Paul Baran, an eminent Marxist historian, in one of his earlier essays draws a distinction between what he calls an “intellectual worker” and an “intellectual” in reference to social scientists. The former, according to Baran, is one who uses his intellect for making a living, while the latter, is seen as one who initiates a critical dialogue and conducts impartial scrutiny through analysis on given subjects, paving a path for social transformation.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, according to Baran’s definition, aptly fits the latter role of an intellectual— one, with most profound insights on social issues relevant to times of both, pre-and post-independent India.

It is true how, in decades since independence, the political usurping of Ambedkar’s work and vision has been used largely to suit certain vested political interests, crowding out one’s ability to fathom, observe and read about his remarkable attributes as a profound scholar (who wrote 22 books on some of the most pressing social issues during his life); an institution builder (drafting the constitution and providing independent voice to least advantaged sections in legal and social institutional arrangements); and as an economic theorist (challenging labor and tax policies of the British Raj).

One key aspect of Ambedkar’s work that, still gets limited mainstream attention, was his determined contribution towards the cause of women’s rights, the social movements of the 1920s and 30s, and their broader role in shaping India’s modern feminist thought.
In charting the history of feminist movements in India, as done by Radha Kumar in *The History of Doing*, 19th century is seen as a period when the “rights” and “wrongs” of women became major issues- with early efforts in reforming conditions of women taken by few women and men. By late 19th century (as argued by Kumar), women across social groups, getting affected by the campaigns, started joining and initiating various social movements in rural and urban spaces for enhancing women’s well-being. By early 20th century, various formations of women’s own autonomous organizations came into being, allowing a special category of “women activism” in late 1920s, 30s and 40s.

Ambedkar’s own role in pushing for women’s rights and their cause — in terms of safeguarding equal treatment and opportunity- is key in this period (early 20th century).

Right from the days of ‘Mook Nayak’ and ‘Bahishkrit Bharat’, oppression of women remained a major plank of Ambedkar’s work. His own writings and efforts to set up newspapers (*Mook Nayak, Bahiskrit Bharat*) with exclusive sections covering women issues seem inspired from earlier works of social reformers like Tulsibai Bansode (first participating in a *Mahad Sabha* in 1913), and who started newspapers like ‘*Chokhamela*’.

In recent decades too, women writers like Meenakshi Moon- in fields of political commentary- have contributed heavily in writing about historical conditions of Dalit women, running journals like *Aamhi Maitarani* (Our Women Friends).

Writing about the status and position of women, as given by Manu, Ambedkar in early 1920s remarks: “Can anybody doubt that it was Manu who was responsible for the degradation of women (and their agency) in India?”. In a gathering of more than 3000 women, Ambedkar (1927) famously remarked, “I measure the progress of community by the degree of progress which women had achieved...”. His concern on women rights and gender equality also echoed in some of his letters to his father.

Ambedkar’s tireless emphasis on valuing human dignity- more from the lens of how an individual is perceived from the lens of others- urged Indian women to break out from pre-existing barriers of caste, class based subjugation (levied historically by discriminatory Hindu codes practicing Brahmanical patriarchy).
The way of doing so, according to him, was by publically denouncing texts preaching patriarchal norms and practices (like Manu itself) and by giving unparalleled attention to women’s education, their well-being, and to collectively help each woman to progressively realize — irrespective of her social position— basic socio-cultural and economic rights (including right to property, involvement in political processes etc.).

In a speech (1936) given to communities of Vaghyas, Devadasis, Jokinis and Aradhis in Kamatipura, Ambedkar urged the Devadasi women—usually from Dalit and other oppressed castes— to give up the regressive religious practice (i.e. offering of pre-pubescent girls) to deities in Hindu temples and become “sexually available for community members”.

He said: “You will ask me how to make your living. I am not going to tell you that. There are hundreds of ways of doing it. But I insist that you give up this degraded life.... and do not live under conditions which inevitable drag you into prostitution..”

Ambedkar persistently talked about issues involving women in claiming and exercising their basic rights in most of his Parliamentary discussions (and speeches). To a certain extent, this helped catalyze greater public support for the work of women reformers around the time, while increasing participation of women— especially from across least advantaged groups— in organized Satyagrahas during years of late 1920s, 1930s and 40s.

In the famous Mahad Satyagraha (1927) for temple entry, a number of women from lower castes participated to burn the Manusmriti. Shandabai Shinde was one of the women who participated during this Satyagraha. In Kalram Temple Satyagraha at Nasik (1930) too, more than five-hundred women participated in the movement to restore equal treatment of women. Ramabai, Ambedkar’s wife, became the president of a women’s association founded in January (1928) in Bombay.

As British India’s first Indian Justice and Law Minister, Ambedkar advocated for family planning measures for women in Bombay’s Legislative Assembly. In 1928, he introduced a Maternity Benefit Bill in the Legislative Assembly with the following argument:
“It is in the interest of the nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the pre-natal period and also subsequently, and the principle of the Bill (Maternity Bill) is based entirely on that principle... That being so, Sir, I am bound to admit that the burden of this (creation and passing of the Bill) ought to be largely borne by the Government, I am prepared to admit this fact because of the conservation of the people’s welfare is primary concern of the Government... And in every country, you will find that the Government has been subjected to a certain amount of charge with regard to maternity benefit."

Speaking about the Hindu Code Bill (1948) in Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar urged members to have a common code which would replace the regressive practices of Hindu Law, with a reforming code commenting on seven important matters (including: an equal right to property; orders of succession among different heirs to the property of a deceased dying intestate; maintenance; marriage; divorce- to cite a few).

His direct confrontation with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee- revered by the RSS- on contested provisions in amended draft of Code Bill (presented in 1951), particularly on the subject of diluting “the prescription of monogamy”, is of particular importance.

Mukherjee- on the Code Bill- said: “Giving women the right to divorce was unacceptable”... “the sacramental nature of marriage is an ideology which lies deep rooted in the minds of millions of people.. it is the fundamental and sacred nature of Hindu marriage...” Ambedkar questioned Mukherjee, asking which Hindus was he referring to (considering 90% of Shudras accepted a right for women to divorce in their custom and practice). He added: “Sacramental marriage in as few words as possible is polygamy for the man and perpetual slavery for the wife.”

Ultimately, owing to pressure from the Hindu orthodoxy, when the Code Bill could not be passed, in reasons cited by Ambedkar for his resignation (as the Law Minister then), he underlined how parliament of independent India- by not passing the Bill- deprived its women citizens of their basic rights.

Still, in Ambedkar’s contribution, as the framing architect to Indian’s Constitution, provisions enlisted under Articles 14,15,15 (3), 16, 23, 39 (a,d), 42, 51 A (e) provide a feminist outlook to the Constitution , explicitly safeguarding equal rights and opportunities for both women and men.
In years since independence, legal jurisprudence across courts have used most of these provisions, invoking them in legal enactments to protect, safeguard and promote individual and collective interests of women and their independent agency (especially observable in cases of labor law, family law).

From a reflective lens, Ambedkar’s vision- appearing as a constitutive feature of modern Indian feminist thought (evolving since early 20th century)- went beyond a need to enable women, in their independent effort, to break through social, cultural patriarchal norms, imposed by Brahmanical codes.

His view on developing a collective, fraternal organization that is led and managed by women- promoting women education, their own well-being while creating self-awareness on social issues- is critical to transforming the Indian society (that still remains a work-in progress).

As we celebrate the 128th birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar, there is a need to see him and his work- as an extraordinaire intellectual- as part of a constitutive element shaping the course of modern Indian feminist movement and thought — since early 20th century.