

## The rise and fall of Hindu women

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar not only championed the cause of social justice for the downtrodden and underprivileged sections of Indian society but also worked tirelessly throughout his life to challenge the legitimacy of orthodox Hindu social order that upheld iniquitous gender relations in an institutionalized manner. His mission in life was to reconstruct Hindu society along the modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. His main argument is that gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to confirm to a stereotype feminine behavior.

Exposed to the Western ideas of humanism and rational thinking, Dr. Ambedkar was appalled at the low status of women in the Hindu society. He not only worked hard at the grassroots level to raise awareness about the degraded status of women in India but also wrote extensively to counter the views on gender relations sanctioned by Shastras and upheld by tradition.

Dr. Ambedkar has analyzed the manner in which gender relations are artificially constructed under Hindu social order which not only moulds attitude of Hindus towards their women but also conditions women to confirm to a stereotype feminine behavior. He worked hard to challenge the iniquitous gender relations under the Hindu social order so that Hindu society could be reconstructed along the modern democratic ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity.

He points out that during the pre-Manu days women occupied a very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country. That a woman was entitled to upanayan is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From the Shrauta Shrutis, it is clear that women could repeat the Mantras of the Vedas. Panini's Ashtadhyayi bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul (College) and studied the various Shuklas (sections) of the Vedas. Similarly, Patanjali's MahaBhasya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. Women also entered into public discussion with men on various subjects like religion, philosophy and metaphysics.

The stories of public disputation between Janak and Sulabha, Yajnavalkya and Gargi, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and Sankracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu days could attain the highest pinnacle of learning and education.

In the days of Kautilya, marriages were post puberty is clear from Baudhayanas Grihya Sutras where an expiatory ceremony is specially prescribed in the case of a bride passing her menses on the occasion of her marriage. Unlike Manu, Kautilya's idea of marriage is monogamy and women could also claim divorce on the ground of mutual enmity and hatred. Further, there was no ban on woman or a widow remarrying.

Economic independence was guaranteed to married women during days of Kautilya is clear from the various provisions in Arthashastra relating to wife's endowment and maintenance. Dr. Ambedkar holds that there was a down fall in the status of women in India due to severe restrictions imposed on them by Manu. Dr. Ambedkar viewed caste system and the customary practices associated with it as largely responsible for the degradation of women in contemporary Indian society.

The women in Pre-Manu days enjoyed respectable status in the Hindu society. Women were free and enjoyed equal status along with men in matters of education, divorce, remarriage and economic independence. The deterioration in status of women in the society began with the imposition of severe restrictions on them under the influence of Manusmriti.

Manu held a very low opinion about women. According to Manusmriti, women are not to be trusted for it is in their nature to seduce men. Men are forbidden to sit in a lonely place even with one's mother, sister or daughter. Women are not to be free under any circumstances, day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families; her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Though devoid of virtues, yet a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. Manu did not give right to divorce to women under any circumstance while allowing man to give up his wife at the same time. Indeed man was allowed to

abandon and even sell his wife. Even after repudiation by her husband, she was not released from her husband and could not become legitimate wife of another. A wife could be subjected to corporal punishment by her husband reducing her status to that of a slave. Like Shudras, a woman was forbidden by Manu to study Vedas. Offering sacrifices, the very soul of religion, was forbidden to be performed by women.

In matters of property, a wife was reduced to the level of a slave as she was not allowed to have any dominion over property.<sup>8</sup> Thus, under the influence of Dharamshastras (Manusmriti), women were held in bondage lifelong and were deprived of basic human rights like right to education, right to property and right to study religious scripture.

Dr. Ambedkar points out that Shastras, Caste and Endogamy – the three important pillars of patriarchy in Hindu society – were responsible for discriminatory practice against women and their degradation in social status.

To be continued.

Reference:

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