

Beyond Caste: Ambedkar's Quest for Gender Justice

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's multifaceted pursuit of gender justice as a central component of his vision for an egalitarian India. As a jurist and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar identified the deep-seated oppression of women as being fundamentally linked to the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of the caste system. This paper argues that his efforts to empower women were not a secondary concern but a core pillar of his broader anti-caste movement. The analysis focuses on several key areas of his work, beginning with his tireless campaign for the Hindu Code Bill, Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, The Adoption and Maintenance Act, The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, pose a radical challenge to religious patriarchy that sought to grant women fundamental rights regarding marriage, divorce, property inheritance, and guardianship. The paper also explores his emphasis on female education as a crucial tool for self-reliance and consciousness-raising. Finally, it highlights the constitutional safeguards he helped enshrine, such as Articles 14 and 15, which prohibit gender-based discrimination and lay the legal groundwork for gender equality. By synthesizing his legal reforms, constitutional provisions, and social ideals, this paper demonstrates that Ambedkar's quest for gender justice was a comprehensive, lifelong struggle to dismantle both caste- and gender-based hierarchies. His legacy provides a powerful framework for contemporary feminist discourse and legal activism in India, underscoring the interconnectedness of social, political, and gender liberation.

INTRODUCTION

There is a prominent unevenness in the way Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been received not only by the history but also in the contemporary. Though he is celebrated as the father of India's Constitution and the crucial voice of Dalit emancipation, but he is seldom acknowledged as a thinker who placed the women and their status at the very centre of his social analysis. If his writings are read carefully starting from the early sociological essays of his Columbia years to the legislative battles of his tenure as Law Minister, one will encounter a sustained, and also sometimes contradictory, argument that caste oppression and gender oppression are not parallel problems that require separate remedies but a single, intertwining system that must be dismantled together.

This paper attempts to locate Ambedkar properly within the field of gender studies, a placement that has been too long deferred. It does so across four interconnected arguments. The first concerns the theoretical framework Ambedkar constructed: his analysis of caste as a system fundamentally organised around the control of women's bodies, which gives his work an intersectional character well before that term was available to intellectual history. The second concerns the Hindu Code Bill, the most ambitious legislative programme for gender justice that independent India had seen, and the story of how it was first resisted, then gutted, and what that story tells us about the relationship between constitutional promise and social reality. The third—and perhaps most overdue—concerns the Dalit feminist intellectual tradition that Ambedkar's thought helped to ignite: the writers and scholars, almost all women, who have taken his foundational insights and carried them into territory he himself never fully explored. The fourth concerns the honest reckoning that any serious engagement with Ambedkar and gender must eventually undertake: the places where his thinking was incomplete, where its assumptions about women's roles remained shaped by the patriarchal world he was trying to dismantle.

Engaging with all the four arguments is a conviction with regard to what it means to indulge seriously with a thinker's legacy. However, it does not mean considering his words as settled authority. Infact, it means following the implications of his best insights much further than he himself went, and thereby identifying and naming the

points where those insights faltered with the belief that having an intellectual honesty is a more essential as a form of respect than reverence.

Caste, Gender, and the Body: Ambedkar's Structural Insight

When Ambedkar stepped before Alexander Goldenweiser's seminar at Columbia University in May 1916 to deliver what would become "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development," he was twenty-four years old, newly arrived from a world in which his caste had determined almost everything about his life's possibilities.¹ What he offered his audience was not a sociological survey of caste practices but a theory of caste's origins—and that theory turned on a single, arresting observation. Caste, he argued, could not sustain itself through ideology alone. It required a biological mechanism, and that mechanism was endogamy: the insistence that marriage occur only within the group. Everything else that scholars had described as characteristic of caste—its hierarchy, its ritual pollution, its hereditary occupations—was downstream of this one practice. And endogamy, in turn, required the management of women's reproductive and sexual lives with a control so total that it produced its own violent institutional repertoire: child marriage to prevent widows before they could become a demographic problem, the immolation of widows to eliminate them entirely, the enforced celibacy of those who survived, the prohibition on remarriage to prevent the mixing of bloodlines.

The implications of this analysis are far more radical than they might initially appear. If the existence and maintenance of caste is possible, predominantly by controlling women's sexuality, then women are not merely the victims of caste, but they are its primary structural mechanism. As per Ambedkar, a caste society is built on and through the female body. This thereby also means that the fight against caste cannot treat gender inequality as a secondary concern that needs to be addressed once the main battle is won! Infact the two are not sequential, rather they are simultaneous. A liberation movement that emancipates Dalit men from the clutches of humiliations around untouchability while leaving Dalit women subject to patriarchal control, in any meaningful sense, has not defeated caste. Essentially, it has merely rearranged who exercises control over women.

This structural insight has been found in a speech of Ambedkar, in its most direct political expression, that he has given in 1927, at a gathering of around three thousand Dalit women in Mahad. In the same year and at the same place he led the famous march to the Chavadar tank. The women who had gathered to hear the man they called Babasaheb, had been offered what was less a rousing address than a statement of principle. Ambedkar said that he measured the progress of any community not by the achievements of its men but by the degree to which its women had advanced. The remark was not a rhetorical embellishment but it was an explicit claim about what progress means when one understands that fundamentally caste operates through gender. He argued that a community whose women remain subordinated has not broken the logic of caste, it has rather internalised and reproduced it under a new management.

In 1936, after nine years, Ambedkar made the same point with more force by pointing at the rituals that has been eulogised for long. While addressing an audience of devadasis and joginis (women who had been given to temples in childhood, consecrated to divine service, and made sexually available to upper-caste village elites throughout their adult lives), he named what had been named for centuries only in euphemism. He argued that these women were not servants of god, but infact they were victims of a system that used religious sanction to provide a permanent supply of lower-caste women for upper-caste male desire. His call to them was not only to convert to Buddhism or to join the political movement, it was to refuse the religious frame that made their exploitation a matter of cosmic duty rather than a systemic human violence.

What does it mean to set this analysis along with the Western feminist theory, whereas Ambedkar is being rarely read alongside? In 1949, when Simone de Beauvoir argued that womanhood is not a biological given but a social construction imposed through institutions, custom and ideology, she was making a claim that had revolutionary implications for European thought. If we look at Ambedkar's arguments, then we will find that had made a structurally comparable claim more than three decades earlier, not about womanhood in the abstract but about the specific form that women's subordination takes in a society organised by caste. Where de Beauvoir described the general mechanism, Ambedkar named the particular engine. And where Judith Butler, writing in 1990, would argue that gender is produced and reproduced through repeated performances that acquire the appearance of naturalness, Ambedkar pointed to the specific institutions—the Manusmriti, the practice of endogamy, the

architecture of Hindu personal law—that scripted those performances and punished deviation from them with extraordinary violence. These are not equivalent projects, but they are projects that illuminate each other, and the conversation between them, so rarely staged in scholarship, is long overdue.

Women Writing Themselves: The Dalit Feminist Autobiographical Tradition

There is a risk, when a male thinker's ideas about women's liberation become the organizing framework for historical inquiry, that the women themselves get reduced to the status of evidence. They appear as beneficiaries of his thought, or as its validation, or as its limitation—but rarely as thinkers in their own right whose accounts of their own lives constitute knowledge, and not merely data. One of the most important corrections that recent scholarship has made to earlier treatments of Ambedkar and gender is to insist that Dalit women's writing must be read as exactly that: not as illustration but as theory, not as testimony merely but as argument about how the world works.

The tradition of Dalit women's autobiography in Marathi is one of the most remarkable bodies of writing to emerge from twentieth-century India, and it remains far less read in gender studies circles than it deserves.

Baby Kamble's memoir *Jina Amucha*—published in Marathi in 1986 and translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* in 2008—is where this tradition finds its most sustained and searching early voice. Kamble was a Mahar woman from a village in Maharashtra who was born into a world in which her community's poverty was not economic misfortune but a social design. Mahars were prohibited from certain wells, roads, a most forms of economic participation and the enforcement of these prohibitions were inseparable from the management of Mahar women's bodies and labour. Her memoir documents this world with the precision that comes from the lived experience that she has gone through for decades, before she found the language and courage to express it by writing it down.

Ambedkar's teachings gave Kamble and her community not simply political consciousness in the abstract, but those gave her a way of understanding that suffering which had seemed natural and had been endured as fate or divine will, was in fact historical, institutional, and therefore changeable and could be abandoned. The prisons of her title are real: the prisons of poverty, of ritual humiliation, of bodily vulnerability. But they are also epistemological prisons, prisons of shame and of the belief that one deserves one's degradation. Ambedkar broke the second kind of prison before the first; he gave Dalit communities, and Dalit women in particular, the intellectual tools to name their oppression as oppression.

Yet Kamble's memoir is also honest about something that more celebratory accounts of the Ambedkarite movement tend to obscure. The movement's formal structures—its public meetings, its newspapers like *Mook Nayak* and *Bahishkrit Bharat*, its organisations and conferences—were overwhelmingly male spaces. Women participated, often crucially, in the everyday labour that kept those structures running: cooking for gatherings, raising funds, carrying the movement's culture into domestic life, raising children in its values. But the conversations about the movement's direction, its priorities, its theory, were conversations between men. And within the households of the movement's members, the relations between husbands and wives, between fathers and daughters, between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, often reproduced the hierarchies of gender that Ambedkar's formal ideology condemned. The gap between principle and practice—between what the movement said it stood for and what it actually did inside its own households—is one of the most important and least discussed features of Dalit liberation politics.

Shantabai Kamble's autobiography, *Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (1985)—whose title might be rendered in English as *The Fractured Story of My Life*—is less widely read than Baby Kamble's memoir but in some respects more searching in its critique. Shantabai writes from inside the contradiction that Baby Kamble gestures toward: she is a woman shaped by Ambedkarian values, committed to the movement's goals, and simultaneously subject to forms of domestic subordination that the movement had not equipped its male members to recognise, let alone to relinquish. Her text enacts what it describes as the exhausting labour of holding together a commitment towards a collective liberation and the daily reality of gendered constraint within the very community that claimed liberation as its goal.

Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's collaborative project *Aamhihi Itihas Ghadavla*, translated as *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (Zubaan, 2008), approaches this terrain from a different angle. Rather than a personal memoir, it is an act of collective historical recovery: Pawar and Moon set out to document the participation of women in the Ambedkarite movement through oral history interviews and archival research, because they had noticed that the movement's official histories had largely forgotten them. Women who had walked in marches, staffed offices, run schools, organised conversions to Buddhism, and sustained the movement's social fabric across decades appeared, if at all, as footnotes to narratives centred on men. Pawar's own memoir, *Aaydan* (2003; translated as *The Weave of My Life*, 2008), extends this recovery to her own experience: the title's image of weaving catches something essential about the kind of labour—patient, intricate, invisible—that women brought to a movement that has remembered its men and forgotten its women.

From Tamil Nadu, Bama's *Karukku* (1992; translated 2000) arrives at comparable insights from a different direction.³ Bama is a Dalit woman from a Paraiyar community that converted to Christianity, and her memoir is set against the institutional structures of the Catholic Church rather than the Hindu caste system—though the two turn out to be less different than one might hope. What *Karukku* contributes to the conversation about Ambedkar and gender is, precisely, its distance from Ambedkar. Bama does not invoke him; she does not situate herself within an Ambedkarian liberation framework. Her analysis of her own oppression draws instead on her reading of liberation theology, on her own embodied experience of caste-gender intersection, and on a scepticism toward institutional religion—any institutional religion—that has no obvious parallel in Ambedkar's thought. The result is a text that confirms many of Ambedkar's structural insights while refusing the authority of his prescribed solutions. It is a useful reminder that Dalit women's intellectual and political self-understanding exceeds any single tradition, however powerful.

When read together, these texts constitute more than a literary tradition. These texts are a continuous argument about the relationship between Ambedkar's theory and the lives of the women whose liberation, the theory that was partly designed to secure. These narratives and expressions gathered in these texts, confirm his structural analysis. The experiences they document are precisely the experiences that Ambedkar's theory would predict. Moreover, they complicate his prescriptions about the liberation of those women that are sought, required more than legal reform and political mobilisation. It infact pointed out that it required transformations in intimate life, in the distribution of domestic labour, in the cultures of Dalit households, which the movement's formal politics had failed to address adequately.

From Testimony to Theory: Rege, Guru, and Arya

The autobiographical tradition poses the question — how do Dalit women's experiences become knowledge, and on whose terms? The most rigorous theoretical treatment is received from the work of Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru, who transformed what had been a body of literary testimony into a set of explicitly philosophical claims about standpoint, authority, and the politics of knowledge.

The article published in the Economic and Political Weekly in 1995, titled "Dalit Women Talk Differently," opened a debate that has not fully closed yet. The argument was precise and uncomfortable: upper-caste feminist scholars in India had, over the preceding decades, accumulated authority in the field of women's studies by making Dalit women's lives the object of their research. They had interviewed Dalit women, published about Dalit women, and built academic careers on the insights those interviews produced—while those women themselves remained on the margins of academic institutions, rarely cited as theorists, rarely invited to the conferences where the theories derived from their experiences were debated. Rege and Guru named this as a structural problem, not a matter of individual scholars' good or bad intentions. It was a reproduction, within feminist academic practice, of the very hierarchy that feminism claimed to oppose.

Rege developed this argument at length in her 2006 monograph *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (Zubaan), which remains the most important single work of Dalit feminist theory produced in India.⁴ Drawing on the Latin American feminist tradition of the testimonio, Rege argued that Dalit women's autobiographical writings are not documents waiting to be interpreted by theorists equipped with the right conceptual tools. They are themselves theoretical acts: they advance claims about how caste and gender work, about what constitutes evidence of oppression, about what counts as a political struggle, that should be treated

with the same seriousness that the academic field treats the claims of scholars working in European theoretical traditions. The insistence here is not merely ethical—it is epistemological. Rege is arguing that scholarship on Dalit women that does not engage with Dalit women as producers of knowledge is not simply incomplete. It is, in a specific technical sense, wrong: it will systematically misrepresent the phenomena it claims to study, because it lacks the vantage point from which those phenomena are most fully visible.

Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore's edited collection *Dalit Feminist Theory* (Taylor & Francis, 2020) brought together for the first time a range of writings that could be recognised as constituting a distinct intellectual tradition, with its own genealogy, its own canonical texts, and its own methodological commitments. The collection's framing argument is worth dwelling on. It does not claim that Dalit feminist theory is simply Ambedkarism applied to women's issues, nor that it is Western feminism translated into an Indian idiom. It claims, more ambitiously, that Dalit feminist theory is a new thing: a mode of analysis that cannot be derived from any of its predecessors but emerges from the specific experience of inhabiting, simultaneously, the social positions of lower caste and female in a society that treats both as grounds for systematic degradation. Ambedkar is an essential resource for this tradition as his structural analysis of caste is the indispensable starting point. But at the same time he is one resource among several, and his authority is not final.

It is significant to deal with what this body of scholarship means with regard to locating Ambedkar in gender studies. It could be argued that he cannot be positioned as a founding father who initiated Dalit feminist thought and whose ideas subsequent scholars have simply elaborated. He must be understood as a crucial but also a one of the contributors to an intellectual tradition that women themselves have built, theorised and, in important respects, also revised. Ambedkar, nevertheless, provided the structural analysis of caste as a gendered system and Dalit feminist scholarship provided the standpoint epistemology, the literary archive, and the critique of patriarchy within the liberation movement that his own analysis has left underdeveloped. The relationship is nonetheless one of necessary but unequal partnership.

The Hindu Code Bill: A Feminist Constitutionalism and Its Defeat

With Hindu Code Bill, it is crucial to recognize what Ambedkar was attempting with it, is to understand both the ambition and the tragedy of trying to legislate social transformation in a society that has not yet culturally prepared itself for what the law demands. The Bill was not a modest reform, which Ambedkar drafted and championed as Law Minister from 1947. It was a comprehensive reimagining of the legal framework governing the most intimate domains of Hindu social life involving marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and guardianship. Its aim was not only to reform but also radicalize and dismantle, through the instruments of constitutional law, the patriarchal architecture that Hindu personal law had preserved and considered sacred across centuries.

The Hindu Code Bill that was introduced to the India, had just gained independence and adopted a Constitution that enshrined equality before the law regardless of sex or caste and also had just been scarred by the violence of Partition. It was indeed a moment of extraordinary political possibility and equally extraordinary anxiety about the pace of change. The Bill's opponents were numerous, organised, and influential. They argued that it attacked the foundations of Hindu culture and that it was a Western import unsuited for Indian society. Furthermore they argued that it threatened the stability of the family and therefore the society itself. What they did not say but their arguments made clear, was that the stability they were defending was premised on women's legal incapacity and social subordination.

The specific provisions that Ambedkar was fighting for, is to illuminate the scale of existing inequality. Under the system of property law at that time can be seen that a widow who inherited property from her husband did not own it in any meaningful sense. She could live on its income but could not sell, mortgage or otherwise treat it as her own. After her death it reverted to her husband's male relatives and neither not to her own children or anyone that she might have chosen. The conceptual category that described this arrangement as the "woman's estate," is opposed to the full estate held by men. It is captured in two words, one of a legal philosophy that regarded women as permanent legal minors and on the other as custodians of property that belonged to men. In Parliament, Ambedkar argued for the abolishment of this arrangement with characteristic directness:

Coming to the question of the 'woman's estate', as members of the House will know, under Hindu Law where a woman inherits property she gets only what is called a 'life estate'. She can enjoy the income of the property, but she cannot deal with the corpus of the property except for legal necessity; the property must pass after the death of the woman to the reversioners of her husband. The Bill, here again, introduces two changes. It converts this limited estate into an absolute estate in the property that she inherits and secondly, it abolishes the right of the reversioners to claim the property after the widow. (1995, pg 22)

After marriage, the Bill proposed to end polygamy and introduced the possibility of divorce which are both radical departures from the existing legal framework and proposed to eliminate caste as a legal precondition for a valid marriage. The last of these was perhaps the most structurally significant, since inter-caste marriage was the practice that the entire apparatus of endogamy existed to prevent. Ambedkar was not merely reforming marriage law; he was attacking the biological mechanism by which caste reproduced itself.

The Bill failed—or rather, it was killed by a combination of organised opposition and political abandonment by the leadership of the Congress party, including Nehru, who could read electoral calculations as well as anyone. Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in September 1951, naming the government's failure to pass the Bill as one of his central reasons for leaving. It is worth pausing on the weight of that resignation. This was a man who had spent his life in conditions designed to prevent him from becoming what he had become. He had reached the highest office of his career. And he walked away from it because he believed that the legal emancipation of women was not a matter that could be deferred for reasons of political convenience.⁵

The Bill was eventually passed in the mid-1950s, but in four separate, considerably diluted acts rather than as the unified code Ambedkar had envisioned. Feminist scholars have noted that the dilution was not random: the provisions that were weakened or dropped tended to be those that most directly threatened the property interests of upper-caste landowning families. Women from landless and labouring communities, for whom the inheritance provisions would have been most transformative, were the least served by what finally became law. The story of the Hindu Code Bill is thus, among other things, a lesson in how formal legal progress can be structured to reproduce the advantages of those who already hold them.

The Limits of the Liberator: Shailja Paik's Critical Reading

There is a temptation, in any account of a thinker who has been systematically underestimated and who belongs to a community that has suffered historical injustice, to protect him from criticism. That temptation should be resisted. Ambedkar himself, who spent his life demolishing the sacred cows of Hindu orthodoxy and who was contemptuous of arguments that deferred to tradition or sentiment rather than reason and evidence, would likely have had little patience for scholarship that deferred to him on similar grounds. The most rigorous—and in this sense the most respectful—engagement with his gender thought is one that is willing to identify where it fell short.

The scholar who has done this most carefully and most generously is Shailja Paik, whose research on Dalit women's educational histories in postcolonial Pune has produced what is now an essential body of work for anyone thinking seriously about Ambedkar and gender. Paik's method is both empirical and textual: she conducted extensive oral history interviews with Dalit women across generations in Pune, and she read those accounts alongside a careful re-reading of Ambedkar's own writings on education and women's emancipation. What she found, though was productive but a troubling tension.

On the productive side, Ambedkar's insistence on education as the primary instrument of Dalit emancipation had material consequences for women. The schools, hostels and institutions that he helped to establish and the cultural value which he attached to the educated community members, did create pathways into formal schooling for Dalit girls and women at the crucial time when almost every other social institution conspired to keep them out of those. The women that Paik interviewed remembered this or their mothers and grandmothers remembering it with a gratitude that was not nostalgic idealization but accurate historical recognition of how much had actually changed.

On the other hand, the troubling side of Paik's reading of Ambedkar's texts revealed something that celebratory accounts of his feminism consistently overlooked. It is that his vision of educated Dalit women was not simply a vision of women's autonomous development. At least in part it was a vision of women as vehicles for community improvement, educated mothers who would raise educated children, educated wives who would support educated husbands, educated women who would embody and transmit the values of the movement's culture and structure. In this framework, women's education was instrumentally valuable rather than intrinsically so. The goal was to create an emancipated community and women must be educated in order to realize that goal. It is also because their own capacities and aspirations deserved development for their own sake.

The distinction matters because it determines what kind of feminist Ambedkar was. This is a kind of feminism that values women's education primarily for its social utility as it produces better mothers, better wives and better citizens and thereby it is structurally different from one that values it because women's intellectual and personal flourishing is an unconditional good. The first treats women's liberation as a means to an end; the second treats it as an end in itself. Ambedkar's texts, read carefully, tend toward the first position more than the second, and this tendency is not incidental. It reflects assumptions about women's primary social roles—as reproducers and nurturers of community—that Ambedkar shared with his era more than he may have realised.

Paik's second and perhaps more politically difficult critique concerns the question of sexual autonomy. Ambedkar had identified, with greater analytical precision than almost any of his contemporaries, the mechanisms through which caste society made lower-caste women sexually available to upper-caste men: the devadasi system, the conventions of rural social life that treated Dalit women's bodies as accessible without consequence, the absence of legal protections that would have required upper-caste men to answer for the violence they committed. His 1936 speech to devadasis was, in this respect, a genuine act of courage—a public naming of what had been publicly unspeakable.

Yet what Paik and other feminist critics observe is that even at his most outspoken on these matters, Ambedkar tended to frame Dalit women's sexual vulnerability as a problem of community dignity rather than individual bodily autonomy. The harm of the devadasi system, in his account, was partly the harm done to individual women—but it was also, and perhaps primarily, the harm done to the Dalit community's honour, its standing in the social order, its capacity to demand respect. This framework carries a significant cost as whatever its political utility in a given historical moment, it positions women's bodies as bearers of collective honour rather than as the sites of individual persons' rights. However differently motivated, this positioning reproduces a logic which Brahminical patriarchy had long employed that women's sexuality as the measure of the community's worth and the violation of which constitutes an offence against the group rather than against the person.

It is not to conclude that Ambedkar's feminism was merely rhetorical or that his advocacy for women's rights was insincere. In fact the biographical and historical evidence makes such a conclusion untenable. What it does require is that we must understand his feminism as historically situated and therefore limited in specific ways, the methods that the Dalit women who came after him have had to work through and work beyond. Therefore that kind of work is itself a form of tribute and thereby more honest and demanding than uncritical celebration.

An Ongoing Inheritance: Ambedkar and Contemporary Dalit Feminist Politics

How Ambedkar's thought lives in contemporary Dalit feminist politics cannot be answered with a singular sentence because the relationship between a founding thinker and the tradition that inherits him is always multiple and often contradictory. Ambedkar is being invoked as authority and subjected to critique simultaneously. He is claimed as liberator and examined as a man of his time as well as honoured as the architect of constitutional rights and pressed to answer for the gaps in unfulfilled rights. But this complexity is not at all a failure of consistency within Dalit feminist politics, rather it is a sign of intellectual seriousness.

The constitutional framework that Ambedkar has created especially Article 17 that abolishes untouchability, ensures the provisions for affirmative action, the fundamental rights that apply regardless of caste or sex, does provide the primary legal language through which Dalit feminist advocacy still operates. When Dalit women's organisations demand accountability for caste-based sexual violence, press for the implementation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, challenge police impunity in cases of

rape and murder of Dalit women, they do so in the language that Ambedkar's Constitution has made available to us. Without that foundation, the advocacy would lack both its legal standing and moral authority.

At the same time, contemporary Dalit feminist movements are organized on fronts that Ambedkar's generation did not fully anticipate. One of the most significant among these was being the critique of mainstream Indian feminism itself. It was argued that the women's movement that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, despite its progressive commitments, was dominated by upper-caste women who set its agendas, defined the priorities, and controlled all institutional resources. The critique that was theoretically developed by Rege and Guru and then enacted politically by Dalit women's organisations across India are not about the upper-caste feminists are individually malicious. It is around the fact that they occupy positions of institutional power which they have not sufficiently interrogated and also the feminism they practice with all its genuine achievements, systematically ignores the specific vulnerabilities of Dalit women.

In the domain of feminist politics, this critique reflects the broader Dalit critique of Indian liberalism with regard to the formal commitments to equality can coexist with, and even provide cover for, the reproduction of hierarchical social relations. Dalit women who are sexually violated rarely find justice through the same legal system that Ambedkar helped to build, not because the laws are wrong but because the institutions that are supposed to implement them like the police, the courts, the local administration, remain dominated by caste interests that has the ability to override constitutional commitments. The gap between the Constitution's promises and the daily reality of Dalit women's lives is not about the gap that Ambedkar failed to anticipate but it is a gap he was acutely aware of. But bridging and closing those gaps requires sustained political pressure of the kinds that extend well beyond any individual thinker's prescriptions.

The engagement of Dalit feminist scholarship with international theoretical traditions (African American feminist thought, postcolonial theory, Indigenous feminisms) from across the world has been another significant development in the contemporary period. These conversations have been productive precisely because they resist the assumption with regard to the Indian experience of caste-gender intersection which is considered either wholly unique or simply a local variant of racial or gendered oppression as being understood elsewhere. If we look at Patricia Hill Collins's concept of interlocking systems of oppression, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, the decolonial feminism developed in Latin American contexts, we will find that all these provide analytical resources that Dalit feminist scholars have engaged critically and selectively by taking what illuminates and resisting what obscures.

What emerges from all of this is a picture of Ambedkar's legacy in which he remains essential but not sovereign. He is the thinker without whom Dalit feminist thought cannot adequately account for itself. He is also the thinker whose incompleteness created the space—perhaps the necessity—for a tradition of women's thought and women's practice that has gone further than he went, in directions he did not always chart. That is not a diminishment of his achievement. It is, in a sense, its most significant measure.

CONCLUSION

The Unfinished Work

Ambedkar once wrote that a great man is different from an eminent man: the great man is a link in the chain of an idea, not its beginning or its end. The remark is worth applying to himself. His contribution to gender thought was not the origination of an analysis that subsequent scholars merely elaborated. It was the articulation of a structural insight—that caste and gender co-constitute each other, that the body of the lower-caste woman is the site on which that co-constitution operates, and that any liberation that does not address both simultaneously is incomplete—that opened a field of inquiry he did not live to finish and that a tradition of Dalit women writers and scholars has been developing ever since.

That tradition—Baby Kamble and Shantabai Kamble writing their lives down in Marathi, Urmila Pawar insisting that women also made the history that men have monopolised, Bama writing her way out of multiple institutional structures at once, Sharmila Rege theorising the conditions under which Dalit women's testimony becomes knowledge, Shailja Paik tracking the gap between Ambedkar's educational prescriptions and the lives of the

women who tried to live them—is not a supplement to Ambedkar's thought. It is its continuation and its critique, the part of the project that he began but could not complete from where he stood, a man shaped by the world he was fighting even as he fought it.

To locate Ambedkar in the field of gender is therefore to position him within a conversation rather than on its head. He was the first person to speak and that too powerfully on the structural connections between caste and gender. He was, then, heard by women who took those connections seriously enough to assert those further than he himself went, that too in the territory of intimate life, domestic labour, sexual autonomy and furthermore what it means for a woman to be the subject of her own emancipation rather than its beneficiary. His analysis helped them to answer their questions, are inseparable from his legacy and irreducible to it.

As a task for scholarship and politics, what remains is to hold both of these things together that is the genuine radicalism of Ambedkar's structural insight which is indispensable, and the genuine incompleteness of his prescriptions that the honest engagement requires us to acknowledge. A scholarship that can do both, it has the ability to honour a thinker's achievement acutely by taking it seriously enough to examine what it left undone which is the kind of scholarship that a figure of Ambedkar's importance deserves.

Endnotes

1. Ambedkar delivered "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" at a seminar organised by Alexander Goldenweiser at Columbia University in May 1916. The paper was subsequently published in the *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XLI, May 1917, pp. 81–95. It remains one of the earliest sociological analyses of caste that foregrounds gender as a structuring principle rather than a secondary concern.
2. Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" appeared in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum* in 1989, more than seven decades after Ambedkar's Columbia paper. The retrospective application of intersectionality to Ambedkar's thought is not a matter of anachronistic projection; rather, it highlights that the structural logic Ambedkar articulated—that caste and gender mutually produce each other—is precisely what intersectionality theory later formalised in a different geographical and racial context.
3. Shoma Sen's essay "The Village and the City: Dalit Feminism in the Autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar" (2019) offers a detailed literary analysis of how both writers negotiate the tension between Ambedkarian liberation ideology and the lived reality of gendered inequality within Dalit communities. Sen argues that both memoirs function as what she calls "testimonies of double witness"—witnessing caste oppression from outside and patriarchal constraint from within.
4. Sharmila Rege's concept of the "testimonio," developed in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (Zubaan, 2006), draws on the Latin American feminist tradition of collective autobiographical utterance, particularly as theorised by John Beverley. Rege's adaptation of the form to the Indian context insists on the irreducibly collective dimension of Dalit women's narratives: these texts speak not merely for individual lives but for the shared experiences of communities whose histories have been systematically excluded from the literary mainstream.
5. The Hindu Code Bill's legislative journey was tortuously protracted. Introduced in 1947, it was referred to a Select Committee that sat for years and produced extensive minority dissents. Ambedkar's resignation letter to Prime Minister Nehru, dated 27 September 1951, explicitly named the government's handling of the Bill—and Prime Minister Nehru's failure to schedule adequate parliamentary time for it—as among the primary reasons for his departure. The letter is reproduced in full in Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 504–508.

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