

Discuss Dr Ambedkar's contribution to the empowerment of women

Social activist and fighter, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar made the most prominent and effective contribution to the empowerment of women in India. He was respected for his power of character, veracity and courageousness all over the world. Indian women struggled historically being denied of their equal and justified rights socially, politically and economically (Nayak and Mahanta, 2009). Empowerment is a development, and during this growth, a person influences a revolution. Education is the most significant factor in empowering young women; with education, women have equal rights to create a more secure world and develop the future that several people want and essentially need (In, 2017). Indian women were denied rights to obtaining an education, eventually leading to a decline in several other areas in their lives due to discouragement and an absence of speaking their minds. Dr. Ambedkar made a positive impact in empowering Indian women by persuading them to participate meaningfully in society for their voices to be heard on topics such marriage, livelihood and child birth (Nayak and Mahanta, 2009).

Ambedkar played an immense role in empowering women through the creation of several laws, and encouraging active participation from women in campaigns and movements. He had a strong urge to participate in such a strong way as he was born into an “untouchable” family who faced several struggles due to inequality, even though his family members were intelligent, creative and full of talent (Zelliot, 2008). Because of this, his main duty was to push for the equal rights of untouchable women, specifically, in India after experiencing problems with untouchability first-hand (Zelliot, 2008).

A woman’s position in society refers to her social standing, as well as her privileges and obligations to her family and the community (In, 2017). The status of Indian women has evolved immensely from pre-historic to modern times, culminating during the Rig Vedic Age (2005-1500 B.C) and declining at the Muslim Period (1100-1700 AD). The Rig Vedic Age portrayed a positive and powerful impact on Indian women and depicted their influential position in society. They had equal constitutional rights to men, and were given the privilege of being educated at the same level (Subrahmanyam and Devi, 2014). Women were also presented with the choice of residing with their parents until they were married. They also had the ability to choose who they desired to marry, which was an incredible advantage compared to the unbearable, upcoming years of Indian women’s encounters (Subrahmanyam and Devi, 2014). Every woman had a choice of being educated which allowed them to develop self-confidence and understand their significance in society (Roy, 2017). Apart from men’s elevated status, women were also treated equally by being given a chance fight like warriors if they pleased (Upadhyaya, 1995). Men and women were given equal rights due to a lack of caste systems during this age (Upadhyaya, 1995). Although the Rig Vedic Period was the earliest society, human equality was represented at its highest peak, which was quite unusual in a primeval world (Upadhyaya, 1995). Due to women’s rights being sufficient and fair during this time, Ambedkar’s influence did not play a role until later years, when times were unfair.

The Post Vedic Age (500 B.C. – 1100 A.D) depicted an enormous deterioration in the status of women due to the creation of the caste system and these values endured until Ambedkar’s contributions to turn India into a more modern society, beginning in 1920,

helped to morph these negative changes into positive ones (Singariya, 2014). The most negative adjustment during the post Vedic period was the refusal of education. Women were denied the rights to education and the entrance of all schools and learning centres (Mohapatra, 2015). As noted previously, education is frequently viewed as the answer to empowering women. Ambedkar's project of reforming education to Indian women around 1930 was initiated by promoting awareness and consciousness of the importance of education in all societies through his slogan "Educate, Agitate, Organise" (Campion, 2016). His aim was to create consciousness on how education can improve their lives and for them to desire an education (Campion, 2016). He wanted Indian women to feel enlightened and liberate themselves so they could recognise how their degradation in society was ultimately triggered (Campion, 2016). Ambedkar empowered women by helping them to realise their importance in society which would then establish modernity.

During 1100 A.D. - 1700 A.D when the Muslims were ruling India, women in Medieval India were dependent on men and several merciless rituals began to take place normally such as child marriage, the dowry system and sati (Mehta, 2013). Husbands believed that their wives should be perished in the flames after their death, rather than suffer more harm from the enemy (Mehta, 2013). Sati became not only a popular tradition, but an honour and was adopted in several communities that did not previously utilize it (Mehta, 2013). Indian women began to stray more away from their own cultures values and beliefs, and their high position in the Rig Vedic age quickly faded away, leaving them at their greatest decline to date (Mohapatra, 2015). Indian women faced several hardships during the Muslim period until Ambedkar noticed the problems of the caste system and the negative impact they were creating for women. He believed that these unjust social practices were occurring due to Hinduism and the caste system. An individual in a caste system, has no choice but to follow the regimes of that caste (Vajpeyi, 2016). Untouchability arises from the makings of a caste system which refers to people in the lowest caste, particularly the Dalits in this case, who were believed to have the least value (Vajpeyi, 2016). Ambedkar perceived untouchability to create barriers between national unison and social development. He also believed that caste systems needed be eradicated completely as they denied people of their equal rights as individuals (Vajpeyi, 2016). His primary goal was to give Dalits (outcasts) equal rights to the rest of the individuals in the Hindu Society, such as the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Unlike Mahatma Gandhi, who proved to be a strong believer in Orthodox Hinduism, Ambedkar, having personally suffered the ill effects of Hinduism in his own life, pushed to cease strict traditions that aroused through Hindu religion (India Today, 2016). He wanted women to be involved in these movements to give them more confidence and power to push for themselves. Gandhi also believed that untouchability could be eradicated in other ways besides getting rid of the tyrannical structure of the caste system, he took a more conventional approach (India Today, 2016). Ambedkar aimed to raise public awareness against his beliefs on the evil custom of untouchability and why it should be abolished through the establishment of the All India Depressed Classes Association (AIDCA), devoted to establishing equality for Dalits. However, AIDCA was primarily designed to promote all women, untouchable or not, as having equal rights in the labour force, in all industries (Vajpeyi, 2016). Although Gandhi's attempts at removing untouchability and protesting for equality for Indian women by rising against the oppressive British government was successful in some ways, Ambedkar's attempts at empowering women by steering them towards a spiritual progress made a stronger impact on Indian women.

Ambedkar continuously stressed the importance of creating awareness of the unfair rights in untouchable women through active protesting and rallying. He created a number of other campaigns in Mahad, Puna, and other cities, intended to prohibit caste controls which would then offer “untouchables” access to resources they were previously denied admission too such as temples and tanks (Samel, 1999). In Mahad, a city in Maharashtra during 1927, Ambedkar conducted another peaceful campaign, known as “Mahad Satyagraha” where he encouraged a large number of untouchables to consume water from the ‘upper-class’ water tank in Chavdar caste (Samel, 1999). He did this because untouchables were only given the rights to consume water from the “untouchable quarters”, which was quite a trek for anyone to reach, and why should untouchables have to drink water from a different quarter if all water tastes the same and serves the same purpose (Samel, 1999). Once the untouchables left, the caste members sanitized the water tank to eliminate all the contamination the untouchables brought to that tank which enraged Ambedkar and only provoked him to take further action. He contemplated for a year about his upcoming plans of action, and he came up with a revolutionary idea at the end of 1927. His next plan to raise awareness was to burn a copy of the Hindu Legal Scripture, called the Manusmriti, in the same location of the water tank in Chavdar (Mandal, 2009). He wanted to burn this scripture in particular as it contained information about untouchables and anti-women beliefs. Ambedkar aimed to raise awareness amongst these women by encouraging them to participate in movements to challenge these unethical customs. After encouraging Indian women to protest for years, Ambedkar had successfully assisted several untouchable women in developing more strength, courage and leadership skills to partake and organise campaigns in their own communities (Vajpeyi, 2016).

Ambedkar tried to construct a democratic society where equality as well as social, economic and justice rights triumphed, regardless of the caste system. His involvement in amending the Constitution as a chairman for the Constituent Assembly of India, he was able voice his concerns about the changes he desired to make to the Constitution (Vajpeyi, 2016). Although the Constitution clearly stated that women and men had equal rights, it also granted each religion to have its own private rules, customs and manners within its community, which meant that women would not always have fair rights (Vajpeyi, 2016). Ambedkar’s problem with this part of the Constitution was specifically related to marriage and child birth in Hinduism. Women had no choice but to marry within their caste, which meant their children would be born into the same caste as well, which was frowned upon by Ambedkar because he believed every person should have a right to do what they wanted (Vajpeyi, 2016). As a member of the Constitution, Ambedkar created the Hindu Code Bill with the mind-set of revamping and modernizing Hinduism as a religion. He planned to annihilate inner-caste marriage and allow for abortion. He also introduced several other acts under this bill such as the Hindu Succession Act and The Adoption and Maintenance Acts of 1956 which gave widows and mothers in general, the right to adopt either males or females, depending on their choice (Das, 2015). Ambedkar’s passing of the Maternity Benefit Bill, gave mothers the right to take leave before and after birth (Vajpeyi, 2016). His views on the necessity of birth control were also shared in his declaration during 1938. He strongly encouraged the birth control bill to be passed which would give women the rights to prevent conception if they pleased (Moon and Narke, 2014). He declared that a woman should have the power to decide whether they want to bear a child or not, especially the women from poor living conditions with diseases who have a high chance of dying after giving painful births (Moon and Narke, 2014). His arguments in these areas recognized the dignity of women and empowered women to make decisions for themselves in their self-interest rather than the interests of others.

Ambedkar's significant contributions during the 20th century in modernizing India allowed women to develop the bravery to crawl out of their private spheres and make independent decisions to fight for their well-deserved equal rights (Singariya, 2014). Ambedkar believed that each individual woman's growth was the first step in developing a free social order (Singariya, 2014). His notion of women's empowerment in India was not only restricted to alterations in social areas, but also political and economic uniformity amongst men and women as well. He created women's empowerment by eliminating inequalities through his acts, bills, and women's awareness (Singariya, 2014). Ambedkar wanted women to empower themselves by fighting for themselves, and knowing what they are capable of. He stated that once women knew their worth, they could then proceed to make powerful, efficient choices in specific areas that influence their lives poorly (Singariya, 2014). Ambedkar's efforts made the most positive impact in empowering women in India.

Word count: 2028

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