

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Gendered Nationalism, Egalitarian Revolution

Women in the Political Discourses of Gandhi and
Ambedkar

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how women were positioned in the political discourses of B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi through an analysis of their speeches, articles, and correspondence. Comparisons between these two men have focused on their conflicting views of the Indian caste system. However, both Gandhi and Ambedkar commented extensively on the place of women in Indian society. A comparison of their respective views reveals a shared goal of realising social, political, and legal equality for women. However, they articulated different means of achieving that goal. This dissertation argues that differences between Gandhi's and Ambedkar's respective discourses on women emerged from their divergent political ideologies. Chapter one shows that Gandhi's discourse on women was a complex and fluctuating product of competing influences, including his role as leader of the Indian nationalist movement, the impact of contemporary events, and his tendency toward conservatism. This suggests that his discourse on women was subject to many of the same concerns as his general politics. Chapter two shows that Ambedkar's discourse on women was heavily influenced by his emancipatory, modernising, egalitarian, and social interventionist political ideology. The interface between caste and gender in Ambedkar's writing is also examined. It is argued that he identified correlations between caste and gender-based discriminations. Overall, despite the appearance of similarities between Gandhi's and Ambedkar's respective discourses on women, their respective discourses on women evinced separate influences and ideologies.

Contents

Abstract	3
Contents	5
Introduction	7
Chapter One	15
Chapter Two	27
Conclusion	41
Bibliography	43

Introduction

The early twentieth century saw Indian women moving from the political periphery toward the centre. If the nineteenth century was the ‘period in which the rights and wrongs of women became major issues,’ then the early-twentieth century was the time in which the ‘special category of “women’s activism” was constructed’.¹ Women hewed out a space for themselves in political discourses and demanded increasing attention from Indian political leaders. Mahatma Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar were two leaders whose politics were heavily engaged with women and their place in Indian society.

This dissertation uses two collections of speeches, published articles, and correspondence to examine how women were positioned in the politics and political discourses of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Particular emphasis is placed on the conceptual parallels and continuities that linked their views on women with other aspects of their respective political ideologies. These parallels and continuities reveal that Gandhi’s discourse on women was a complex and changeable product of multiple competing influences, including the demands of his role as leader of the nationalist movement, the pressure of contemporary events, and his latent affinities toward conservative tradition and social inertia. Ambedkar’s discourse on women was more consistent than Gandhi’s, owing to its constant grounding in the modernising, egalitarian, and emancipatory creed that characterised his political career. Both men expressed the importance of social, political, and legal equality for women. However, this paper demonstrates that they proposed different means of achieving those goals.

Gandhi belonged to the Bania caste, a merchant sub-division that falls third in the four-fold *varna* system.² Ambedkar was an Untouchable, the section of Indian society who live outside of the *varna* system. Both men were educated in the West. Gandhi studied at the Inner

¹ R. Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminist in India, 1800-1990*, London, Verso, 1993, p. 1.

² E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2011, p.

Temple, London.³ Ambedkar's prolific education included studies at Elphinstone College, Bombay, Columbia University, New York, and finally, Gray's Inn, London.⁴ This resume was remarkable, considering the severe social disadvantages faced by Untouchables in the early-twentieth century.⁵ Both Gandhi and Ambedkar trained as lawyers. However, legal education seems to have had a greater impact on Ambedkar's political ideology. Indeed, he was, in later years, a strong advocate for interventionist legal remedies in cases of social injustice, while Gandhi preferred to tackle these problems with direct appeals to the national community on moral and religious grounds.⁶ Gandhi was the paramount leader of the nationalist movement from 1920 until shortly before independence in 1947. Ambedkar was the leading architect of the independent Indian constitution, and India's first law minister. He was also the most prominent leader of India's Untouchables from the early 1920s until his death in 1956.⁷ As two of the most important Indian political leaders of the twentieth century,⁸ Gandhi and Ambedkar dominated certain areas of the public discourse. Caste was the primary intersection of their competing views. However, Gandhi and Ambedkar also devoted significant attention to women in their political articulations.

No comparative studies of Gandhi and Ambedkar have addressed their respective views on women. Instead, most have focused on the issue of caste. This historiographical focus is largely the result of Gandhi and Ambedkar's relationship; caste was the principle point of contact between their different politics, and discourse between the two men was dominated by their competing prescriptions for the removal of untouchability from Indian society.⁹ Most accounts see Gandhi and Ambedkar as mutual antagonists and frame their political ideologies

³ R. Gandhi, *Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, his People and an Empire*, New Delhi, Viking, 2006, p. 32.

⁴ D. Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 3rd edn, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1981, pp. 27-37.

⁵ G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, New Delhi, Viking, 2004, pp. 1-19.

⁶ S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 249-250.

⁷ Omvedt, *Ambedkar*, pp. 156-162.

⁸ Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, p. 260.

⁹ Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, pp. 150-177.

as largely incompatible. Joseph Lelyveld describes Ambedkar as irreconcilable to Gandhi.¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee conceptualises the debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar on caste as a contest between the mutually exclusive concepts of national homogeneity and heterogeneous minority citizenship.¹¹ Ambedkar, Chatterjee argues, ‘refused to join Gandhi in performing [national] homogeneity in constitutional negotiations over citizenship’.¹² Rather, he insisted the Untouchables a ‘were a minority within the nation and needed special representation in the political body’.¹³ Harold Coward offers a more moderate assessment, arguing that while Gandhi and Ambedkar differed in their respective approaches to removing untouchability, it is also ‘clear that they needed and benefited from each other’.¹⁴ Ranajit Guha has also attempted a retrospective reconciliation of Gandhi and Ambedkar. He argues that while they were adversaries in life, hindsight suggests their contributions were complementary.¹⁵ Guha emphasises that, inimical discourses and methods aside, they nonetheless shared a common goal of eliminating untouchability. He also rejects recent accounts that represent the conflict between Gandhi and Ambedkar as a ‘fight between a hero and a villain, the writer’s caste position generally determining who gets cast as the hero, who as villain’.¹⁶ He would prefer that both leaders were seen as ‘heroes, albeit tragic ones’.¹⁷ Guha’s work can be interpreted as a rejoinder to writers like Arun Shourie,¹⁸ who emphasises the ideological differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar without stopping to consider the gradations within and between their respective viewpoints. Aakash Singh rejects these attempts to reconcile Gandhi and Ambedkar on caste, which he claims elide crucial differences between their respective methods and

¹⁰ J. Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, p. 227.

¹¹ P. Chatterjee, ‘B. R. Ambedkar and the Troubled Times of Citizenship’, in V. R. Mehta and T. Pantham (ed.), *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2006, pp. 73-93.

¹² Chatterjee, *Political Ideas in Modern India*, p. 83.

¹³ Chatterjee, *Political Ideas in Modern India*, p. 83.

¹⁴ H. G. Coward, *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 63.

¹⁵ R. Guha, ‘Gandhi’s Ambedkar’, in A. Singh and S. Mohapatra (ed.), *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, p. 38.

¹⁶ Guha, *Indian Political Thought*, p. 33.

¹⁷ Guha, *Indian Political Thought*, p. 33.

¹⁸ A. Shourie, *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar, and the facts which have been erased*, New Delhi, ASA Publications, 1997.

motivations. Instead, he argues that homogenisation of their views breaks down ‘if one chooses not to peg emancipation simply to the Gandhian aim of abolition of untouchability, but instead to the Ambedkarian aim of the total annihilation of caste’.¹⁹ This dissertation does not try to reconcile the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar on women in a way that could be considered analogous to the reconciliations proposed by Guha and Coward on the subject of caste. While both of these leaders expressed the desire to empower and emancipate Indian women, they differed in their motivations and approaches to those goals. Nonetheless, the interpretation of Singh, who emphasises the different motivations and methods of Gandhi and Ambedkar with respect to caste, represents a credible correlation to the different motivations and methods they demonstrated in their political discourses on women.

The dispute between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the subject of caste is often examined by historians using a common collection of abstracted oppositional concepts. Gandhi and Ambedkar are represented as contending voices within a set of interrelated social struggles, counterposing conservatism against radicalism, religion against modernity, and tradition against reform. Coward, for example, argues that Gandhi’s ‘traditional outlook ... had little appeal for Ambedkar and his Mahar colleagues who wanted to integrate themselves into a modern Indian society, at the highest level’.²⁰ Likewise, Guha characterises Gandhi as a ‘rural romantic, who wished to make the self-governing village the bedrock of free India,’ while Ambedkar was ‘an admirer of city life and modern technology who dismissed the Indian village as a den of inequity’.²¹ Singh describes Gandhi’s ‘romanticist nostalgia for a pre-modern organization [sic] of human society and economy,’ while Ambedkar ‘was through and through a pro-enlightenment modernist’.²² Chatterjee calls Ambedkar ‘an unalloyed modernist,’ who believed in ‘science, history, rationality, secularism and, above all, in the modern state as the site for the actualization [sic] of human reason’.²³ The use of these oppositional concepts in

¹⁹ A. Singh, ‘Gandhi and Ambedkar: Irreconcilable Differences?’, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2014, p. 413.

²⁰ Coward, *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, p. 64.

²¹ Guha, *Indian Political Thought*, p. 34.

²² Singh, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, p. 416.

²³ Chatterjee, *Political Ideas in Modern India*, p. 77.

framing the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar on caste suggests the possibility of an analogous framework that can be applied to their discourse on women. This dissertation examines concepts like tradition, reform, religion, and modernity in the context of Gandhi's and Ambedkar's respective political ideologies and discourses.

Madhu Kishwar, Radha Kumar, Sujata Patel, Ketu H. Katrak, Suresht R. Bald, and Debali Mookerjea-Leonard have all addressed Gandhi's views on women, particularly in the context of his attempts to expand women's participation in the nationalist movement.²⁴ Feminist scholars have also drawn attention to the tension between Gandhi's emancipatory rhetoric and his recapitulation of certain received values of Indian womanhood. Kumar argues that Gandhi's politics served to 'legitimise and expand women's public activities in certain ways, extending the latter so that it cut across class and cultural barriers'.²⁵ However, at the same time, 'his definition of women's nature and role was deeply rooted in Hindu Patriarchy, and his inclinations were often to limit the women's movement rather than push it forward'.²⁶ Ambedkar's discourse on women has attracted comparatively less scholarly attention, although some recent work has examined his views on women's emancipation, education, and empowerment.²⁷ Sharmila Rege has described his involvement in reforming gender discriminatory laws as an attempt to 'undermine and limit practices that reproduced

²⁴ D. Mookerjea-Leonard, 'To Be Pure or Not to Be: Gandhi, Women, and the Partition of India', *Feminist Review*, vol. 94, 2010, pp. 38-54; Kishwar, M., 'Gandhi on Women', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 20, no. 40, 1985, pp. 1691-1702; S. Patel, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 23, no. 8, 1988, p. 377-387; S. R. Bald, 'The Politics of Gandhi's "Feminism": Constructing "Sitas" for Swaraj', in S. Nilsson and M. A. Tétreault (ed.), *Women, States and Nationalisms: At Home In The Nation?*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 81-97; K. Katrak, 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian Satyagraha, and Representation of Female Sexuality', in A. Parker et al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 395-406.

²⁵ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, p. 82.

²⁶ Kumar, p. 82.

²⁷ P. Velaskar, 'Education for Liberation: Ambedkar's Thoughts and Dalit Women's Perspectives', *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 245-271; R. Pruthi, *Ambedkar and Women*, New Delhi, Commonwealth Publications, 2011; C. M. Gandhiji, *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Women's Empowerment*, Jaipur, ABD Publishers, 2011.

Brahmanical patriarchy'.²⁸

Two collections of speeches, articles, correspondence, and other writings form the basis of this dissertation.²⁹ The *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)* comprises one hundred volumes published between 1958 and 1994. A re-edited CD-ROM and print edition was published in 2001. However, this updated edition has been criticised for missing entries, unwarranted deletions, and inaccurate translations.³⁰ Consequently, this paper uses the first print edition to examine Gandhi's discourse on women. The bulk of the *CWMG* is reprinted material from articles Gandhi published in the newspapers *Young India*, *Navajivan*, *Harijan*, and *Indian Opinion*. However, the *CWMG* also includes previously unpublished speeches and personal correspondence. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches (BAWS)* comprises eighteen volumes published between 1979 and 2003. The first sixteen volumes were edited by Vasant Moon; following Moon's death in 2002, the task of editing the seventeenth and eighteenth volumes fell to a group led by Hare Narake. *BAWS* is largely a collection of previously published articles, books, and pamphlets. Other material includes speeches, legislative documents, and transcriptions of parliamentary debates.

Collections are inevitably shaped by the perspectives of their editors. Moon was an associate of Ambedkar and a member of the Ambedkarite movement.³¹ The *CWMG* project was initiated, funded and published by the Government of India, whose official pronouncements on Gandhi have rarely deviated from hagiography. Consequently, both

²⁸ B. R. Ambedkar and S. Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2013, p. 193.

²⁹ M. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958-2001, 100 vols; B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, V. Moon (ed.) Bombay, Government of Maharashtra Education Department, 1979-1998, 16 vols; B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, H. Narake et al. (ed.), Bombay, Government of Maharashtra Education Department, 2003, 2 vols.

³⁰ T. Suhrod, "'Re-editing' Gandhi's Collected Works', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 46/47, 2004, pp. 4967-4969.

³¹ V. Moon, *Growing Up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Biography*, trans. G. Omvedt, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 149-56.

collections must be approached with a degree of caution. The use of collected sources imposes more general interpretative limitations. First, sources removed from their original context can lose or take on new meanings. Second, the process of selecting sources for a collection can emphasise different aspects of the author's oeuvre. Notably, what is not included by an editor, and how these decisions influence a collection, is typically invisible to the reader. Third, the structure of a collection has the potential to create artificial thematic connections between previously disparate source materials. Likewise, the structure can create artificial disjunctions that obscure otherwise obvious thematic connections. Fourth, multiple source versions are often omitted from collections in the interests of economy and coherence. These challenges are all represented to a greater or lesser degree in the *CWMG* and *BAWS*.

The use of translated texts presents further interpretative challenges. Ambedkar produced many texts in Marathi. In most cases, the only available English translation is provided by Moon. Similarly, Gandhi wrote and delivered many of his speeches in either Gujarati or Hindi.³² However, Bhikhu Parekh has described some of the available translations as 'grossly inadequate' and those in the *CWMG* as '[leaving] a good deal to be desired'.³³ Moreover, the use of translated sources to study political thought imposes more general interpretative limitations. Lawrence Venuti writes that translators are forced 'not only to eliminate aspects of the signifying chain that constitutes the foreign text ... but also to dismantle and disarrange that chain in accordance with the structural differences between languages, so that both the foreign text and its relations to other texts in the foreign culture never remain intact after the translation process'.³⁴ The semantics of political discourse, so often expressed through metaphor, idiomatic expression, and intertextual references, are particularly vulnerable to this severance from their cultural and linguistic foundations.

Drawing on the *CWMG* and *BAWS* this dissertation assesses the place of women in the politics of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Chapter one examines Gandhi's varying perspectives and

³² 'General Preface' in M. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 1, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958, p. xii.

³³ B. Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 7.

³⁴ L. Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, London, Routledge, 1995, 14.

discourses on women, using a range of speeches, articles, and letters. Themes emerging from these sources include Gandhi's use of mythic symbolism when discussing women, his efforts to channel women's energies into the nationalist movement, and his inconsistent approach to the question of whether or not women should engage in public protest. Gandhi's discourse on women was guided throughout by a complex set of often-competing political considerations. The demands of the nationalist movement and the goal of maintaining a unified Indian society were of paramount importance. However, he was also influenced by contemporary events, pressure from activist women, and both personal and wider-societal conservatism. This suggests that many of the concerns that mediated his general politics also mediated his political discourse on women. Chapter two considers the place of women in Ambedkar's politics using a selection of his published articles and speeches. These sources focus largely on Ambedkar's political career, particularly his role in drafting the Hindu Code Bill, a legislative attempt to address the socio-legal discrimination faced by women in early post-independence India. It is suggested that Ambedkar's subsequent intervention into the controversy that surrounded this bill was a vocal indication of his modernising, reformist, and state-interventionist political philosophy. The intersection between caste and women in Ambedkar's writing is also examined. It is argued that caste and gender-based discriminations fell under the same rubric in his emancipatory politics because of his belief that both shared a single origin in the textual traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Chapter One: Women, Gandhi, and the Tensions of Nationalism

Analysis of Gandhi's discourse on women generally proceeds from the observation that his own political ascent was roughly coincident with the rise of women's mass involvement in Indian politics. Thus, most historians have agreed that, whatever its theoretical foundations, rhetorical contours, and lasting influence on Independent India, Gandhian discourse increased women's engagement with the nationalist movement.³⁵ Gandhi himself was a consistent advocate of expanding women's political participation. In fact, he often insisted that mobilising women was a necessary precondition for achieving independence and social reform.³⁶ This claim was typically conveyed through metaphors of physical debilitation and powerlessness. Gandhi argued that 'just as man, with one half of his body inactive, could not do anything properly, so the Indian body would not be able to do its work properly if one half of it, namely, the women, remained inactive'.³⁷ Indian women, he said, could not 'be treated either as dolls or slaves without the social body remaining in a condition of social paralysis'.³⁸ Indeed, at first glance, Gandhi's politics seemed to produce a marked shift in the nationalist perspective on women. In contrast to the nineteenth century reformers, who had sought the amelioration of women's social disadvantages through paternalistic intervention, Gandhi recruited women as political actors, for both his reform programme and the nationalist movement.³⁹ In a 1927 speech he argued that the 'full freedom of India will be an impossibility unless your daughters

³⁵ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, pp. 81-82.

³⁶ 'It would be vain to hope for swaraj so long as women do not make their full contribution to the effort. Men are not as conscientious as women in such matters. If the women do not know or do not accept their duty of preserving the nation's freedom, or of winning it back when it is lost, it will be impossible to defend it'. 'Women's Role' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 18, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965, p. 319.

³⁷ 'Speech at Ladies Protest Meeting, Bombay, April 6, 1919' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 15, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965, p. 189.

³⁸ 'Address at All-India Social Service Conference, Calcutta, December 31, 1917' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 14, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965, p. 127.

³⁹ M. Kishwar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 1692.

stand side by side with the sons in the battle for freedom and such an association on absolutely equal terms on the part of India's millions of daughters is not possible unless they have a definite consciousness of their own power'.⁴⁰ This recognition of women's agency was evident as early as 1918 when, in remarks at the Bhagini Samaj, he said that 'men cannot bring about the regeneration of women. I don't mean to suggest that men do not desire it, or that women would not want to have it through men's help; I merely wish to place before you the principle that it is only through self-help that an individual or a race can rise'.⁴¹ Indeed, it is arguable that after Gandhi, Indian women were for the first time constituted as political subjects in nationalist discourses. Nonetheless, the content and form of those discourses produced and reproduced significant constraints on that newly articulated subjectivity. While Gandhi helped Indian women carve out a new space for themselves in the body politic, that space, as he imagined it, was constructed using a language of difference.

Mythic symbolism figured prominently in Gandhi's discourse on women. Drawing on characters from the near-ubiquitous Sanskrit epics, Gandhi presented essentialised portraits of Indian femininity to support his positions on moral edification, social regeneration, nationalism, and the ingress of women into the public sphere. In a speech at the 1917 Gujarat Educational Conference, Gandhi argued that, for both men and the nation as a whole, there could be salvation:

only when - and not until - women become to us what Uma was to Shankar, Sita to Rama, and Damayanti to Nala, joining us in our deliberations, arguing with us, appreciating and nourishing our aspirations, understanding, with their marvellous intuition, the unspoken anxieties of our outward life and sharing in them, bringing us the peace that soothes.⁴²

⁴⁰ 'Speech at Public Meeting, Paganeri, September 27, 1927' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 35, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1969, p. 44.

⁴¹ 'Speech at the Bhagini Samaj, Bombay, February 20, 1918' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 14, pp. 202-203.

⁴² 'Speech at the Second Gujarat Educational Conference, Broach, October 20, 1917' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 14, pp. 32-33.

This passage highlights some of the ways in which Gandhi used traditional female characters to supplement his discourse on women. First, his references to mythical women were implicit inducements to his audience. Gandhi suggested these characters could serve as both prototypes and inspiration for contemporary women's political participation. Second, he used these sources to support objections to certain prevailing concepts of gender. Gandhi often described his programme for social reform as a return to the values epitomised in narratives like the Ramayana and Mahabharata.⁴³ Thus, the performance of gender as it is depicted in these stories figured prominently in his arguments on contemporary reform. Third, he used traditional female characters in an attempt to influence the sorts of political participation that were open to ordinary Indian women. Indeed, Gandhi conceived of a narrow, and largely exclusive, set of available roles for women in the nationalist movement, and mythical women figured prominently in his arguments for this gendered division of labour. Gandhi's staple lecture on women spinning and wearing khadi as a nationalist act was typically interspersed with references to Sita, who he claimed had 'also spun on her own charkha, which might have been bedecked with jewels and probably ornamented with gold, but all the same it was still a charkha.'⁴⁴ Likewise, he argued women should take up the swadeshi vow and embrace economic nationalism because Sita 'treated the beautiful cloths sent by Ravana as of less worth than even leaves, so should we regard foreign cloth as inferior to khadi'.⁴⁵ So, too, in his requests to women for donations of cash and jewellery, Gandhi invoked the moral example set by mythological figures. Addressing a women's meeting in Giridih in 1921, Gandhi asked 'was

⁴³ According to Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi 'knew how to tap and mobilise the regenerative resources of tradition. Though he made several mistakes, especially during the early years of his political leadership in India, he soon acquired a deep understanding of the nature, mode of discourse and structural constraints of Hindu tradition'. In B. Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, New Delhi, Sage, 1999, p. 16.

⁴⁴ 'Speech at Women's Meeting, Giridih, October 7, 1925' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 28, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1968, p. 295.

⁴⁵ 'Speech at Public Meeting in Wadhwan, June 9, 1921' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 20, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966, p. 199.

Sitaji in Ashokvatika [was] decked in jewellery? Were there any ornaments on Damayanti's person when she went crying in a frenzy of grief in the forest? Was Taramati bedecked in necklaces of pearls and diamonds when she accompanied Harishchandra in his wanderings?'.⁴⁶ He went on to say that it was 'an unworthy thing to wear jewellery in these times when adharmā prevails'.⁴⁷ There was, of course, a significant cultural precedent for Gandhi's appeal to the authority of the Sanskrit epics. As Brodbeck and Black explain, the 'Mahābhārata [was] one of the definitive cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since'.⁴⁸ Moreover, for Gandhi, the incorporation of traditional and reformist discourses was a familiar rhetorical manoeuvre.⁴⁹ He frequently refigured elements of the Hindu mythos into allegories representing his nationalist and reformist objectives.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, this interplay between the seemingly oppositional tendencies of reform and tradition produced an integral tension in both Gandhi's construction of feminine identity and his directives to the women of the nationalist movement. The emancipatory logic of his discourse on women was, in many ways, undermined by his decision to co-opt archetypes and

⁴⁶ 'To Women, Satyagraha Ashram, June 14, 1921' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 20, p. 214.

⁴⁷ 'To Women, Satyagraha Ashram, June 14, 1921' in Gandhi, p. 214.

⁴⁸ S. Brodbeck and B. Black, 'Introduction', in S. Brodbeck and B. Black (ed.), *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2007, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform*, pp. 15-30.

⁵⁰ Gandhi often linked the oppressions of British rule with the Kali Yuga, and the promise of independence and social regeneration with the Satya Yuga. Moreover, the independent future was depicted as a return of the Rama Rajya (rule of Rama), an age of justice and prosperity depicted in the Ramayana. By the end of the independence struggle, he told his audiences, we 'hope to establish Ramarajya and the poor hope to get protection, women to live in safety and the starving millions to see an end of hunger. When the struggle ends, we hope to see the resurrection of the spinning-wheel, decrease in the poison of communal discord, eradication of the practice of untouchability so that the so-called untouchables may look forward to being treated as our brothers, the closing of liquor shops and the disappearance of the drink-habit, the preservation of the Khilafat and the protection of the cow, the healing of the Punjab wounds, the restoration of our traditional culture to its rightful place and the introduction, in every home, of the spinning-wheel to take its place along with the oven'. In 'Women of Gujarat' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 22, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966, pp. 181-182.

didacticisms whose popular interpretation contributed to the reproduction of the status quo. Thus, according to Ketu H. Katrak, these archetypes promoted within Gandhian discourse a sense that the feminine was ‘legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifedom, motherhood, domesticity - all forms of controlling women’s bodies’.⁵¹ The roles that Gandhi defined for women joining the nationalist movement were reflections of this ideology.

Feminist writers have pointed out that Gandhi’s support for women’s political activism, particularly in the years before the Civil Disobedience movement, was circumscribed by his implicit support for the gendered division of the public and private spheres.⁵² As Kumari Jayawardena writes, his movement ‘gave the illusion of change while women were kept within the structural confines of family and society’.⁵³ Indeed, these confines were reified in the four walls of the family home, which, according to Gandhi’s regular injunctions, formed a sanctioned environment for women’s political participation. By spinning *khadi*, embracing *swadeshi*, and providing support to activist men, Indian women could, according to Gandhi, engage with the independence struggle from within the physical and ideological boundaries of domesticity. Feminist scholars have offered varying assessments of this programme. Suresht R. Bald argues it was a stroke of political genius that enabled Gandhi to ‘support women’s involvement in the public arena of politics at the same time that he defended their traditional roles as mothers and wives who were expected to work within the confines of the home’.⁵⁴ Conventional politics dictated that women would need to leave their homes and enter public spaces in order to participate in nationalist work. Gandhi’s discourse obviated this challenge to the norm by transposing the idiom of politics into the home. However, as Radha Kumar notes, by ‘emphasising the importance of the family as a site for social change, he also, on the other hand, made it clear that further expansion of their role into the field of public action was wrong’.⁵⁵ Gandhi moderated this position intermittently, often in response to those women

⁵¹ K. H. Katrak, ‘Indian Nationalism, Gandhian “Satyagraha,” and Representations of Female Sexuality’, in A. Parker et al. (ed.), *Nationalities and Sexualities*, 1992, p. 396.

⁵² See Mookerjee-Leonard, *Feminist Review*, pp. 38-54; Patel, *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 377-387 ; Bald, *Women, States and Nationalism*, pp. 81-97 ; Katrak, *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, pp. 395-406.

⁵³ K. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, London, Zed Books, 1986, p. 107.

⁵⁴ Bald, *Women, States, and Nationalism*, p. 82.

⁵⁵ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, p. 85.

who, ignoring his proscriptions, continued to assert their appetite for an active role in public agitations. By 1922, he was prepared to accept women going to jail for the nationalist cause, claiming a ‘yajna is incomplete without women taking part in it’.⁵⁶ However, even then, the public opportunities he conceded to women were formulated along gendered lines and articulated through suppositions of their natural strengths and weaknesses as *satyagrahis*. Gandhi argued women were ideally suited to picketing liquor stores because customers ‘[would] surely be put to shame by their presence’.⁵⁷ Indeed, he argued that women possessed an inherent purity, morality, and spirit of non-violence that could be used to influence those who traded in corrupting items like liquor and foreign cloth. Appeals made by women ‘to merchants and buyers of foreign cloth and to the liquor dealers and addicts to the habit [could not] but melt their hearts. At any rate the women [could] never be suspected of doing or intending violence to these four classes. Nor [could] Government long remain supine to an agitation so peaceful and so resistless’.⁵⁸ Thus, while he appeared to be more open to the idea of women participating in public agitations, the roles he assigned to them were still based on assumptions of sexual difference. Gandhi argued women should picket foreign cloth and liquor stores because of their deleterious effects on the private sphere. Drink and drugs, he claimed, ‘sap the moral well-being of those who are given to the habit. Foreign cloth undermines the economic foundations of the nation and throws millions out of employment. The distress in each case is felt in the home and therefore by the women.’⁵⁹ Ultimately, his construction of women’s political participation may have recognised new potentialities. However, that recognition was hemmed in by existing ideologies, and conceived in terms intended to control the modes of political participation open to women in the nationalist movement.

Some writers have suggested that Gandhi’s discourse on women was primarily a product of his background and identity. Sujata Patel, for example, argues his rhetoric was ‘drawn from a space inhabited by an urbanised middle-class upper-caste Hindu male’s

⁵⁶ ‘Women of Gujarat’ in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 22, p. 182.

⁵⁷ ‘Women of Gujarat’ Gandhi, p. 182.

⁵⁸ ‘To The Women of India’ in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 43, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, p. 220.

⁵⁹ ‘To The Women of India’ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 43, p. 220.

perception of what a woman should be'.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the adjustments he made to that base construction were themselves 'mediated by his class, caste and religious ideologies'.⁶¹ While Madhu Kishwar finds room for the social and the political in Gandhi's thought, she also emphasises the influence of the 'cultural and and emotional environment in which he grew up'.⁶² However, interpretations that assign priority to Gandhi's formative influences cannot completely account for his later inconsistency, in particular the way his positions on women changed during the course of his public life. Analysis of Gandhi's discourse must also consider how his role as leader of the independence movement entailed compromise with his own ideology. According to Judith Brown, Gandhi's political mind was divided into two distinct hemispheres: the activist and the strategist.⁶³ As an activist, his statements were characterised by utopianism, optimism, and unflinching commitment to reform. As a strategist, he was deeply aware of his own limitations, mindful of political realities, and willing to compromise in order to achieve his objectives. These mentalities 'interacted dialectically, resulting in [the] complex web of social and political ideas evolved by Gandhi during his involvement with perhaps the most gigantic nationalist struggle of the twentieth century'.⁶⁴ Viewed in terms of this dialectic, Gandhi's shifting positions assume a degree of coherence. His discourse on women was not a straightforward product of personal ideology, but was also subject to the demands of the independence movement, shaped by existing social realities, and responsive to contemporary political developments. Gandhi was forced to compromise and alter his public positions on a variety of issues in order to achieve the overarching goal of an independent India. This pragmatic approach inflected his discourse on women, as it did his approach to caste, communalism, and other risks to the nationalist movement's unified front against colonial authority. Indeed, Gandhi was often quite transparent about the necessity of compromise. In one case, he suggested only minor reforms to the practice of Hindu widowhood because 'a

⁶⁰ Patel, *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 378.

⁶¹ Patel, p. 37.

⁶² Kishwar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp. 1691-1692.

⁶³ See summary of Brown's thesis in B. Chakrabarty, *Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 11-12; J. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

⁶⁴ Chakrabarty, *Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 11-12.

really big reform may seem impossible'.⁶⁵

This kind of political realism was also apparent when Gandhi considered the question of women leaving the home to join his struggle. He would have realised that, in most cases, women needed the consent and approval of their husbands or other male relatives in order to publicly participate in the independence movement. As a result, Gandhi coded his discourse to soothe fears for the safety of women entering the principally masculine realm of politics. Moreover, he tried to reassure those men who viewed women's engagement with the public sphere as threatening either to a sense of tradition, to their economic position or to their existing social relations. This effort to appease male sensibilities is evident in the way he modulated his discourse to meet the expectations of specific audiences. Addressing a meeting of predominantly male mill-hands in Ahmedabad, Gandhi assured his listeners that it was not 'for women to work in factories'.⁶⁶ Instead, they should 'give peace to the husband when he returns home tired, minister to him, soothe him if he is angry, and do any other work they can staying home'.⁶⁷ Should women enter the public sphere, Gandhi warned, social life '[would] be ruined and moral standards [would] decline'.⁶⁸ These statements addressed the competitive threat posed by women entering the workforce and reinforced the orthodoxy that connected women and the private sphere. However, when he spoke to a mostly female audience at the Bhagini Samaj, a women's welfare organisation in Bombay, he described the prospect of women emerging from the private sphere more favourably. Over time, he argued, it might even be 'possible to introduce women to the subjects of politics and social reform'.⁶⁹ Gandhi displayed similar ambivalence on the question of female education. Speaking at the male-dominated 1924

⁶⁵ 'Renunciation Personified' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 23, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1967, p. 525.

⁶⁶ 'Speech at Meeting of Mill-Hands Ahmedabad, February 25, 1920' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.17, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1965, p. 49.

⁶⁷ 'Speech at Meeting of Mill-Hands Ahmedabad, February 25, 1920' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.17, p. 49.

⁶⁸ 'Speech at Meeting of Mill-Hands Ahmedabad, February 25, 1920' in Gandhi, p. 49.

⁶⁹ 'Speech at the Second Gujarat Educational Conference, Broach, October 20, 1917' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.14, p. 33.

National Education Conference in Ahmedabad, he downplayed the importance of schooling for women. In fact, he argued this issue would ultimately have ‘no bearing on [the independence] struggle’.⁷⁰ Gandhi told the conference they should simply ‘get girls to attend primary schools and only make them turn the spinning-wheel’.⁷¹ The *charkha* could not ‘but touch the hearts of women. [It] alone [was] their true education, the education of the heart’.⁷² However, when he addressed the graduates of the Women’s Christian College in Madras, he offered a more positive assessment of scholarly instruction as a means of social uplift. Gandhi told these women that they should ‘not disappear from public life’.⁷³ Instead, he urged them to use their education to ‘extend [a] helping hand to the poor and needy, who need all the help that can be given to them’.⁷⁴

Gandhi also shifted his positions as they were overtaken by events. In 1921, the son of C. R. Das, a prominent Congress leader in eastern India, was arrested for publicly selling homespun in violation of a ban on political protests. Then, Das’ wife, ‘Basanti Devi, his sister, Urmila Devi, and his niece, Miss Suniti Devi, took to the streets and were arrested’.⁷⁵ Upon hearing that Basanti Devi and Urmila Devi had been arrested, Gandhi expressed concern over their safety.⁷⁶ Indeed, until this point, he had not fully endorsed the idea of women protesting outside of the home. After these women had already gone to jail, however, Gandhi reversed his position and framed the participation of women in public protests as a badge of honour. In any case, he argued, women were ‘bound, when a sufficient number of men have been

⁷⁰ ‘Speech at National Education Conference, Ahmedabad, August 1, 1924’ in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.24, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1967, p. 498.

⁷¹ ‘Speech at National Education Conference, Ahmedabad, August 1, 1924’ in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.24, p. 498.

⁷² ‘Speech at National Education Conference, Ahmedabad, August 1, 1924’ in Gandhi, p. 503.

⁷³ ‘Speech at Women’s Christian College, Madras, March 24, 1925’ in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.26, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1967, p. 397.

⁷⁴ ‘Speech at Women’s Christian College, Madras, March 24, 1925’ in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.26, p. 397.

⁷⁵ G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 126.

⁷⁶ Patel, *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 382.

removed, for honour of their sex to step into their places'.⁷⁷ In a similar situation, Gandhi initially rejected the participation of women in the public agitations precipitated by the 1930 Salt Satyagraha. As a justification, he claimed that if women joined the march, it might appear to outsiders as if the men were using them as human shields. He argued that because 'the British do not attack women as far as possible' it could be construed as 'cowardice for us to have women accompany [the march]'.⁷⁸ Ignoring his protests, thousands of women turned out at daily meetings held along the route from Ahmedabad to Dandi.⁷⁹ Sarojini Naidu joined the march itself in its final days and assumed leadership of the protest after Gandhi's arrest.⁸⁰ Women turned out en masse at Dandi, Dharasana, and elsewhere across India to manufacture salt in contravention of the British monopoly and to go to prison if necessary.⁸¹ Faced with this reality, Gandhi reversed course and conceded that even 'women can participate in this righteous struggle and many have already enrolled themselves'.⁸²

Gandhi had several reasons for adopting this ambivalent approach to the issue of women in the public sphere. His overarching concern was channeling the energies of women into the nationalist movement. Yet he was also forced to consider the demands of directing a unified, pluralistic, and mass-based political front against the British colonial authorities. The involvement of women was a necessary part of any genuinely mass-based politics. Women also occupied a unique position in Gandhi's theory of non-violent resistance to colonial rule. Indeed, according to Gandhi, they possessed an inherent predisposition toward *satyagraha*:

In this non-violent warfare, their contribution should be much greater than men's. To call woman the weaker sex is libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is

⁷⁷ 'Women's Part' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.22, p. 22.

⁷⁸ 'Remarks at Prayer Meeting, Sabarmati Ashram, March 5, 1930' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 43, pp. 12-13.

⁷⁹ S. Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Hyderabad, Orient Blackswan, 2008, pp. 390-391.

⁸⁰ J. Liddle and J. Rama, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986, p. 34.

⁸¹ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 132.

⁸² 'Speech at Ras, March 19, 1930' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.43, p. 105.

meant brute strength, then indeed is a woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not great intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman.⁸³

Gandhi viewed women as the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering.⁸⁴ Therefore, within the ambit of both his political and philosophical calculus, they represented a potent non-violent force to be channeled toward the goals of the nationalist movement.⁸⁵ More prosaically, Gandhi could not have been unaware of the positive publicity generated internationally by media reports of Indian women engaging in non-violent protests,⁸⁶ nor the potential for negative publicity accruing to the British government when their colonial authorities resorted to violence against unarmed women. However, these points were balanced against both his own and Indian society's conservative inertia. Gandhi's vacillating discourse on women should be understood in the context of his time. He was, indeed, a 'Victorian by birth, and many of his ideas about women were genuinely reformist if not radical in that context'.⁸⁷ Moreover, he was guided by an overriding concern for the unity of Indian society. Bald argues that Gandhi's 'commitment to national harmony and consensus dictated that female satyagrahis not disrupt the traditional gender system. Just as in his economics, workers and capitalists were to accept each other's "rightful" place in society, men and women were to accept their "naturally" defined spaces'.⁸⁸ Gandhi's discourse on women was not a product of a concrete and immutable personal ideology. Rather, he charted a complex rhetorical path between tradition and reform, articulating a series of positions that were variously influenced by the exigencies of his nationalist objectives, contemporary events, and the pull of extant ideologies. From these positions he projected an inconsistent vision of women as political actors. Moreover, his use

⁸³ 'To The Women of India' in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.43, pp. 219-220.

⁸⁴ 'Position of Women' in M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.42, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1970, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Kishwar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, p. 1696.

⁸⁶ Bald, *Women, States, and Nationalism*, p. 82.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 391.

⁸⁸ Bald, *Women, States, and Nationalism*, p. 82.

of mythic symbolism and his attention to patriarchal sensibilities led him to recapitulate ideologies that emphasised an essentialised theory of difference between men and women.

Chapter Two: Ambedkar, Women, and the Power of Law

Ambedkar's discourse on women was largely produced in the context of his efforts to improve their socio-legal status. This connection reflected a political career that was oriented around campaigns to secure social justice, enfranchisement, and legal equality for marginalised groups. Faith in the emancipatory power of democratic institutions led Ambedkar to advocate the universal enfranchisement of the Indian people, including women. Belief that social and legal equality were requisite for the proper functioning of democracy led him to sponsor reforms intended to eliminate laws and practices that discriminated against Indian women. The Hindu Code Bill, the most significant of these reforms, was driven by an emancipatory and modernising ideology. Moreover, Ambedkar's public defence of the bill attested to his belief that women were entitled to equal legal and political rights. The traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism represented for Ambedkar the roots of both caste and gender oppression in India. In particular, he suggested the dictates of the lawgiver Manu were integral to a social system that marginalised both women and Untouchables.

In a written statement to the Southborough Franchise Committee in 1919,⁸⁹ Ambedkar argued that was in the 'interest of the people that no person as such should be denied the opportunity of actively participating in the process of government'.⁹⁰ Quoting Abraham Lincoln, he went on to summarise his position that 'popular government is not only government for the people, but by the people'.⁹¹ Ambedkar lectured and published on the theme of democracy throughout his career. Indeed, the subject was of great practical importance to his political projects, particularly his role as an advocate for the rights of Untouchables. Moreover,

⁸⁹ The Southborough Franchise Committee was appointed in the context of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms to investigate the franchise in India. The female franchise was excluded from the Southborough recommendations. See A. Rao, 'The "Womanly Vote" and Women Citizens: Debates on Women's Franchise in Late Colonial India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, p. 475.

⁹⁰ 'Evidence Before the Southborough Committee: Written Statement' in B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, V. Moon (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 1979, p. 247.

⁹¹ 'Evidence Before the Southborough Committee: Written Statement' Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, p. 247.

democracy underpinned his faith in the power of human agency to effect the reform of an unjust society.⁹² Therefore, it also influenced his efforts to improve the socio-legal status of Indian women. Between 1919 and 1930, in his capacity as semi-official spokesman for the Depressed Classes, he presented evidence in support of universal suffrage to three British delegations on Indian governance. Ambedkar argued consistently that there was an obligation to enfranchise the Indian people, regardless of class, caste, or gender, because of their collective participation in what he called an “associated life.” In a report prepared for the Indian Statutory Commission in 1928,⁹³ he noted that because ‘associated life is shared by every individual and as every individual is affected by its consequences, every individual must have the right to settle its terms’.⁹⁴ Ambedkar repeated this claim at the Round Table Conference in 1930,⁹⁵ where he described the right to vote as ‘the right to regulate the terms of what one might call associated life in society’.⁹⁶ In other words, he argued that membership of the national community entitled all Indians, including women, to an equal say in how their individual rights and responsibilities were configured within and by that community. Democracy was more than a question of polling booths, ballot papers, and election officers. It was, in fact, the means for an individual to defend themselves against laws which were likely to ‘invade [their] liberty, ... life and ... property’.⁹⁷ Ambedkar made these arguments in the course of his efforts to secure reservation

⁹² Zelliott, *From Untouchable to*, p. 161.

⁹³ The Indian Statutory (Simon) Commission was an all-white delegation appointed by the British government in 1927 to report on the constitutional system of colonial India. The commission was deeply unpopular and was boycotted by both Congress and the Muslim league. See Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, p. 314.

⁹⁴ ‘A Report On the Constitution of the Government of Bombay Presidency: Section III Provincial Legislature: Chapter I: Franchise’ in B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 2, V. Moon (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 1982, pp. 337-338.

⁹⁵ The Round Table Conferences were a series of meetings in London where ‘Indians were invited to discuss with British politicians the making of a new constitution, which took final shape in the 1935 Government of India Act’. In J. M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 255.

⁹⁶ ‘In Sub-Committee No. VI (Franchise): Second Sitting - 22nd December 1930’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 2, p. 559.

⁹⁷ ‘In Sub-Committee No. VI (Franchise): Second Sitting - 22nd December 1930’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 2, p. 559.

for the Untouchables in the future Indian parliament.⁹⁸ However, his immediate and unequivocal call for universal suffrage suggests he recognised its applicability to women as well, particularly in light of his future attempts to ameliorate the socio-legal disadvantages faced by women through the legislative process.

Bidyut Chakrabarty has convincingly argued that Ambedkar's use of the phrase "associated life" echoed John Dewey, his professor at Columbia University between 1913 and 1916.⁹⁹ In fact, he often quoted whole sentences from Dewey when discussing his own ideas about democracy and social reform.¹⁰⁰ Dewey considered the "individual" to be an inherently social construction; every human's 'observations, beliefs, meanings, and values are formed and exist in and through social processes'.¹⁰¹ Ambedkar expanded on this idea to describe his own abstracted ideal of a democratic society: individuals coming together to form communities based on the unrestricted exchange of those observations, beliefs, meanings, and values. Thus, associated life in a democratic society was a social process that moulded individuals and mediated their perception of the world. Moreover, he argued that an ideal democratic society should be 'mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association'.¹⁰² Without these channels of communication, the mutual exchange of ideas, and, therefore, the free exchange of ideas, a society would become stagnant; Ambedkar argued the cohesive strength 'of a society depends upon the presence of points of contact, [and] possibilities of interaction between different groups which exist in it'.¹⁰³ Inequality and

⁹⁸ M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, 1993, pp. 129-131.

⁹⁹ B. Chakrabarty, 'BR Ambedkar and the History of Constitutionalizing India', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2016, p. 136.

¹⁰⁰ A. P. Mukherjee, 'B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy', *New Literary History*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, pp. 351-357.

¹⁰¹ J. J. Stuhr, 'John Dewey: Introduction', in J. J. Stuhr (ed.), *Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretative Essays*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 332.

¹⁰² 'Annihilation of Caste' in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, p. 57.

¹⁰³ 'Annihilation of Caste' in Ambedkar, p. 65.

stratification necessarily limited these points of contact, and were therefore antithetical to his vision of democracy. Thus, on the one hand, the democratic process provided robust protection against both legal and social discrimination, on the other hand, democracy depended on legal and social equality in order to function. In 1952, he delivered a speech to the Poona Law Society outlining a set of conditions necessary for the successful functioning of a democratic government. The first of these conditions was that there ‘must be no glaring inequalities in society’.¹⁰⁴ Nationalist platforms in the early-twentieth century typically included a commitment to address social inequality. Specifically, the Nationalist elite focused on reforming gender-discriminatory laws, alleviating poverty, developing educational programmes, and bridging the caste and communal divisions of Indian society. Where Ambedkar differed from the Nationalist elite was his view that this reform was necessary to cultivate the national associated life and thereby support the nascent Indian democracy.¹⁰⁵ This political philosophy led him to address the place of women in Indian society through legislative reform. Indeed, in 1951, remarking on the importance of improving the socio-legal conditions for Hindu women, he argued that leaving inequality ‘between sex and sex which is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap’.¹⁰⁶

The Hindu Code Bill was the most significant attempt made by Ambedkar to ameliorate the socio-legal discrimination faced by women in early post-independence India. It was also a meaningful expression of his often-stated belief that democratic India could provide legislative remedy to those citizens most affected by social inequity and legal discrimination. Moreover, his defence of the bill in the Constituent Assembly and subsequent intervention into the controversy that surrounded it were indicative of both the emancipatory logic that underpinned his political discourse on women and the modernising ideology that drove his efforts to

¹⁰⁴ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, no. 3, H. Narake et al. (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 2003, p. 475.

¹⁰⁵ K. Maitra, ‘Ambedkar and the Constitution of India: A Deweyan Experiment’, *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, p. 303.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Statement by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Parliament in Explanation of His Resignation’ in B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no. 2, V. Moon (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 1995, p. 1326.

overthrow the traditional Hindu social order.

The origins of the Hindu Code Bill can be traced to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth century British attempts to standardise, secularise, and reform the various Indian legal traditions. Colonial authorities consolidated traditional *Dharmasastric* sources and English common law into a hybrid Anglo-Hindu legal system.¹⁰⁷ They also initiated the reform of personal law through a series of legislative acts, including the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829, the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856, and the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937. Notably, the social condition of women was already the axis upon which the question of reforming personal law turned; the British reforms were supposedly intended to benefit Indian women, although, as Lata Mani has indicated, the results of their efforts were often ambiguous.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the system of Hindu personal laws inherited by the Indian government from its colonial predecessor comprised a fragmented collection of English common law, Brahmanical textual tradition, and interventionist social legislation. Codifying, reforming, and, ultimately, simplifying this elaborate and often ambiguous system was an early priority for the post-independence Indian government.¹⁰⁹ In 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, placed Ambedkar, now India's first Law Minister, in charge of a codification bill to be passed through the newly-formed Constituent Assembly. The bill itself was based on an earlier effort prepared between 1941 and 1947 by the Rau Committee.¹¹⁰ Ambedkar oversaw the creation of a second draft and

¹⁰⁷ R. Rocher, 'The Creation of Anglo-Hindu Law', in T. Lubin, D. R. Davis Jr., and J. K. Krishnan (ed.), *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 78-88.

¹⁰⁸ L. Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati In Colonial India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 191-196.

¹⁰⁹ R. V. Williams, 'Hindu Law as Personal Law: State and Identity in the Hindu Code Bills Debates, 1952-1956', in T. Lubin, D. R. Davis Jr., and J. K. Krishnan (ed.), *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 109.

¹¹⁰ Priority given by the legislature to the events surrounding independence caused this draft to be shelved in 1947. For an account of the Rau Committee, see H. L. Levy, 'Lawyer-Politicians and the Hindu Code Bill, 1921-1956', *Law & Society Review*, vol. 3, no. 2/3, 1968-1969, pp. 306-312.

chaired the select committee that produced a significantly altered third.¹¹¹ He described the bill as an effort to ‘codify the rules of Hindu Law which are scattered in innumerable decisions of the High Courts and of the Privy Council, which form a bewildering motley to the common man and give rise to constant litigation’.¹¹² However, the ambit of the bill that was returned from the select committee extended beyond clarification of a fragmented and overly-complex area of the law. Indeed, both the provisions of the bill and the discourse that surrounded it were driven by the authors’ underlying motive of reform; the Hindu Code Bill was as much about improving the socio-legal status of women as it was the consolidation of existing Hindu personal laws.

The Hindu Code Bill diverged from existing Hindu personal law in its reorganisation of inheritance, dowry, marriage, and divorce.¹¹³ Changes made to improve the socio-legal status of women were among the most contentious.¹¹⁴ Perhaps the most controversial of all concerned the right of a daughter to inherit property from a father who had died intestate. The first iteration of the bill made the daughter a full or first-class successor to the property of the father. However, the share they were entitled to was only half that of a son.¹¹⁵ This difference was supposedly offset by the addition of the son as a one-half successor to the estate of the mother.¹¹⁶ Ambedkar explained this exchange to the Constituent Assembly as an effort to ‘maintain an equality of position between the son and the daughter’.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, he recognised there was still the potential for an unjust division of the combined family estate,

¹¹¹ R. Som, ‘Jawaharlal Nehru and the Hindu Code: A Victory of Symbol over Substance?’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1994, p. 171.

¹¹² ‘Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee’ in B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no. 1, V. Moon (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 2003, p. 5.

¹¹³ R. V. Williams, ‘The More Things Change: Debating Gender and Religion in India’s Hindu Laws, 1920-2006’, *Gender & History*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2013, pp. 715-716.

¹¹⁴ C. Sinha, *Debating Patriarchy: The Hindu Code Bill Controversy in India (1941-1956)*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 160-176.

¹¹⁵ ‘Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no.1, p. 6.

¹¹⁶ ‘Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ ‘Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, p. 7.

particularly in the event of a disparity between the personal wealth of the father and that of the mother. To address this imbalance, the third draft promoted both equity and uniformity by giving the daughter a full share in the father's property and the son a full share in the mother's property.¹¹⁸ Another controversial provision concerned the right of women to exercise absolute control over property they inherited through the male line. Ambedkar challenged the arguments against women holding absolute property. Defenders of the status quo claimed it would be dangerous to leave women 'subject to the influences of all sorts of wily men who may influence them in one way or another to dispose of property both to the detriment of themselves as well as to the detriment of the family from which they have inherited the family property'.¹¹⁹ Ambedkar dismissed this claim by pointing out that women were already trusted to dispose of property they inherited through the female line; logic, consistency, and the principles of gender equality enshrined within the draft constitution demanded they be able to dispose of property obtained through the male line as well. The draft code also proposed significant changes to the dowry system. Ambedkar described how girls who brought property to marriages were often 'treated, nonetheless, with utter contempt, tyranny and oppression'.¹²⁰ New provisions required a girl's dowry to be held in trust until she reached the age of eighteen, so the husband and his relations could not 'waste that property and make her helpless for the rest of her life'.¹²¹ Finally, the bill made significant changes to the laws surrounding marriage; most salient with regards to improving the socio-legal status of women, were provisions that restricted polygamy and those that introduced the option of divorce.¹²²

Ambedkar's defence of the Hindu Code Bill was indicative of both his desire to negate the strictures of Hindu orthodoxy and the modernising impetus that underpinned his efforts to reform the socio-legal status of Indian women. Indeed, his intervention into the controversy precipitated by the bill revealed the motivations behind what he retrospectively called the

¹¹⁸ 'Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from the Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 264.

¹¹⁹ 'Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from The Select Committee' in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no.1, p. 278.

¹²⁰ 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 8.

¹²¹ 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 8

¹²² 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 10.

‘greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the Legislature in this country’.¹²³ Ambedkar adopted a diversified approach to justifying the various provisions of the Hindu Code Bill. In some cases, he claimed the bill was consistent with the edicts of Hindu textual tradition. Seeking to defuse the controversy generated by the changes to intestate succession, for example, he argued that it was ‘impossible to deny the fact that the daughter according to the Smritis was a simultaneous heir along with the son and that she was entitled to a one-fourth share of her father’s property. [This had] been accepted as a text from the Yagnavalkya and also from Manu’.¹²⁴ Granting men and women the same priority in matters of inheritance was not a departure from Hindu tradition. Instead, he told the bill’s critics, it was ‘merely going back to the text of the Smritis which you all respect’.¹²⁵ Ambedkar’s appropriation of Manu at this juncture was a response to conservative criticism that the draft code had deviated too far from the foundational texts of Hinduism. However, claims that the bill contained little innovation beyond the Smritis were contradicted by his own admission that the Select Committee had gone ‘a step further and made [the share of the daughter] full and equal with that of the son’.¹²⁶ Moreover, Ambedkar typically condemned the dictates of the Hindu lawgivers. In 1927, during the Mahad Satyagraha, he and his Mahar followers had famously burned copies of the *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu) during a protest against caste discrimination.¹²⁷ This suggests that assertions about the bill’s supposed fidelity to Hindu scripture represented a somewhat disingenuous attempt to deflect attention away from its framer’s progressive spirit. Ambedkar’s defence of the bill did include more authentic indications of intention to remake Hindu personal law. The intention to modernise and bring India in line with international norms was implied by his assertion that, other than the existing scheme of Hindu inheritance, there was ‘no system anywhere in the world where a daughter

¹²³ ‘Statement by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Parliament in Explanation of His Resignation’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 1325.

¹²⁴ ‘Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from the Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 280.

¹²⁵ ‘Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from the Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, p. 281.

¹²⁶ ‘Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from the Select Committee’ in Ambedkar, p. 281.

¹²⁷ Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, pp. 100-101.

has been excluded'.¹²⁸ Ambedkar also addressed the question of reform explicitly in response to criticism that the bill did not go far enough to strengthen the rights of women. Hansa Mehta, a member of Constituent Assembly and representative of the All India Women's Conference, argued against the one-half share inheritance apportioned to daughters in the original bill.¹²⁹ She also called for the inclusion of provisions to raise the minimum age of marriage to sixteen years, to make mothers co-guardians of children, and to lower the necessary grounds for divorce. In response, Ambedkar claimed Hindu society had, until that point, 'never accepted its own power and its own responsibility in moulding its social, economic and legal life'.¹³⁰ Instead, it had 'always believed that law-making is the function either of God or the "Smriti" and that Hindu Society has no right to change the law'.¹³¹ If Hindu society could be convinced to accept the bill, Ambedkar argued, it would 'not hesitate to march on the path that remains to be trodden and reach the goal that [the critics had] in mind'.¹³²

There were clear parallels between the arguments Ambedkar used to defend reforms to the socio-legal status of women and those he used to challenge the perpetuation of caste discrimination in Indian society. In both cases, he displayed a Deweyan scepticism toward tradition, particularly those traditions he believed were standing in the way of establishing a more egalitarian society. Writing on caste, he argued that 'Hindus must consider whether they should conserve the whole of their social heritage or select what is helpful and transmit to future generations only that much and no more'.¹³³ Quoting Dewey, he went on to say every 'society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse As a society becomes more enlightened, it realises that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society'.¹³⁴ Ambedkar's discourse on both women and caste counterposed

¹²⁸ 'Discussion On the Hindu Code Bill After Return of the Bill from the Select Committee' in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 281-282.

¹²⁹ 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, pp. 27-30.

¹³⁰ 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 41.

¹³¹ 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 41.

¹³² 'Hindu Code Bill Referred to Select Committee' in Ambedkar, p. 41.

¹³³ 'Annihilation of Caste' in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, p. 79.

¹³⁴ 'Annihilation of Caste' in Ambedkar, p. 79.

tradition against reform and modernisation; his denunciations of both caste and gender based discrimination were largely interchangeable in terms of their targets, tones, and proffered solutions. Ambedkar was not alone in his belief that Indian society was stagnant and encumbered by tradition. Most of those who spoke in favour of the Hindu Code Bill in the Constituent Assembly evinced a view that the Indian social system had ossified.¹³⁵ As Flavia Agnes argues, the Congress party was ‘dominated by lawyers trained in British law or those who studied law in England and consequently imbibed all the colonial biases regarding the functioning of Indian society, as well as the changes that were supposedly needed to modernize [sic] it’.¹³⁶ Gandhi had expressed sentiments similar to Ambedkar’s about a stagnated Indian society, although the solutions he proposed generally focused on the reinterpretation of tradition rather than reform or modernisation.¹³⁷ What set Ambedkar apart from both Gandhi and the liberal Congress elite was his categorical rejection of what he argued were the intertwined historical antecedents of both caste and gender oppression.

Ambedkar identified the shared roots of caste and gender oppression in the textual traditions of Brahmanical Hinduism. His emphasis on scripture, Susan Bayly argues, reflected ‘both a lawyer’s and an “orientalist’s” view of the power of texts rather than custom or individual will to shape human behaviour’. Thus, Ambedkar’s critiques of caste and gender oppression were punctuated with references to the *Manusmriti* and the other *Shastras* he contended were foundational to the ethos of Hindu society. In ‘The Revolt of the Untouchables,’ he argued the ‘rock on which the Hindu Social Order has been built is the [*Manusmriti*] Being sacred it is infallible. Every Hindu believes in its sanctity and obeys its injunctions. Manu not only upholds caste and untouchability but gives them legal sanction.’¹³⁸ Thus, Ambedkar expressed profound scepticism toward the possibility of disentangling caste from the tenets of Manu. Indeed, according to Nicholas Dirks, Ambedkar

¹³⁵ R. Majumdar, ‘Marriage, Family, and Property in India: the Hindu Succession Act of 1956’, *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2010, p. 399.

¹³⁶ F. Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women’s Rights in India*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. 80.

¹³⁷ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform*, p. 27.

¹³⁸ ‘The Revolt of the Untouchables’ in B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 5, V. Moon (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 1989, p. 255.

believed caste ‘could not be separated from the beliefs and institutions of Hinduism more generally’.¹³⁹ Likewise, in his analysis of women’s oppression, he perceived a clear correlation between the commands of the *Manusmriti* and the social status of contemporary Indian women. In 1951, Ambedkar published ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,’ in which he blamed Manu for the “fall” of women from a historically ‘very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country’.¹⁴⁰ Here, Ambedkar was alluding to the apocryphal *Vedic* “golden age” of Indian women; claims about the high status of women in *Rig Vedic* society were also a common theme in nationalist histories.¹⁴¹ Ambedkar pointed to the disputation between Gargi and Yajnavalkya to defend his position,¹⁴² an episode from the *Upanishads* that was also used in nationalist circles as evidence for the “golden age” theory. Ambedkar was alone, however, in denouncing Manu as the culprit for the subsequent “downfall.” Like ‘The Revolt of the Untouchables’ and many other anti-caste articles written by Ambedkar, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ incorporated a textual deconstruction of the *Manusmriti*. Specifically, it highlighted sections of the *Manusmriti* which were purportedly used as justification for restricting women’s liberty and upholding gender-discriminatory laws. Thus, according to Manu, women, through ‘their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however, carefully they may be guarded in this (world)’.¹⁴³ Further, knowing ‘their disposition, which the Lord of creatures laid in them at the creation to be such, (every) man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them’.¹⁴⁴ Manu also states that women have ‘(a love of their) seat and (of) ornament,

¹³⁹ N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001.

¹⁴⁰ B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, no. 2, H. Narake et al. (ed.), Mumbai, The Education Department of Maharashtra, 2003, p. 122.

¹⁴¹ R. Thapar, ‘Is the Past Another Country?’, in N. de Mel and S. Thiruchandran (ed.), *At the Cutting Edge: Essays in Honour of Kumar Jayawardena*, New Delhi, Women Unlimited, 2007, p. 244.

¹⁴² ‘The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulabha, between Yajnavalkya and Gargi, between Yajnavalkya and Maitrei and between Sankaracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu’s time could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education’. In ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 122.

¹⁴³ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 123.

¹⁴⁴ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 123.

impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.¹⁴⁵ According to Ambedkar, these verses showed ‘how low was woman in the opinion of Manu’.¹⁴⁶ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ also addressed issues that were central to the Hindu Code Bill. These parallels may have reflected Ambedkar’s ongoing frustration with conservative efforts to slow the bill’s passage through the legislature. Indeed, he resigned as law minister in 1951, shortly after the publication of the article, in protest against the bill’s obstruction by conservative members of the Congress party.¹⁴⁷ The points of similarity between the bill and article included divorce and women’s property rights. Specifically, Ambedkar quoted from Manu to argue women were disadvantaged in matters of divorce by Brahmanic tradition. Manu stated that a woman ‘must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband’s) families contemptible’.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the ‘husband is declared to be one with wife, which means that there could be separation [sic] once a woman is married’.¹⁴⁹ Finally, Ambedkar quotes Manu’s law that neither ‘by sale nor by repudiation is a wife released from her husband’.¹⁵⁰ The purpose of these directives, Ambedkar argued, was to restrict the liberty of women. Manu did not proscribe men leaving their wives. Therefore, the law was intended not ‘to tie up a man to a woman but it was to tie up the woman to a man and to leave the man free’.¹⁵¹ Ambedkar also quoted from Manu on the subject of women’s property. Manu stated that a ‘wife, a son and a slave, these three are declared to have no property; the wealth which they earn is (acquired) for him to whom they belong’.¹⁵² Ambedkar’s commentary on this passage was reminiscent of his interjection into the Hindu Code Bill debates on women’s absolute property. When she becomes a widow, he explained,

¹⁴⁵ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 123.

¹⁴⁶ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 123.

¹⁴⁷ C. Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2005, pp. 116-117.

¹⁴⁸ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 124.

¹⁴⁹ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 124.

¹⁵⁰ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 124.

¹⁵¹ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 124.

¹⁵² ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 125.

‘Manu allows her maintenance, if her husband was joint, and a widow’s estate in the property of her husband if she was separate from his family. But Manu never allows her to have any domination over property’.¹⁵³ However, the tone adopted by Ambedkar in ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ was more polemical than his reasoned defence of women’s absolute property in the Hindu Code Bills debates. It was Manu, he argued, that had reduced women ‘to the level of a slave in the matter of property’.¹⁵⁴ Finally, Ambedkar drew attention to the absolute obedience expected of women living under Manu’s code, which stated him ‘to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father’s permission, she shall obey as long as he lives and when he is dead, she must not insult his memory’.¹⁵⁵ A woman’s husband might have been ‘destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband [was to be] constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife’.¹⁵⁶ She must always be cheerful, clever in the management of her household affairs, careful in cleaning her utensils, and economical in expenditure.¹⁵⁷ These verses highlighted by Ambedkar epitomise the qualities displayed by a *pativratā*, the idealised figure of a chaste, faithful, and devoted Hindu wife.¹⁵⁸ In many ways, Ambedkar’s critique of this concept in Manu prefigured critiques in recent feminist scholarship on the subject of “Brahmanical patriarchy.”¹⁵⁹ Shalini Shah writes, for example, that ‘the pativrata cannot be seen as an eternal given in the Indian culture. She was really an accreditation of the patriarchal brahmanical social order over a period of time’.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Ambedkar argued the oppressive gender norms sanctioned by the *Manusmriti* were not inherent to Indian culture. Rather, they were rooted in the dictates of the Brahmanical

¹⁵³ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 124.

¹⁵⁴ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, p. 125.

¹⁵⁵ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, pp. 126-127.

¹⁵⁶ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, pp. 126-127.

¹⁵⁷ ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman’ in Ambedkar, pp. 126-127.

¹⁵⁸ W. J. Johnson, ‘Pativratā’, *A Dictionary of Hinduism*, 2014,

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198610250.001.0001/acref-9780198610250-e-1872>, (accessed 10 September 2016).

¹⁵⁹ Brahmanical patriarchy is defined as an interconnected system of caste and gender that organises the Brahmanical social order. See, U. Chakravarty, ‘Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, 1993, pp. 579-580.

¹⁶⁰ S. Shah, ‘On Gender, Wives and “Pativratās”’, *Social Scientist*, vol. 40, no. 5/6, 2012, pp. 87-88.

textual tradition.

Social liberation and legal equality were the hallmarks of Ambedkar's discourse on women. Working with the philosophy of Dewey, he developed a vision of a democratic society that rejected social, legal, and structural inequalities, including those experienced by Indian women. The Hindu Code bill was a concrete expression of that vision. Motives of reform and modernisation drove the development of the bill. For Ambedkar, improving the socio-legal status of Indian women was the bill's definitive purpose. In many ways, Ambedkar's discourse on women paralleled his discourse on caste. Indeed, within the frame of his emancipatory rhetoric, both gender and caste-based discriminations were rooted in the same oppressive Brahmanical traditions.

Conclusion

Gandhi's and Ambedkar's discourses on women emerged from different political goals and ideologies. Gandhi incorporated mythical characters from the Hindu epics into his discourse on women. He employed these figures strategically to supplement his rhetoric and inspire his audiences. However, his use of these characters represented an implicit endorsement of the patriarchal interpretations with which they were generally associated. Gandhi's position on women entering the public sphere to take part in nationalist protests was inconsistent. Initially, he offered a set of sanctioned political activities for women that were largely restricted to the home. When women ignored his injunctions, he was forced to reframe his position and accept their ever-increasing presence in public agitations. However, having conceded ground, he still attempted to channel women's energies into the forms of public protest he argued were suited to their inherent purity, morality, and non-violent qualities. Thus, Gandhi's construction of women as political actors was consistently based on an essentialised construction of sexual difference. Gandhi's discourse on women was produced under the influence of several competing concerns. His paramount objective was effectively integrating women into a mass-based political front directed against British rule. Gandhi was also guided by his vision for a unified and harmonious Indian society. Thus, as with his approach to caste, communalism, and economics, his discourse on women advocated against major disruptions to existing social structures.

Ambedkar's approach to discriminatory social structures was more radical than that of Gandhi. His discourse on women was based on a modernising political ideology, that emphasised social and legal emancipation. Ambedkar argued that participatory democracy represented a form of protection against discriminatory laws and social practices. This realisation led to his demands for universal suffrage, including the enfranchisement of women, in the years leading up to Indian independence. The Hindu Code Bill was Ambedkar's most notable legislative attempt to improve the socio-legal status of Indian women. The bill was purportedly an effort to rationalise and simplify an overly-complex area of the law. However, the significant changes that were proposed to existing gender-discriminatory inheritance, dowry, marriage, and divorce laws suggests that reform was the

underlying intention of the bill's supporters. Ambedkar's defence of the Hindu Code Bill exemplified the intersection between his discourse on women and his modernising, reformist, and state-interventionist political ideology. There was also an intersection between Ambedkar's discourse on women and his discourse on caste. Indeed, he believed that both caste-based oppression and gender discrimination were the products of Brahmanical textual tradition. Thus, the dictates of Manu occupied a central place in Ambedkar's integrated critique of caste and patriarchy in Hindu society. Ultimately, both Gandhi's and Ambedkar's distinctive discourses on women were produced by their different objectives and overarching political ideologies.

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