposed by religion, Ambedkar urged women to live with dignity and confidence. This included emphasising the importance of their assumption of roles of responsibility within families and community, particularly those concerning their children. His approach differed from other social reformers as he questioned societal roots of discrimination (Das 2015). Ambedkar has been criticised for his view on Hinduism, but it is apparent that without his identification of Hinduism as the main cause of women’s oppression, large-scale social change would not have occurred (Singariya 2014). Therefore, through his social theorisation and political work, Ambedkar significantly contributed to the empowerment of women to an unprecedented extent.

In addition, Ambedkar’s furthering of women’s economic rights empowered them to be independent from male figures. Women’s lack of economic and property rights had induced a

'slavish mentality' and sense of dependency on men (Majumdar 2010). Thus, Ambedkar's espousal of increased economic and labour rights for women in addition to the challenge of socio-cultural and religious norms curtailed situational obstacles, increasing the presence of women in the public domain. Moreover, as the economic independence of women and their societal prosperity is interlinked, Ambedkar's legal pursuit of women's economic independence ultimately improved their welfare (Nandal and Rajnish 2014). This was illustrated in the 1930's where Ambedkar endeavoured for increased labour rights, particularly for women. He was involved with labour strikes in Bombay, set up the Independent Labour Party and helped create the women's wing of the AIDCA (Vajpeyi 2016). These ventures initiated dialogue promoting women as part of the labour force, catalysing their economic liberation. By opposing the structural obstacle of social conventions which discouraged working women, Ambedkar increased their future claims to resources, a key measure of empowerment. Moreover, the policies Ambedkar framed in the Constitution were significant advancements to women's rights. For example, Article 14 promotes equal rights and opportunities, whilst Article 39 states the need for equal pay for equal work and the equal means of livelihood (Patil 2017). In addition, Article 46 promotes the educational and economic interests of weaker people (Patil 2017). Through his early works and Constitutional inputs, Ambedkar endorsed the socio-economic development of women and set precedent for further reform. This is seen in the Maternity Benefit Bill of 1942 which he proposed as a Labour Minister, forming the grounds for the Maternity Benefit Act 1961. Such legislation, in addition to the property and divorce rights in the aforementioned Hindu Bill Code furthered the upliftment of Indian women's status, particularly those of depressed classes (Patil 2017). Hence, through his legal espousal of women's economic rights, Ambedkar was instrumental to the advanced independence and thus, empowerment of Indian women.

Another significant contribution of Ambedkar is his rousing of the political consciousness of women, particularly those in depressed classes. By encouraging women to challenge the values of Hinduism, Ambedkar is accused of undermining movements for national unity and the progress of India as a whole (Gokhale 1976). This rebellion is justified as he envisaged a unified egalitarian India and was endorsing modernist views which were arising at the time (Gokhale 1976). Notably, from the 1920s, Ambedkar dedicated himself to removing the socio-economic disparities in the Hindu Social System. This was as he believed democracy was founded on the fraternity of liberty and equality (Mandal 2011). Through his newspapers, *Mooknayak* and *Bahiskrit Bharat*, Ambedkar emphasised women's rights, particularly political

involvement, inspiring and encouraging them (Mandal 2011). Consequently, at the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, women participated in the procession of the conference and more significantly, in the committee meetings of the conference itself (Moon and Pawar 1989). This was the beginning of Ambedkar's desired "social revolution" to equalise women's rights and further India's trajectory towards being a more democratic nation (Kumar 2008). The expanding influence of his teachings were evident in the hundreds of women that participated in the 1930 Kalaram Temple event and the 1932 Round Table Conference (Mandal 2011). Ambedkar continued these programmes, emboldening community involvement, particularly from those of depressed classes. The climax of his movement is displayed in the 25,000 female attendees of the 1942 All India Dalit Mahila Conference (Mandal 2011). This illustrates the magnitude of Ambedkar's influence in raising the political consciousness of women. Thus, it is argued he held a decisive role among uplifting poor illiterate women (Mandal 2011). By simultaneously confronting political, socio-cultural and religious barriers, Ambedkar galvanised the political involvement of women, empowering the marginalised.

However, the impact of Dr. Ambedkar's contribution is not limited to the physical actions of his lifetime, his legacy has also inspired and empowered many individuals. His opposition to the oppression of human rights imposed by the Hindu Social System was unprecedented, as was his promotion of egalitarianism in India. As such, he is often recognised as a "crusader" of human rights, and India's "foremost human rights activist" of the twentieth century (Keer 1995, Makwana 1992). Overcoming the discrimination of being a 'sudra', Ambedkar became a powerful symbol of rebellion against "the oppressive features of Hindu society" (Nehru in Das 2015). Ambedkar's inspirational legacy can be displayed anecdotally. His teachings persuaded men to reconsider the dignity and honour owed to women through his teachings. In one instance, a brothel worker was moved to not simply leave his profession, but to ensure the prostitutes there left also (Singariya 2014). His actions also inspired many women to become politically active, including Dalit feminist Tulsibai Bansode who started the political newspaper *Chokhamela* (Singariya 2014). By enabling and influencing others' actions through his work, Ambedkar furthered his contribution to the empowerment of Indian women. Unsurprisingly, Ambedkar's influence extends to present society. Amartya Sen, an Indian Nobel Prize winner and contributor to welfare economics and social justice, has attributed foundations of his work to Ambedkar (Atrocity News 2007). However, perversion of his ideals are also currently used to coerce political support from Dalits and other followers of Ambedkarism (Bajpai 2017). Therefore, the contributions of his legacy may inadvertently

become negative in modern context. Despite this, Dr. Ambedkar's work on the empowerment of Indian women has been immortalised as his teachings continue to inspire and influence.

To conclude, Dr. Ambedkar initiated unprecedented social reform in regards to equality of castes, and women. Despite critiques of undermining national unity and progress, without his opposition the Hindu Law would not have been modified to allow women greater agency and economic rights. Thus, through his social theorisation and legal advocacy, Ambedkar has been instrumental to the empowerment of Indian women. It is evident, his contributions removed significant structural and situational barriers regarding socio-cultural norms. As a result, the increased claims of Indian women to resources and responsibilities in the public domain may be attributed to Ambedkar. A symbolic figure of defying socio-cultural norms for the sake of human rights, Ambedkar's work has outlasted his physical lifetime. His extensive contributions in uplifting the rights and status of Indian women continues to influence current social reform.

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