

INDIAN POLITICAL THINKER'S CONTRIBUTIONS IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment—the process of increasing the social, economic, political, and legal strength of women—has been a vital concern in India's socio-political discourse. From ancient times through the colonial period to independent India, various Indian political thinkers have played a significant role in advocating and shaping ideas of gender equality and women's rights. Their contributions have laid the foundation for modern feminist movements in the country. This paper explores the role of key Indian political thinkers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others in promoting the empowerment of women. It evaluates their philosophies, movements, and policy contributions toward creating a more equitable society for women in India.

1. RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY: THE PIONEER OF SOCIAL REFORM

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) is often hailed as the father of the Indian Renaissance and a pioneering figure in advocating women's rights during the early 19th century.

Key Contributions:

- Led the campaign against **Sati**, which was outlawed in 1829 with British support.
- Advocated for **widow remarriage** and **women's education**.
- Emphasized rationality, human dignity, and social justice in his writings and actions.

(i) Led the Campaign against Sati, which was outlawed in 1829 with British Support

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's most renowned and impactful contribution to women's rights was his relentless campaign against the inhumane practice of **Sati**—the burning of widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. At a time when this custom was entrenched in certain parts of India and often justified in the name of religious tradition, Roy courageously challenged both the orthodoxy of Hindu society and the passivity of colonial authorities.

- **Advocacy through Reason and Scripture:** Roy was a scholar of Sanskrit, Persian, and English, and he used his deep understanding of Hindu scriptures to argue that Sati had no sanction in the Vedas or other ancient texts. He published tracts and essays refuting the religious justifications for the practice.
- **Moral and Humanitarian Grounds:** He emphasized the moral degradation and cruelty of forcing women—often young, and sometimes against their will—to die. For him, this was not only a religious issue but a question of human rights and dignity.
- **Mobilizing Support:** He worked to build public opinion against Sati through the **Atmiya Sabha** and engaged with British officials to press for legal intervention.
- **Legislative Victory:** His efforts culminated in the passing of **Regulation XVII of 1829** by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor-General of India, officially banning the practice.

of Sati in Bengal Presidency. This was a landmark moment in Indian social reform, directly saving thousands of lives and sparking further debates on women's rights.

(ii) Advocated for widow remarriage and women's education

Roy believed that true empowerment of women could only be achieved through structural reforms in family and social life, starting with the right to remarry and access to education.

- **Widow Remarriage:** Although not as directly involved in the legislative process that came later, Roy laid the intellectual and moral foundation for the movement. He opposed the inhuman treatment of widows, who were often ostracized and forced to live in poverty and isolation. He argued that denying them remarriage was both unethical and un-Hindu, using scripture to advocate for change.
- **Women's Education:** Roy firmly believed that education was the cornerstone of women's empowerment. He supported and established schools that included girls in the curriculum, which was revolutionary at a time when educating women was frowned upon in orthodox circles.
- He emphasized subjects like science, philosophy, and rational thinking rather than purely religious instruction.
- He also advocated for the teaching of modern languages such as English, as he believed exposure to liberal Western ideas would aid in women's emancipation.

Roy's vision was of a society where intellectual and moral development was open to all, regardless of gender.

(iii) Emphasized Rationality, Human Dignity, and Social Justice in His Writings and Actions

Roy's overarching philosophy was deeply rooted in Enlightenment ideals—reason, equality, and individual dignity. He applied these principles consistently to the cause of women.

- **Rationality:** He challenged social customs that were based on superstition and blind faith. For Roy, rational inquiry and scriptural reinterpretation were essential tools for social change. He believed that the progress of a society depended on the critical thinking of its citizens, including women.
- **Human Dignity:** His writings constantly reaffirmed the moral worth and autonomy of women. In opposing practices like Sati, polygamy, and child marriage, he highlighted how such customs reduced women to property rather than treating them as full human beings.
- **Social Justice:** Roy saw gender inequality as part of a broader pattern of social injustice, including caste discrimination and religious intolerance. Through institutions like the Brahmo Samaj, which he co-founded, he sought to reform Hinduism to be more inclusive, ethical, and equitable.

His intellectual contributions and public campaigns established the ideological groundwork for 19th-century reform movements in India. By using reasoned argument, moral persuasion, and political activism, he became one of the earliest champions of women's rights in modern India.

2. MAHATMA GANDHI: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATION

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) integrated women into the national movement in a way that gave them public visibility and voice.

Key Contributions:

- Encouraged women's participation in the **Non-Cooperation Movement, Dandi March**, and other satyagrahas.
- Advocated **non-violence and self-reliance**, values he saw as inherently resonant with women's strengths.
- Stood against child marriage and **purdah** (veil) systems.

(i) Encouraged Women's Participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement, Dandi March, and Other Satyagrahas

One of Gandhi's most groundbreaking contributions to women's empowerment was his deliberate inclusion of women in the national freedom struggle, offering them a public and political role for the first time at such a scale in Indian history.

- **Political Inclusion:** Prior to Gandhi, women's participation in politics was minimal and largely symbolic. Gandhi believed that true swaraj (self-rule) was impossible without women's active involvement. He encouraged them to break out of the domestic sphere and engage in civil disobedience, boycotts, and constructive programs.
- **Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22):** Thousands of women responded to Gandhi's call, participating in picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops, spinning khadi, and promoting Indian goods. For many women, this marked their first experience in organized political action.
- **Salt March (Dandi March, 1930):** Although the march itself was predominantly male, Gandhi's message resonated widely with women. After the march, he encouraged women to lead local satyagrahas, especially in making salt and breaking colonial laws. Figures like **Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi**, and **Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay** became iconic leaders of this movement.
- **Civil Disobedience Movement and Quit India Movement:** Gandhi insisted on mass participation, and women responded by taking on leadership roles, even facing arrest and imprisonment. For example, **Usha Mehta** set up an underground radio station during the Quit India Movement, defying British surveillance.

Through these actions, Gandhi transformed women from passive observers into active agents of political change, asserting their right to participate in shaping India's future.

(ii) Advocated Non-Violence and Self-Reliance, Values He Saw as Inherently Resonant with Women's Strengths

Gandhi's philosophy of **ahimsa (non-violence)** and **swadeshi (self-reliance)** was not just a political strategy but a moral framework that he believed aligned naturally with women's traditional roles and inherent qualities.

- **Ahimsa (Non-violence):** Gandhi argued that women were naturally more patient, forgiving, and non-violent, and thus uniquely suited to practice and lead in the principle of ahimsa. He believed their moral strength and capacity for suffering made them ideal satyagrahis.
- **Swadeshi and Economic Empowerment:** Gandhi promoted spinning khadi and cottage industries as part of self-reliance. He actively involved women in these initiatives, encouraging them to become economically independent through home-based work.

- He saw **economic self-sufficiency** as key to dignity and empowerment, especially for rural women who had limited access to education or mobility.
- **Constructive Work Programs:** Women were central to Gandhi's efforts in village sanitation, education, anti-untouchability work, and rural health, which were all part of his nation-building vision. These activities helped women acquire leadership skills and a sense of purpose beyond domestic confines.

Gandhi's redefinition of politics as moral action rooted in everyday life made it accessible to women and legitimized their participation on their own terms.

(iii) Stood against Child Marriage and Purdah (Veil) Systems

Gandhi was a fierce critic of regressive social customs that he believed oppressed women and denied them their basic human rights.

Opposition to Child Marriage:

- Gandhi condemned child marriage as a social evil that stunted the physical and mental development of girls. He considered it an act of violence and exploitation.
- He openly supported legislation like the **Sarda Act of 1929**, which rose the minimum age of marriage.
- Through his writings and speeches, he encouraged parents to educate their daughters and delay their marriage until they were physically and emotionally mature.

Critique of Purdah:

- Gandhi opposed the **purdah system**, which required women to veil themselves and remain secluded from public life, particularly in North Indian orthodox communities.
- He viewed it as a symbol of gender inequality, reinforcing notions of female shame and inferiority.
- Gandhi urged women to shed the purdah, not just physically but mentally—to speak up, walk in public, and engage confidently in social life.
- He emphasized that true modesty lay in conduct, not in confinement, and that empowering women meant giving them freedom and visibility.

By challenging these deep-rooted practices, Gandhi shifted the cultural conversation around women's rights and dignity, encouraging both men and women to rethink traditional gender roles.

3. DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR: LEGAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the architect of the Indian Constitution, played a crucial role in embedding women's rights into the legal framework of India.

Key Contributions:

- Drafted provisions in the Constitution guaranteeing **equality, non-discrimination, and equal protection under law** for women.
- Championed the **Hindu Code Bill**, which sought to grant women rights in property, divorce, and adoption.
- Addressed the intersection of caste and gender, emphasizing that **Dalit women** suffered triple oppression.

(i) Drafted Provisions in the Constitution Guaranteeing Equality, Non-Discrimination, and Equal Protection under Law for Women

As the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in ensuring that gender equality was enshrined in the legal foundation of the Indian Republic. His vision for women's empowerment was rooted in social justice, human dignity, and constitutional morality.

Fundamental Rights for Women:

Ambedkar ensured that the Constitution guaranteed equal rights for women in all spheres—political, economic, and social.

Key Articles:

Article 14: Guarantees equality before the law **and** equal protection of the laws to all persons, regardless of gender.

Article 15(1): Prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, along with religion, race, caste, and place of birth.

Article 15(3): Allows the state to make special provisions for women and children, enabling affirmative action.

Article 16: Guarantees equal opportunity in public employment.

Political Rights:

Ambedkar strongly supported universal adult franchise, ensuring that women had the right to vote and stand for elections from the very beginning of the Republic—at a time when many Western democracies still denied full political rights to women.

Symbolic and Structural Equality:

- By embedding these rights in the Constitution, Ambedkar shifted the focus from token gestures to structural empowerment through legal mechanisms.
- This constitutional framework has since served as a critical tool for feminist jurisprudence, legal reform, and social movements aimed at protecting and advancing women's rights in India.

(ii) Championed the Hindu Code Bill, Which Sought to Grant Women Rights in Property, Divorce, and Adoption

Ambedkar believed that legal reform in personal laws was essential for dismantling patriarchy in Indian society. One of his most significant yet controversial contributions was the **Hindu Code Bill**, which he introduced in the Constituent Assembly.

Objectives of the Bill:

The Hindu Code Bill was a comprehensive attempt to codify and modernize Hindu personal laws, which had historically denied women any meaningful rights in family matters.

The Bill aimed to provide Hindu women with:

- **Equal rights to inherit property** from parents and husbands.
- The right to initiate and obtain divorce on grounds such as cruelty, desertion, or mutual consent.

- Adoption rights, so women could adopt children independently.
- Greater say in matrimonial property and maintenance.

Resistance and Political Fallout:

- The Bill faced immense resistance from conservative Hindu leaders and members of Parliament, who saw it as an attack on traditional values.
- Due to this opposition and lack of support from the ruling Congress leadership, the Bill was not passed in its full form during Ambedkar's tenure.
- In protest, Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in 1951, stating that “to leave inequality between man and woman untouched and to go on passing laws regarding economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution.”

Legacy:

- Although the original Bill was diluted and passed later in parts (as the Hindu Marriage Act, Hindu Succession Act, etc., between 1955–56), Ambedkar's efforts were visionary and set the tone for future legal reforms.
- The Hindu Code Bill remains a milestone in the legal history of Indian women, as it challenged centuries-old customs and advocated equal status within the family.

(iii) Addressed the Intersection of Caste and Gender, Emphasizing that Dalit Women Suffered Triple Oppression

Dr. Ambedkar was among the first Indian thinkers to systematically analyze the intersection of caste and gender, long before the term became popular in academic discourse.

Triple Burden: Ambedkar highlighted that **Dalit women** were the most oppressed segment of Indian society, as they faced:

- **Caste-based exploitation** from the upper castes.
- **Gender-based subordination** from men within their own communities.
- **Economic marginalization** and lack of access to education or employment.

Critique of Manusmriti:

- In his famous act of burning the Manusmriti in 1927, Ambedkar symbolically attacked the religious foundations of both caste and patriarchy. The ancient text was used to justify both the inferiority of women and the hierarchy of castes.
- He condemned texts that perpetuated women's subjugation and called for the eradication of scriptural authority in civil law.

Empowering Dalit Women:

- Ambedkar advocated for education, political participation, and land ownership for Dalit women.
- Through his newspaper "**Mook Nayak**", and in speeches to women's gatherings, he encouraged women to:
 - ✓ Get educated,
 - ✓ Challenge discrimination,

- ✓ Participate in the public sphere.

Institutional Reforms:

- Ambedkar envisioned a welfare state where the state would actively intervene to uplift marginalized groups, including women from oppressed castes.
- His vision was later reflected in policies of reservations (affirmative action) in education and employment.

His emphasis on the interlocking systems of caste and patriarchy made his contribution uniquely inclusive, paving the way for **Dalit feminism** and the broader understanding of intersectional justice in India.

4. JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: MODERNIST AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMER

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), played a key role in creating institutions and policies that supported women's development.

Key Contributions:

- Promoted women's education and economic participation as essential to nation-building.
- Supported the codification of personal laws to ensure women's rights in marriage, inheritance, and property.
- Strengthened institutions like the **National Commission for Women** and **All India Women's Conference**.

(i) Promoted Women's Education and Economic Participation as Essential to Nation-Building

As the first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru placed women's empowerment at the heart of his vision for a modern, democratic, and inclusive nation. He recognized that a new India could not be built unless half the population—women—were educated, economically empowered, and socially uplifted.

Education as a Catalyst

- Nehru viewed education as the foundation of gender equality and social progress.
- He expanded access to primary and secondary education, emphasizing the inclusion of girls in all levels of schooling.
- Under his leadership, institutions like the **University Grants Commission (UGC)** and **Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)** were established, many of which began to admit women and support their academic advancement.
- He advocated for the eradication of illiteracy among women, especially in rural India, recognizing that educated women could uplift families and communities.
- Nehru also supported the growth of vocational and technical education for women to enhance their employability.

Economic Participation

- Nehru believed that women's economic independence was essential for their empowerment. He encouraged their participation in cooperatives, industry, agriculture, and public service.
- His Five-Year Plans, particularly the **Second Five-Year Plan**, emphasized women's role in development and recommended training programs, self-employment schemes, and cottage

industries for women.

- By linking women's economic roles with national development, Nehru helped reshape the idea of women as contributors to the economy, not merely dependents or caretakers.

(ii) Supported the Codification of Personal Laws to Ensure Women's Rights in Marriage, Inheritance, and Property

Nehru played a crucial political role in pushing forward legal reforms to codify Hindu personal laws. While the efforts were initiated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, it was Nehru's political leadership and perseverance that ensured the eventual passage of these progressive laws after Ambedkar's resignation.

The Hindu Code Reform Package (1955–56)

- Nehru spearheaded the passage of a series of laws known collectively as the **Hindu Code Bills**, which were landmark achievements in securing women's rights in private and family life. These included:
 - ✓ **Hindu Marriage Act (1955)**: Legalized divorce and ensured monogamy.
 - ✓ **Hindu Succession Act (1956)**: Gave equal inheritance rights to daughters in joint family property.
 - ✓ **Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956)**: Allowed women to adopt children and claim maintenance from their husbands.
 - ✓ **Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956)**: Addressed guardianship of minors, ensuring equal rights for mothers.

These laws, despite facing intense opposition from conservative quarters, were passed due to Nehru's political will, commitment to social justice, and vision of a secular, modern India.

Secular and Inclusive Legal Vision

- While these reforms applied only to Hindus, Nehru envisioned a **Uniform Civil Code** to eventually ensure equal rights for all women, regardless of religion—a goal not realized in his time but still part of ongoing debate in India.
- He saw state intervention in personal laws as a necessary step to liberate women from patriarchal control.

(iii) Strengthened Institutions like the National Commission for Women and All India Women's Conference

Jawaharlal Nehru recognized the importance of institutional support for women's advancement. Although the **National Commission for Women (NCW)** was formally established in 1992, long after his time, Nehru laid the institutional groundwork for women's rights organizations and supported their legitimacy and expansion.

Support for All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

- Founded in 1927, the **All India Women's Conference (AIWC)** was a key organization fighting for women's education, legal rights, and social reform.
- Nehru was a staunch supporter of AIWC, often engaging with its leaders and supporting their campaigns for reforms in marriage laws, female education, and suffrage.

- He encouraged AIWC and similar bodies to act as civil society partners in policy-making.

Encouraging Women's Representation

- Under Nehru's leadership, women were appointed to important positions in politics, civil service, and education.
 - ✓ **Rajkumari Amrit Kaur** became India's first Health Minister and one of the first women to hold a cabinet position in any government globally.
 - ✓ Nehru's own support of **Indira Gandhi** as a political leader was part of his broader vision of women's leadership.
- He also encouraged the inclusion of women in the Planning Commission, educational institutions, and local governance bodies.

Institutional Legacy

- Nehru's approach helped legitimize the role of women's organizations in national development.
- His administration laid the foundation for later institutions like the NCW and the Ministry of Women and Child Development by establishing the norm that women's welfare was a core state responsibility, not just a private or charitable concern.

1. Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922)

A pioneering social reformer, scholar, and educationist, Pandita Ramabai dedicated her life to improving the condition of Indian women, especially widows, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She is regarded as one of the earliest feminist voices in modern India.

Advocate for Widow Upliftment

- In an era when widows were ostracized, impoverished, and denied basic dignity, Ramabai emerged as a staunch defender of their rights.
- She established the **Sharada Sadan (Home for Learning)** in Bombay in 1889, which later moved to Pune, as a shelter and education center for destitute and child widows.
- The institution not only provided literacy and vocational training, but also psychological support and moral courage, empowering widows to live independently.

Promotion of Female Education

- Ramabai believed education was the key to women's liberation. At a time when female education was rare, she insisted on universal, secular, and practical education for girls.
- She emphasized subjects like science, history, hygiene, and English, challenging the male-dominated religious curriculum of the time.
- She translated important texts, including portions of the **Bible into Marathi**, to make knowledge accessible to Indian women in their native languages.

Trailblazer in Women's Rights

- Ramabai traveled widely, including to England and the United States, studying Western education systems and raising funds for her mission.
- Through her writings such as **“The High-Caste Hindu Woman” (1887)**, she offered a piercing critique of patriarchy, child marriage, and caste oppression, which gained

international attention.

Pandita Ramabai's legacy lies in her courage to challenge orthodoxy and her creation of spaces where women could rebuild their lives with dignity and education.

2. Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949)

Known as the “**Nightingale of India**” for her lyrical poetry and the first Indian woman to become President of the Indian National Congress, Sarojini Naidu combined political leadership with advocacy for women's rights.

Role in the Freedom Movement

- A key associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Naidu played a vital role in mass mobilizations like the **Civil Disobedience Movement** and **Salt Satyagraha**.
- She was one of the first women to be arrested during protests against British rule and led delegations across India to mobilize female participation in politics.

Champion of Women in Democracy

- Naidu consistently emphasized the role of women in democracy, arguing that freedom was incomplete without gender equality.
- As a delegate to the Round Table Conferences in London, she spoke eloquently about the right of Indian women to vote, to education, and to political representation.

Institutional Leadership

- In 1947, she was appointed the first female Governor of an Indian state (United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh), marking a breakthrough for women in Indian governance.
- She was an active member of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), supporting reforms in education, marriage laws, and political participation.

Through her eloquence, political courage, and commitment to gender justice, Sarojini Naidu remains a symbol of women's leadership in nation-building.

3. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973)

A rationalist thinker and social reformer from Tamil Nadu, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was a radical advocate of anti-caste politics, self-respect, and women's emancipation in South India.

Women's Liberation as Part of Social Justice

- Periyar viewed patriarchy and caste oppression as interlinked systems, both needing to be dismantled for true equality.
- He advocated equal rights for women in marriage, property, and education, and called for the abolition of child marriage, dowry, and the Devadasi system.

Critique of Religion and Patriarchy

- Through the **Self-Respect Movement**, Periyar encouraged women to reject religious customs that perpetuated male dominance, such as wearing the thaali (mangalsutra) or observing menstrual taboos.
- He supported inter-caste and self-respect marriages, conducted without Brahmin priests, often officiated by women themselves.

Promotion of Female Education and Employment

- Periyar promoted education for girls as a tool of liberation and encouraged women to enter politics, professions, and public life.
- He challenged male dominance in both domestic and public spaces, advocating for a society where women had complete autonomy over their lives.

His revolutionary ideas made him one of the strongest feminist voices from the South, influencing generations of activists, particularly in **Tamil Nadu and Dravidian politics**.

4. Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982)

A spiritual successor to Gandhi and founder of the **Bhoodan (Land Gift) Movement**, Vinoba Bhave combined spiritualism with social reform, emphasizing non-violence, equality, and service.

Bhoodan Movement and Women's Participation

- In the 1950s, Bhave launched the **Bhoodan Movement**, walking across India and persuading wealthy landowners to voluntarily donate land to landless peasants.
- Women, especially from rural and tribal communities, actively participated in the movement—organizing meetings, distributing land, and mediating between landlords and peasants.
- Bhave viewed women as natural nurturers of the earth and moral agents, essential to building a just and equitable society.

Belief in Spiritual Equality

- Bhave emphasized equality between men and women in spiritual and moral terms, arguing that gender discrimination was contrary to divine law.
- He often included women in his ashrams, peace missions, and training camps, giving them equal space to lead in non-violent social transformation.

Critique of Structural Inequality

- While not as radical as Periyar in his critique of patriarchy, Bhave subtly challenged patriarchal norms by encouraging women to question societal roles imposed on them.
- He also advocated for simple living and communal work, offering women a space of dignity and purpose outside traditional family structures.

Vinoba Bhave's emphasis on moral and spiritual equality provided a non-confrontational but effective approach to women's empowerment, especially in rural India.

CONCLUSION

The issue of women's empowerment has been a cornerstone of India's sociopolitical transformation since the 19th century. Within this broader context, Indian political thought has played a pivotal role in shaping discourses on gender equality and women's rights. This chapter aims to explore Indian political thought in relation to women's empowerment, highlighting its historical context, key thinkers, and future prospects.

Women's empowerment, defined as the process of increasing the political, social, educational, and economic strength of women, has long been recognized as crucial for building an

inclusive and just society. In India, this cause was not only taken up by reformers and social activists but also deeply embedded in the ideologies and actions of major political thinkers. Their philosophies and interventions laid the foundation for progressive social change and legal reforms, influencing both public opinion and state policy.

Understanding these contributions requires a closer examination of the ways in which key Indian political thinkers conceptualized gender justice. This chapter specifically highlights the perspectives of four influential figures—Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, and Jawaharlal Nehru—regarding women's empowerment. Each of these leaders, through their speeches, writings, and actions, addressed the issue from distinct ideological standpoints while converging on the importance of gender equity.

By analyzing their contributions, this chapter seeks to offer critical insights into the legacy of Indian political thought in advancing women's rights. It also aims to assess the enduring relevance of their ideas in the ongoing struggle for gender justice in India, thereby paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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