



### TOWARDS INCLUSIVE GROWTH: AMBEDKAR'S GENDER EQUALITY IDEALS IN 19TH CENTURY INDIA

**Dr. (Mrs.) Sanghamitra Mishra**

*Associate Professor*

*Department of Business Economics.*

*SIWS N.R. Swamy College of Commerce and Economics*

*Smt. Thirumalai College of Science*

#### Abstract:

*The present study aims to explore and analyse Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision, ideas, and policy prescriptions concerning emancipation and empowerment of the deprived class of society, situating them within his social, economic and political framework. Ambedkar's thoughts on the issues are not isolated but deeply embedded in his larger vision of societal transformation. His ideas were shaped through a prolonged cognitive process, which was influenced by his experiences of caste-based discrimination and the social surroundings of his upbringing. Significant early influences included his father, who instilled in him a deep respect for rationality, justice, and the rule of law, and his education at Columbia University, which broadened his intellectual horizon, his perception towards life and his attitudes towards humanity. These experiences collectively shaped Ambedkar into a visionary reformer committed to social justice, particularly for the marginalised, deprived lower caste section of society.*

*Dr Ambedkar envisioned an India where unity could be built through the acceptance of diversity and the recognition of the rights of all communities, especially the underprivileged. His realisation of the divisions in Indian society along caste, gender and religious lines emphasised the need for a representative government that safeguards the rights of various social groups in proportion to their population. His vision laid the foundation for the inclusion of affirmative action and positive discrimination measures in the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar identified inequalities rooted in caste, religion and inherited social status as major barriers to progress. He critically examined Brahminical customs and male-dominated structures that restricted individual freedom, denied property rights to women, and enforced caste-based subordination. Central to his critique was the concept of 'graded inequality'—a hierarchy within the caste system that institutionalised social oppression. Ambedkar proposed and implemented measures to liberate Dalit and underprivileged women from the oppressive structures of caste-based discrimination.*

**Keywords:** *Positive discrimination, Inclusive growth, Gender inequality, Social Justice.*

**Copyright © 2025 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

#### Introduction:

The principle of gender equality is deeply embedded in the Indian Constitution through its Preamble,

Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties, and Directive Principles of State Policy. The Constitution not only assures equality to women but also empowers



the State to implement measures that support positive discrimination. Over time, particularly from the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974–78) onwards, there has been a notable shift in approach from viewing women's issues as matters of welfare to focusing on their development and empowerment. Recognising the critical role of women's empowerment in improving their status, the government has introduced several initiatives. The establishment of the National Commission for Women in 1990 and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1993, which reserved seats for women in local governance, are significant milestones. Despite these efforts, a considerable gap remains between constitutional promises and the actual status of women, as noted by the Department of Women and Child Development.

India remained under British colonial rule for nearly two centuries before gaining independence in 1947. Women's involvement in politics began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, influenced significantly by British imperialism, though in different ways for elite and non-elite women. While elite women were shaped by reformist agendas, non-elite women were driven to resist colonial oppression due to difficult socio-economic conditions such as famine, land confiscation, and heavy taxation. These women actively participated alongside men in famine revolts and other uprisings during the 18th and 19th centuries. Two major movements defined India's path to freedom: the political struggle against British rule and the social reform movement that aimed to transform traditional structures. The national movement, especially under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, played a vital role in bringing large numbers of women into the public sphere. Gandhi emphasised that the fight for women's equality was central to the goal of *Swaraj* (self-rule). His commitment to non-violent satyagraha created a platform where women could engage actively and creatively, breaking away from

the confines of male-dominated political action. The image of women in white khadi sarees became a powerful symbol of the anti-colonial movement, representing their crucial role in India's struggle for independence.

For a long time, people's views about women were based on old traditions and religious beliefs. Even up to the early part of the 20th century, most political and social leaders believed that women were just followers of men. This idea stayed strong until Dr. B. R. Ambedkar spoke out against it. He believed that true progress for women could not happen unless the Hindu religious texts, called Dharma-shastras, were completely rejected. According to him, Hindu women were stuck in superstitions passed down as *sanskaras* (rituals), which they followed throughout their lives.

### Objectives:

1. To explore Dr. Ambedkar's efforts in empowering women through education.
2. To assess Ambedkar's contributions to the social liberation and advancement of women.
3. To examine the various strategies and measures implemented for the emancipation of women.
4. To evaluate Dr. Ambedkar's role in establishing constitutional rights and safeguards for women.

### Empowering Women through Education:

According to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, education was not just a way for women to build their personality or earn a living. He saw it as a powerful tool to bring about social change. Dr. Ambedkar believed that education was the foundation for igniting a social movement in modern times. It was a means to free women from ignorance, illiteracy and superstitions. Through education, he believed women could gain the strength to fight against injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the dominance of the upper castes.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar founded Siddharth College in Bombay in 1945 and Milind College in Aurangabad in 1951 to provide higher education to women belonging



to the Depressed Classes and to involve them in managing these institutions. He believed that organised efforts were important to advance his movement. Dr. Ambedkar viewed education as essential for everyone, regardless of their social or economic background. He emphasised that all men and women should receive at least a basic education so they could read and write. Primary education, he believed, met the basic needs of the masses. His vision encouraged the untouchables and women to understand their identity, history and place in society.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar believed that education should help students think critically about their situation. He felt that education should be scientific, fair and unbiased. In higher education, Ambedkar supported giving teachers the freedom to create their syllabi and assess students on their terms. He was against strict and rigid course structures. He also believed that universities should focus on promoting learning and research, not just on holding exams and giving degrees.

To improve the education of the deprived section of society, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar founded the People's Education Society on 8 July 1945. He believed that political power was necessary for Dalits and deprived women to break the barriers created by the Brahminical social system. To prepare them for political participation, he founded the Independent Labour Party in 1936 and the Scheduled Caste Federation in 1942. He encouraged Dalits to become a ruling class, as he believed political freedom was key to ending caste-based oppression.

### **The Social Liberation and Advancement of Women:**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar ultimately succeeded in securing legal rights of equality and social justice for the untouchables, other exploited communities and deprived women. This remarkable achievement was mainly the result of his tireless efforts and dedication

to creating a path for inclusion. Through his work, he gave a voice to those who had been oppressed and treated as subhuman for centuries. Because of his contributions, Ambedkar is rightly regarded as the liberator of the untouchables and tribal people of India. At times, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was seen as aggressive, arrogant, and highly uncompromising in his approach. He often chose to stay away from the mainstream freedom movement, as he felt its leadership was largely dominated by upper-caste individuals. Ambedkar believed that the concerns of the untouchables and women were not genuinely addressed by the national leaders. Their efforts towards social justice were marginal.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar actively used platforms like his newspapers *Mook Nayak* (Mute Leader) (1920) and *Bahiskrit Bharat* (Outcaste India) (1927) to emphasise the importance of female education and to mobilise women as integral participants in the struggle for social justice. Through these publications, Ambedkar took on the responsibility of awakening the consciousness of the oppressed. While he acknowledged the social reform movements led by figures like Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, he felt that political action was more effective than religious reform in challenging the deep-rooted caste system. With journals like *Janata* (1930), later renamed *Prabuddha Bharat* (Awakened India) in 1956, he educated people on various social, political, and economic issues. His writings, filled with rationalism and humanism, brought about a revolutionary change in the mindset of the deprived and discriminated class like never before.

Ambedkar publicly burned the 'Manu Smriti', condemning its role in perpetuating caste and gender discrimination. This historic event, witnessed by over fifty women, Ambedkar never viewed women as passive recipients of reform; rather, he considered



them as empowered individuals capable of shaping their futures.

Traditional Indian texts often portrayed women through an essentialist lens, emphasising their roles as devoted, self-sacrificing figures while occasionally casting them as rebellious or dangerous. In contrast, women were largely defined by their biological roles and their presumed destiny to serve in subordinate, supportive capacities. Dr Ambedkar was against the traditional role of women as depicted in the *Manu Smriti* and *Dharma Sastra*. He always emphasised inclusive growth.

### **The various strategies and measures implemented for the emancipation of women:**

For Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the issues of caste and gender were deeply intertwined, each reinforcing the other within the structure of social inequality. He argued that caste is sustained through the practice of endogamy, which not only dictates who one can marry but also regulates and controls women's sexuality and mobility. Ambedkar viewed the institution of marriage as central to the reproduction of caste hierarchies, maintained through gendered violence and ritual exclusion. He challenged dominant religious texts and traditions, exposing how they contributed to the subjugation of women and the perpetuation of caste-based discrimination.

A women's association was founded in Bombay in January 1928, with Ramabai, Ambedkar's wife, as its president, marking a significant step in the formal inclusion of women in the struggle for social justice. This involvement grew steadily, with women not only attending major events but also organising their parallel conferences to address gender-specific concerns. Their participation was especially visible during the historic Kalaram Temple entry movement in Nasik, launched in March 1930, where around 500 women joined the non-violent Satyagraha, many facing arrest alongside their male counterparts. They

also formed the Samata Sainik Dal group to promote equality by encouraging efforts at the grassroots level. When Ambedkar returned from the Round Table Conference in 1932, women were actively present at committee meetings, demonstrating their deep engagement with political developments. In a powerful 1931 press conference, Radhabai Vadale voiced the collective resolve of these women, declaring their demand for both social and political rights and expressing a fearless willingness to be imprisoned and violence in the fight for their own dignity. Her vehement words— "It is better to die a hundred times than live a life full of humiliation"—Reflected the resilience and defiance that women contributed to Ambedkar's movement.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strongly contested the ideal of womanhood as prescribed by the *Manu Smriti*, a text he saw as central to the institutionalisation of women's subordination. In his works 'The Woman and Counter Revolution' and 'The Riddle of Women', Dr Ambedkar argued that women in pre-Manu times enjoyed greater respect, autonomy, and rights. Citing the Baudhayana Grihya Sutras, he noted that during the era of Kautilya, post-puberty marriages were customary, and menstruation was acknowledged in marriage rituals, indicating a more natural and respectful approach to women's bodies. Unlike Manu, Kautilya advocated for monogamous unions and recognised a woman's right to seek divorce on grounds such as mutual enmity—principles that reflected a more egalitarian social order. Moreover, widow remarriage was accepted, and economic independence for women was protected through provisions related to endowments and maintenance. According to Ambedkar, the decline in the status of Indian women began with the imposition of Manu's codes, which institutionalised patriarchal norms, denied women legal and social autonomy, and relegated them to a



position of subservience within the caste and gender hierarchies.

### **Constitutional Rights and Safeguards for Women:**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played an important role as the principal architect of the Constitution of Independent India. While he was the driving force behind its creation, he was also advised and supported by two other key leaders, Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel, who helped conceptualise the basic principles, provisions, and objectives of the Constitution. One of the most significant moments for Ambedkar came when the resolutions on Directive Principles and Fundamental Rights were adopted by the Constituent Assembly. Article 15 of the Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, marked a monumental achievement for Ambedkar and solidified his legacy as a champion of social justice and equality.

Dr Ambedkar's commitment to gender justice was most powerfully demonstrated during the debates on the Hindu Code Bill. As the first Law Minister of independent India and a key architect of the Constitution, Ambedkar viewed the Hindu Code Bill as a crucial extension of his constitutional work, so much so that he famously stated it was as important as drafting the Constitution itself.

For Ambedkar, political and economic rights enshrined in a secular Constitution were incomplete without addressing the entrenched social and religious inequalities that continued to oppress women, particularly within Hindu society. He was acutely aware that existing Hindu personal laws, especially those governing inheritance and succession, institutionalised discrimination against women and reinforced patriarchal norms. Ambedkar envisioned the Hindu Code Bill as a foundational step toward dismantling these inequalities and reforming Hindu society from within.

The Hindu Code Bill, which represented the most significant achievement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's struggle for gender justice, introduced several transformative provisions aimed at securing legal and social equality for Hindu women. The Bill covered a wide range of personal laws, including property rights, the order of succession, maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption, minority, and guardianship. Among the most significant proposals were: the abolition of the birthright to property and the traditional rule of survivorship, which had excluded women. Granting daughters an equal, half-share in inheritance. Converting a woman's limited estate into an absolute one and thereby giving her full control over her property. Abolishing caste restrictions in marriage and adoption promotes a more egalitarian social structure. Additionally, the Bill endorsed the principles of monogamy and legal divorce, both of which challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal and religious norms. These proposed reforms were not just legal adjustments—they were bold steps toward reshaping Hindu society and affirming women's status as equal citizens under the law. Through this Bill, Ambedkar sought to ensure that women were not just constitutionally equal in theory, but substantively empowered in practice.

Dr. Ambedkar strongly believed that the Hindu Code Bill would bring men and women to an equal footing in legal matters, fundamentally altering the unequal status of women in Hindu society. However, his reform efforts faced significant opposition, both from within the Congress party and from other political groups. The Bill was referred to the Select Committee on April 9, 1948, and its parliamentary debates stretched for over four years, becoming the longest discussion on any single Bill in independent India's Parliament. Despite Ambedkar's persistent efforts, he recognised that the Congress government was not fully supportive of the Bill. In a profound act of protest, he





resigned from his position as Law Minister on September 27, 1951, signalling his disillusionment with the lack of political will to push through such transformative legislation. Despite Ambedkar's monumental contributions to improving the status of women, ranging from his critical examination of religious scriptures to his legislative endeavours to ensure gender justice in the Indian Constitution.

He supported the Maternity Benefit Bill, arguing that the welfare of mothers was a national responsibility. He insisted that the government must bear this burden to ensure the well-being of women and children.

### Conclusion:

Dr. Ambedkar's ideas and vision about women's emancipation and empowerment, while significant, are not as clearly articulated or vigorously pursued as his efforts for the emancipation of the untouchables. He often highlighted the shared roots of oppression faced by both women and untouchables, attributing their suffering to the Hindu social order and its deeply entrenched system of graded inequality.

His broader philosophy was centred on human emancipation as a whole, advocating for education, organisation, and agitation as means of empowerment

for all oppressed communities. Ambedkar's ultimate vision was the establishment of equality across social, political, and economic spheres. While his ideological stance on women's rights aligned with that of the untouchables and other depressed classes, the institutionalisation of his policies was more pronounced in the context of the latter. His relentless advocacy for reservations, separate electorates, and other protective measures primarily benefited the untouchables. In contrast, although he supported women's rights, he was not directly responsible for initiating major legal reforms in their favour.

### References:

1. B. R. Ambedkar – *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women* ([www.ambedkar.org](http://www.ambedkar.org))
2. Sharmila Rege – *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (Navayana, 2013)
3. Uma Chakravarty – *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Bhatkal and Sen, 2003)
4. Urmila Pawar & Meenakshi Moon – *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (Zubaan, 2014)

### Cite This Article:

**Dr. (Mrs.) Mishra S. (2025)** *Towards Inclusive Growth: Ambedkar's Gender Equality Ideals in 19th Century India.* In **Electronic International Interdisciplinary Research Journal: Vol. XIV** (Number II, pp. 86–91).