

Research Article

Dr. Ambedkar's Vision towards Education of Dalits

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For centuries, the Indian education has been the monopoly of the twice born communities. Education outside these communities confines, strictly prohibited and always seen as a crime. It is more so with regard to the *shudra* community getting educated. Any attempt by the *shudra* communities to acquire education had to meet with severe consequences. If a *shudra* attempts to chant, his tongue was to be cut, if he listened the chanting he was punished by hot lead being poured into his ears, if he saw chanting his eyes were removed Deshpande (2010). This indicates the serious restrictions imposed on the *shudra* communities to keep them away from the domain of education. This had benefited certain sections to occupy the higher echelons of power by denying the basic education for the *shudra* communities of which Dalit formed a significant segment. Even after centuries, the advantages and disadvantages provided by the Hindu social order are being inherited by the later generations with a degree of variation. During the British rule also, the education was deliberately kept confined to the upper classes, as the British feared that the spread of education to the lower classes jeopardise their existence in India. The worst sufferers of such an education policy were the Dalits. Their segregation in schools was absolute. They had to sit outside the school. Drinking water was not available to them. Even the method of punishment meted out to the untouchable students was different from the method to punish the caste Hindu students. Although the caste Hindu students were beaten with sticks, the untouchable students were hit with clods and stones from a distance lest the touchable teachers got polluted. Thus, only those untouchable students, who meekly submitted to such horrible

insults and physical injuries, could receive education. ‘Those who could not put up with inhuman atrocities ran away from the school and spent the rest of their lives ploughing in the farms owned by others’ (Quoted by Lokhande, 1982:228–229). Ambedkar examined the education policy of the British and found that Education in India had always remained restricted to the members of the upper stratum of society.

Education is of great help in establishing equality and ensuring social justice. However, the system of education is adding to the existed inequalities, as there are problems in providing equal opportunities for all in education. The inequalities arise for the following reasons: Inequalities of educational opportunity occur due to the poverty of a large number of people. The poor cannot afford to meet the expenses of education. Children in rural areas studying in poorly equipped schools have to compete with the children urban schools, which are well-equipped schools. The poor exposure of the children leads to poor performance. Wide inequalities arise from difference in home environments. A child from a rural house hold or a slum does not have the same opportunity as a child from an upper class home with educated parents and in the places where there is no educational institution, the children do not get the opportunity as those who have educational institutions in their vicinity (Rao, 1990).

The repressive caste order was resented and protested by various intellectuals, scholars and reformers at different points of the history. In the later part of the 19th century and earlier part of 20th century, they attempted to reduce the caste inequalities in the society. They believed that the discrimination in different walks of life would pose a great danger to the integrity of the country. Some of them have gone to the extent to challenge the Hindu social order by advocating conversions into other religions. Since education was denied to Dalit they thought the progress of Dalit was permanently sealed under the social system and this should be questioned. Thus, they could establish a relation between education and empowerment as education is the way to acquire knowledge. Thus, the Dalit intellectuals seem to have believed the ancient saying ‘knowledge is power’; therefore, the means of acquiring knowledge, that is, education is denied to them. To overcome this problem, all Dalit leaders and scholars have demanded education for Dalit.

The changed social environment resulting from the demand of social reformation movements, and the impetus derived from the colonial administrator’s rationality the Dalit attempted for social mobility. The education provided by the Christian

missionaries and others has further encouraged the Dalit for the demand of integration with the larger society. Such efforts were made largely by Dr Ambedkar and Phule. Infact, Phule was the first Indian to realise the significance of universalisation of education in India. He believed that lack of education made Dalit innocent which became a curse for them. To make Dalit realise their conditions, he thought that education was a powerful instrument. To realise this objective apart from 'starting schools for Dalit on his own, he also requested the colonial government to allow Dalit into schools'. He took initiative to give education to the downtrodden thinking it is necessary for them to regain their social and cultural values and self-respect (Martin, Macwan, 2013).¹It was Dr. Ambedkar who consistently advocated education for Dalit as a means that could help in their liberation. 'Accordingly education was given a very significant place in Dr. Ambedkar's perception of social development'. He identified education as a key instrument of liberation from the oppressive structures of Hindu caste order (Padma Velaskar, 2012). The importance to education could be understood through his renowned and most inspiring slogan 'educate, organise and agitate'. The response for this slogan was spontaneous among Dalit who continued to live in oblivion.

There were serious attempts by Dr Ambedkar for the radical transformation of Dalit through education. He never compromised in demanding education for Dalit which was religiously denied for them. Despite all hurdles they went on to acquire higher education and emerged as role models for the Dalit community. In fact, their relentless struggle for Dalit dignity and self-respect has paved the way for the better life Dalit in the latter course of action.

While emphasising on the significance of education for Dalit, Dr Ambedkar argued that the backward classes have come to realise that after all education is the greatest material benefit for which they can fight. We may forego material benefits, we may forego material benefits of civilisation, but we cannot forego our right and opportunities to reap the benefit of the highest education to the fullest extent. That the importance of this question from the point of view of the backward classes who have just realised that without education their existence is not safe.² Dr. Ambedkar firmly believed that it was only through education Dalit could be made aware of the necessity of political power for their emancipation. Thus Dr Ambedkar

¹<http://mulnivasiorganiser.bamcef.org> accessed on 15 August 2013.

²Government of Maharashtra, 1982. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 2, p. 62.

attempted to establish the correlation between the education and Dalit emancipation. In view of this, he demanded admission for Dalit children in educational institutions without discrimination. He made strong recommendations with regard to education for Dalit to the constituent assembly in the form a memorandum, in 1946 which later came to be known as 'the states on minorities'. In this document while stressing the need for Dalit liberation he attached utmost importance to education for Dalit. In this connection, he argued that the state should take the responsibility of imparting education to Dalit.

The constitution envisaged the overcoming of the civil disability of Dalit through empowerment with the help of protective discrimination policy and affirmative action. It aimed at transforming the traditional hierarchical and unequal society a socialist society. The key formula included the system of reservations in admissions in educational institutions, in employment and in political institutions for the Dalit. Uplifting on the economic front through various schemes and programmes and on the education front through reservations system are considered major means changing pathos of the Dalit since independence. In fact, as early as 1946, Dr Ambedkar realised the significance of the constitutional protections to Dalit and their rights. He believed that in the absence of these rights Dalit could not develop (Dr. Ambedkar, 1979). DrAmbedkar as the chairman of the drafting committee of the constitution of India incorporated several rights in the third part of the constitution under fundamental rights. The safeguards provided to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are grouped as social safeguards, economic safeguards, educational, cultural safeguards and political safeguards service safeguards.

The 1961 census revealed that only 10% of Dalits were literate seventy years after independence the situation has marginally improved. Low literacy rate for Dalits indicates the failure of the school system. The 2011population census shows that literacy rate among Dalits is 66.1% compared with73% among others. Poor accessibility of schools is one of the important factors for low literacy among Dalits. No access to schools is a hurdle for Dalits as compared with the population in general. A study by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) reveals that schooling is available within a significantly smaller number of Dalits localities.³ Aruna (1999) in her study of Tamil Nadu says that in many habitations, the school is situated in localities inhabited by upper castes, which are hostile to students belonging to the lower castes.

³NCERT, 1998. Cited in Nambissan and Sedwal 2002.

According to the Sixth All India Educational Survey of NCERT (1998), Dalits mainly avail of government schooling. Of the Dalit children in primary schools, 91.3% in rural areas and 64.6% in urban areas were in schools managed by state government and local bodies. Many of these schools are plagued by various problems such as lack of basic infrastructure, classrooms, teachers and teaching aids. Dilapidated buildings, leaking roofs and mud floors appear quite common in schools and provide a depressing atmosphere for children. Teaching aids, apart from blackboards, are relatively absent. There is a problem of absenteeism of students and teachers, etc. The Dalits children do not have access to quality education. They also face discrimination and discouragement from higher caste community members who perceive education for Dalits as both a waste and a threat. Their hostility to-wards Dalits' education is linked to the perception that Dalits are not meant to be educated, are incapable of being educated, or if educated, would pose a threat to village hierarchies and power relations (Vasavi, 1997).

Ambedkar identified education as the main element in the construction of modern India under the constitution. Ambedkar started educating Dalits, by establishing a fortnightly 'Mook Nayak'. His vision started with the publication of magazines and journals, various representations to the Government for legislative approval in promoting the education of Dalits. His vision further appears in the establishment of schools, colleges, hostels and other educational institutions under an educational Society. Ambedkar wanted to achieve the emancipation of Dalits in education, as a person is not in the proper sense until he is educated. The education trains the human mind to think and take the right decision. It is through education that knowledge and information received and spread throughout the world. An uneducated person cannot read and write and hence he closed to all the knowledge and wisdom he can gain through books and other mediums.

The lack of education among the Dalits or the social handicap of Dalits due to lack of education, as argued, is the result of social exclusion. It is also argued that the social exclusion has caused lack of education among the Dalits as they were prevented from access to schooling. In this dialectic discourse, Dr BR Ambedkar as the first eminent personality who argued that education is the best weapon to fight against discrimination, inequality and social exclusion (Lal, 2003). According to him, education brings overall change and its primary goal is to improve economic standards of Dalits and help solving the problems of discrimination and social exclusion.

The traditional prejudice against the Dalit' education continues. It is a notion of upper castes and their children also that Dalit are incapable of education, and it is a mere waste, and as such the Dalit children are discriminated in school (Vasavi, 1978). Such a kind of stereotype notions is prevalent even among the teachers as revealed in a recent study in a cosmopolitan city like Delhi (Bishwokarma, 2010). It is generally observed by some scholars that education either during the colonial or post-Independent period the system benefited only the upper castes but the Dalit. In fact, the upper castes are accused of this sad state of affairs (Satyanarayana, 2002). Some have gone a step further to say that education helped privileged sections of the sections through 19th century as a potent means of social control. There is an official negligence of the educational claims of the lower castes (Yagati, 2002). It is argued that the educational institutions attended by the upper sections have better infrastructure facilities, human and non-human inputs in order to get better education higher learning achievement. The Dalit and the poor are at the disadvantage to benefit from education (Aikara, 2004). It is argued that there is a need for policy to addresses the barriers of education among the Dalit in India in order to overcome the structural social exclusion (Jenkins and Barr, 2006).

Dr. Ambedkar highlighted the considerable progress in education and a greater degree of political consciousness acquired by the Dalits in India (Keer, 1991:351). He advised the Dalits to educate, agitate and organise. According to him, educate agitate and organise means create power in people for achieve basic rights in the society for life, achieve success in the life and struggle for social justice. Ambedkar's idea about educate agitate and organise is very much relevant in the current context because in the Indian society people are illiterate and they are not aware about education as well as their basic rights of the life, still people are facing caste discrimination in society, and lack of support and motivation. This statement can be operationalised through awareness of education and basic rights of life, through motivation and opportunity, through social movement and work against caste system. Ambedkar developed a doctrinal belief in the efficacious and transformatory character of education, held that education must be available to all, irrespective of caste or status. 'Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone' (Ambedkar, 1982:40).

Ambedkar became an ideal for Dalits, a personification of what could be achieved by a Dalit once he was educated. However, even after 60 years of independence, most of the Dalits are the main victims of illiteracy yet. Ambedkar's advice gradually showing its influence and the Dalits are displaying great dedication by spreading

the word about education in the society. In 1928, he established the Depressed Class Education Society to organise the school education of Dalits (Lokhande, 1982:124). Ambedkar made personal efforts to collect funds for these institutions. On 20 June 1946, the establishment of the People's Education Society was an important step. Ambedkar propagated the higher education to the backward classes. He established the People's Education Society, in Mumbai, to raise the cultural level and enlarge the mental horizon of the depressed and oppressed classes, which were denied the educational facilities for centuries. The People's Education Society's objective is not merely to give instructions, but to impart such education as promotes intellectual, moral and social democracy. This is what modern India needs and this is what all well-wishers of India must promote, held Ambedkar. The motto of the People's Education Society is 'Knowledge and Compassion'. The Society had made good progress in this direction; running a number of colleges (Kadam, 1993:210–211).

Ambedkar wanted the education to be within the reach to the Dalits. He felt that,

we are arriving at a stage when the lower orders of society are just getting into the high schools, middle schools and colleges, and the policy of education therefore ought to be to make higher education as cheap to the lower classes as it can possibly be made. (Ambedkar, 1982:40–41)

He suggested other pragmatic ways to promote literacy among Dalits, during the Legislative debate, he wanted 'a certain sum has been set aside in the budget for scholarships for the backward communities' (Ambedkar, 1982:43–44).

In brief, the People's Education Society has significantly contributed to the spread of higher education among the vulnerable communities. The colleges gave monthly scholarships, provided cheap accommodation and paid immense attention to student's problems and encouraged progress. On the contrary, the students, after completing their education, have been working in villages and cities in various capacities in various bodies and offices. Ambedkar's voluntary efforts also included educational modernisation but he said that it's a task that the state should undertake. Thus, in state socialism, he allocated a major role to the state in discharging its duties in respect of education of the unlettered millions of citizens in the country (Ambedkar, 1979).

Ambedkar observed the method of scholarships. The depressed class parents are too poor and too ignorant to understand that the help given by Government is really the help for the education of the child. The parents look upon the scholarship

as a family aid to meet their expenses. It is certainly not made available for the education, which is the primary object of the scholarship. So he urged the government that without the proper direction, the child can easily fall prey to all sorts of evil influences and gives up his education and money spent upon him is lost. During the discussions, Ambedkar developed logical argument in favour of equality of opportunity to be provided to all the vulnerable communities in the society which can be further developed in the context of different controversies raised on the issue of reservations after independence. "I must here emphasise that this country is composed of different communities. All these communities are unequal in their status and progress. If they are to be brought to the level of equality then the only remedy is to adopt the principle of inequality and to give favoured treatment to those who are below the level" (Ambedkar, 1982:42). Addressing a gathering of women during the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar advised them,

...Send your children to schools. Education is as necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress. As you are, so your children will be. (Keer, 1991:104)

Ambedkar has deliberately included Article 45 in the Directive Principles of State Policy that,

the state shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.

The government of India has passed the bill of *Right to Education Act 2008* and paid a great tribute to the contributions of Ambedkar to mass education. The policy of the Government of universalisation of elementary education focusing particularly on marginalised groups, poorer sections and the girl child, enhancing enrolment in secondary education as well as its commitment to expand education facilities will empower and equip youth to face the future with hope and confidence. There are several challenges to cherish Ambedkar's vision of universal education. There is need to frame such policies starting from the primary stage to the higher stage that help to realise the vision of Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's vision towards education starting from primary to university is found relevant today to make it effective and his vision is full of innovations and quite pragmatic. His emphasis on the utilisation of scarce resources for the development of education, the idea of pooling the teaching resources of both colleges and

universities to avoid duplication and to improve efficiency are still very relevant. Getting educated does not mean only to acquire academic designations. One must get educated about Babasaheb's mission and his thoughts. There is a need to read and learn Dr Ambedkar's ideology and strategy to strengthen the Dalits.

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