



People's Education Society's

**DR. AMBEDKAR COLLEGE OF
COMMERCE AND ECONOMICS**

(Opp. Wadala Bus Depot, Mumbai - 400 031)

**Bharat Ratna
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar
and
Women's Question**

compiled and edited

by

Lalitha Dhara

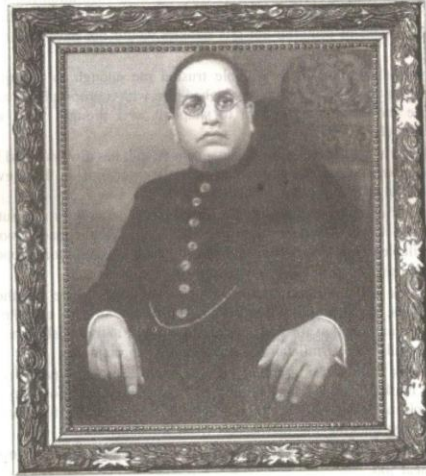
*with the support and cooperation of
Principal Dr. S. R. Kamble*

for

Women Development Cell, Dr. Ambedkar College unit

**BHARAT RATNA
DR. BABASAHEB AMBEDKAR**

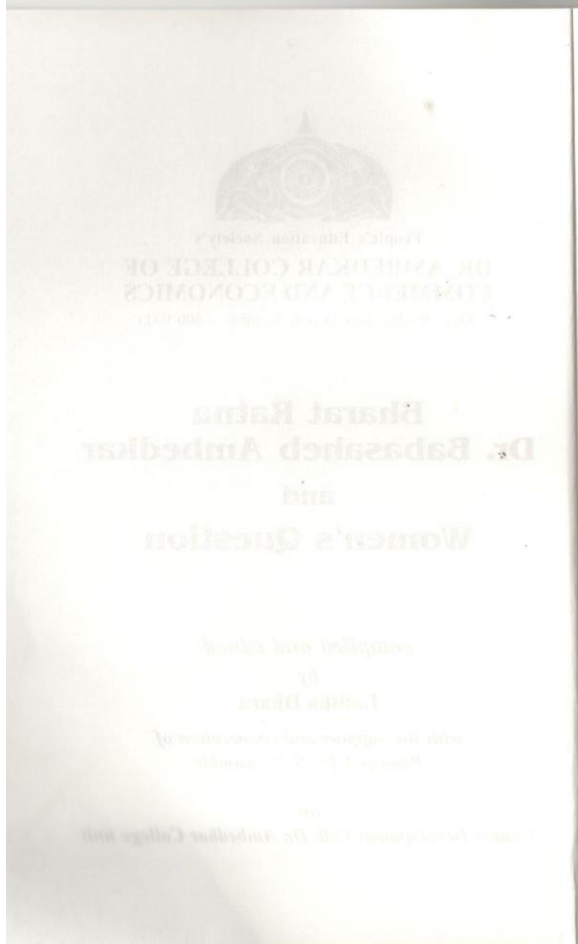
M.A., Ph.D. (Columbia); D.Sc. (London);
LL.D. (Columbia); D.Litt. (Osmania); Bar-at-Law (London)



(14th April 1891 - 6th December 1956)

*I do not know what would happen to this world
if daughters were not born.*

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar



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With deepest respects to

Tathagata Bhagwan Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule, Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

I consider myself fortunate to be teaching in an institution founded by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. If I were teaching elsewhere, perhaps the thought of bringing out this booklet would not have occurred to me...

Principal Dr. Siddharth Kamble trusted me enough to promptly sanction the book when I approached him with a proposal. He also gave me complete freedom to shape it as I thought fit. I am extremely grateful to him.

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I thank Zubaan for granting permission to reproduce parts from the book 'We Also Made History'*. I also take this opportunity to thank my friend, Medha Kotwal Lele of Aalochana, for facilitating and fast-tracking the permission from Zubaan.

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I cannot end without placing on record my indebtedness to my good friend; Dr. Uday Mehta - retd. vice-principal of Mithibai college and HOD, Sociology; for inspiring me with his own writings and praxis.

Lalitha Dhara.

June 2010

* For complete details of this book, see page 50

*This book is dedicated to
the great emancipator of women
Bharat Ratna
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar
and
to women, everywhere
struggling for emancipation*

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is hailed by many names. He is variously known as architect of the Indian Constitution, messiah of the downtrodden, intellectual giant among giants, eminent jurist, erudite scholar but not many are aware of his commitment to the Women's Cause. For instance, how many people know that way back in 1928, as a member of the Legislative Council of Bombay, he supported the bill for paid maternity leave for working women? Or for that matter that in 1938, as Member of the Legislative Assembly of Bombay, he recommended that birth control facilities be made available for women? (See Appendix 1)

This booklet attempts to highlight Babasaheb's commitment and contribution to gender equality through his own writings and speeches as well as through others' contributions.

Dr. Ambedkar occupies a pride of place in Indian Feminist Historiography. This perspective is brought forth by Pushpa Bhawe in her Overview.

As the chief architect of the Constitution of newly formed independent India, Babasaheb made several provisions to safeguard women's rights, putting them at par with men. Finding a huge gap between the constitutional guarantees for gender equality and the existing Hindu laws governing women's lives, he sought to bridge it through the Hindu Code Bill (HCB). The historic role played by Dr. Ambedkar in introducing the HCB in Parliament in 1947 is well known but how many know of his uphill struggle and ultimate failure to have it passed or that, in utter disgust, he resigned as Law Minister mainly over this issue? All this and more is brought out in the article 'Ambedkar's Quest for Gender Equality' by Dr. Suresh Mane. His presentation is supplemented by the reproduction of relevant articles \ sections of the Indian Constitution that are pro-women, in Appendix 2

Babasaheb's writings are a testimony to his deep understanding about the interface between caste and gender. Through his epochal works - Rise and fall of Hindu women, Castes in India, The woman and the counter-revolution - Dr. Ambedkar has clearly

established the link between control and suppression of women's sexuality and maintenance of caste purity. He saw Manu's laws as instrumental in keeping women in a subordinate position and drafted the Hindu Code Bill to counter them. This is the perspective put forth in the article, 'Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Question of Women's Liberation in India' by Pratima Pardeshi but she takes pains to point out that the Bill was never conceived by Dr. Ambedkar as an end in itself but rather as a beginning.

It is interesting that while Mane sees the Hindu Code Bill as an instrument used to bridge the gap between constitutional guarantees provided for women under the new Constitution and their lived-in realities, Pardeshi sees it as a counter to the casteist, patriarchal laws of Manu.

Whichever way you look at it, the Draft Hindu Code Bill by Dr. Ambedkar was a masterstroke of social engineering with far reaching consequences. The salient features of the HCB, as presented by Dr. Ambedkar in Parliament and extracts from his historic resignation letter when it failed to pass through is reproduced in Appendix 3

Babasaheb did not mince words when it came to denouncing Manu in the strongest possible terms for his patriarchal prescriptions. Nor did he fail to appreciate the freedom granted to women during Kautilya's time. Readers can appreciate this for themselves from a reproduction titled 'Dr. Ambedkar on position of Hindu women' given in Appendix 4

One would be mistaken in thinking that Babasaheb was content in taking up cudgels on behalf of Hindu women alone. This is apparent from the anguish expressed by him at the situation of women living under Muslim laws in India as also his critique of the purdah system and how it affects Muslim women adversely. This is reproduced in Appendix 5 under the title 'Dr. Ambedkar on position of Muslim women' and is a moving testimony to Dr. Ambedkar's deep concern about women's position in society and should be read, understood and appreciated in that light.

Babasaheb understood that suppression and subordination of women was central to the maintenance of caste hierarchy and therefore women would necessarily have to be in the forefront in the struggle to liberate themselves from caste as well as gender oppression. His speeches at different women's gatherings reinforce this view. He held that the struggle for liberation of women was an intrinsic part of the struggle against the oppressive, hierarchically graded caste system. He encouraged the formation of women's organizations and took a keen interest in them. In turn, women responded massively to his call to educate, agitate and organize. They listened to his speeches spellbound and tried to incorporate his advice. All this is vividly brought out in the article – Women in the Ambedkarite Movement by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, ably translated by Dr. Wandana Sonalkar.

An extract from Babasaheb's speeches at women's gatherings would help us understand and appreciate his passionate involvement with the Women's Question. The text of one such speech delivered before a large gathering of 'untouchable' women during the Mahad Satyagraha is reproduced in Appendix 6

It was not just Babasaheb who impacted women in myriad ways but vice versa too. The All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference was held in Nagpur on 20th July, 1942. Among the resolutions that were passed was the right to divorce of both men and women and a ban on polygamy. The Conference also demanded fair working conditions for workers – both men and women. When Dr. Ambedkar became Labour Member in the Executive Committee of the Viceroy between 1942 - 1946, he saw to it that these demands were legally implemented. This clearly demonstrates how seriously he took the women's cause! He admitted to as much in a letter dated 3rd August 1942, to a functionary of the All-India Depressed Classes Conference. 'The Women's Conference has made a great impression on me', he confessed in his letter.

We cannot afford to forget some significant dates with history. These are given in Appendix 7

When expounding on women's situation, Babasaheb displayed a rare sensitivity and extraordinary perception. This is evident from his quotations relating to gender, presented at the beginning of each article.

Through this booklet, I have tried to present a comprehensive picture of Babasaheb's mighty contribution to the cause of Indian women's liberation. I sincerely hope I have succeeded in my mission.

The Women Development Cell, Dr. Ambedkar college unit has embarked on a rather ambitious project of bringing out a series of booklets on the 'Women's Question' in the Indian context to place at the disposal of teachers of Humanities, Gender and Foundation Courses at the undergraduate level so that our students become aware of our feminist heritage and history.

This is the first in the series. Hopefully, others will follow...

Signing off on this positive note,

Happy and fruitful reading!

Lalitha Dhara.

NB : Despite my best efforts to make this booklet error-free some mistakes, by omission and commission, must surely have crept in. My apologies for the same. I welcome your feedback, comments, suggestions on my maiden effort. You can send your feedback to my email address: lalid02@yahoo.com

From time immemorial man as compared with woman has had the upper hand. He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman, his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions - religious, social or economic. But man as a maker of injunctions is most often above them all.

- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

AN OVERVIEW

Pushpa Bhawe

AMBEDKAR AND WOMEN QUESTION

A FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVE

Women question was much discussed in India during the British period. The discussion goes on even today. Every decade has its cultural context, historical perception and immediacy of political debate.

It would be appropriate to start by remembering Jotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule. It was in 1848 that they launched the first girls' school. Late 19th century and early 20th century is generally described as a period of reforms, some even use the nomenclature of renaissance or enlightenment project, yet when one looks back at the period from Women's History standpoint, one has to differentiate between family reforms conceived by the higher caste, middle class reformers and "Bahujanvadi" outlook of Jotiba Phule and his Satyashodhak workers.