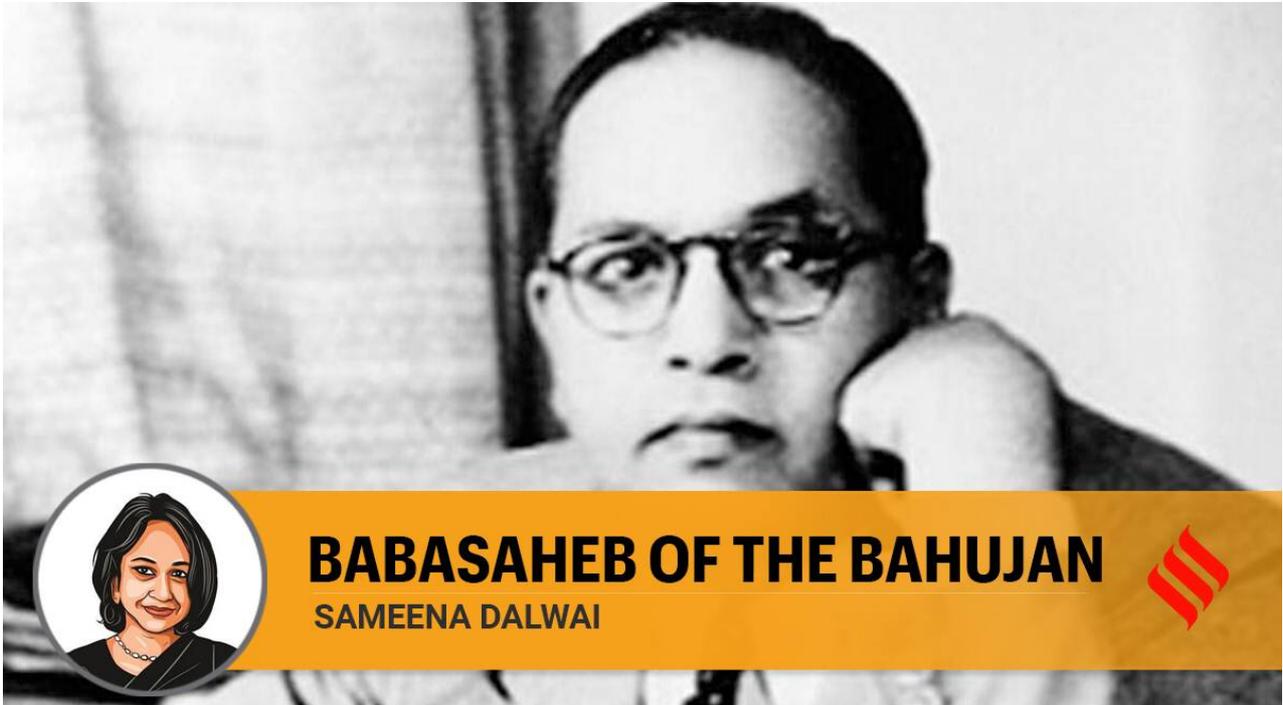


Babasaheb of the Bahujans: B R Ambedkar lives on

 indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/babasaheb-of-the-bahujans-ambekar-lives-on-8309792

December 7, 2022



When Ambedkar went away to Columbia, he was already dedicated to the cause of eradicating untouchability.

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“Why is Ambedkar not like Phule who educated his wife and together with her started schools for girls?” we are asked. In mainstream parlance, Ambedkar is often presented as a stern, preaching man who expected sacrifices from his wife and contributed little to the women’s cause.

In Madness of Manu, feminist sociologist Sharmila Rege argues that mainstream feminism falls short in understanding the difference between the lives of Phule and Ambedkar as members of OBC and Dalit communities. Phule belonged to the Mali (gardener) caste and Ambedkar was a Mahar. The entitlements, access to resources and spaces, poverty and humiliation are distinct for those who are destined to live outside of village boundaries and treated as beasts of burden. So, when we say that Ambedkar did not envisage a public life for his wife, we have to understand their household and its role in the anti-caste struggle.

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When Ambedkar went away to Columbia, he was already dedicated to the cause of eradicating untouchability. In his absence, his wife ran the household. She took wage jobs and faced starvation at times. What she performed was not merely a wifely duty, but it was her contribution to her community and a partnership in social change.

Ramabai Ambedkar is referred to as “Ramai”. Rama plus “aai” (mother in Marathi) with Ambedkar as Baba — father. She is the representative of the tough mother that working-class families know. When she got angry, she reprimanded everyone, including her celebrity husband. When he returned to Bombay, Ambedkar started teaching at Elphinstone College. Once Ramabai was mad at him for buying too many books. “Can you eat books?” she asked. He left and returned with fish, fruit, and vegetables. A big family meal ensued and everyone laughed at the whole episode.

Ambedkar himself liked to cook fish and feed others. He also liked to play the violin. But domestic bliss or artistic pursuits had little scope in a busy and harsh life. The couple lost four of their children; of their five children, only a son survived infancy.

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Ramabai, weakened by the childbirths and deaths, died in 1935. An inconsolable Ambedkar wrote that she had transformed him from “Bhima to Dr Ambedkar”. After her death, he was overcome with grief.

As a leader, Ambedkar is credited with pulling his community from darkness to light. Dalit women’s autobiographies show how illiteracy, poverty, fights, squalor were relentless in the basti, and women suffered cruelty and degradation. Mukta Sarvagod’s book Mitali Kavade (Closed Doors) narrates how teenage daughters-in-law were starved, beaten and worked to death. Superstition was rampant: Women were accused of being possessed by spirits and young girls would be dedicated to temples, where they would become prostitutes. Kumud Pawade in her Antasphot (Inner Blast) writes how the “pativrata” models of Sita and Savitri had a deep impact on women, who fasted for violent philandering drunkard husbands. In the 1930s, revolution arrived in the bastis.

Baby Kamble in Jine Amuche (Our Lives) writes that the message of Buddha filled with compassion came through Baba and the situation changed in a generation. Ambedkar told the women: “Men and women are partners in a marriage, treat your husband with equality, send your children to school, wear clean clothes. Let’s wash off the blot of untouchability together”.

In We Too Made History (Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon), an old activist Gitabai Pawar remembers a meeting in 1942 where she met Babasaheb Ambedkar. All the women had dressed up for the special women’s meeting and Ambedkar was overjoyed to see them. “My sisters look so neat and tidy. Who will call them Mharani now?” He said with tears in his eyes, referring to the derogatory terms used for Mahar women. They cried with him and carried home his message: “Always be like this, confident. Educate your daughters” It is easy to imagine why they identified him as Baba, a father figure rather than as a political personality.

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As a policy-maker, Ambedkar's greatest contribution, apart from the Constitution, was the Hindu Code Bill. It would revolutionise the Hindu domestic sphere by offering women the right to marry by choice and across caste boundaries, give them the right to divorce, and the right to inherit property. Ambedkar felt women, once they become agents of their own fate, will dismantle the caste patriarchy. He resigned when the Bill was stalled by the upper caste orthodoxy. The Bill became the law in a piecemeal, diluted avatar, in the form of the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act etc.

What do we, the women of India, inherit from him? Today, when a Dalit woman rape survivor seeks justice in the court against upper caste rapists, when a woman in a joint family demands her share of land, or when a lower caste woman becomes a sarpanch, chief minister or President, Ambedkar's legacy comes alive.

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First published on: 07-12-2022 at 07:18:33 am

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