

# Educate, unite, struggle: Ambedkar's approach towards raising consciousness in women from marginalized communities

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## Abstract

*Dr. Ambedkar rightly said, only through education, one can free himself/herself from social slavery and it is the power of education which will enlighten the downtrodden masses including, women to mobilize themselves, attain a better social status, improve their economic conditions and work towards political freedom. He suggested that education can be instrumental in changing women's position in society. It will orient them to fight against the inequalities that they face in their everyday lives. His vision towards women's emancipation helped women to organize themselves and participate in crucial events of history including, the Mahad Satyagraha. Several women collectively formed women's associations, belonging to marginalized communities to spread education and create awareness among themselves. Thus, it is important to reflect on the fact that Babasaheb's individual ideologies and his refined consciousness helped women from marginalized communities to collectivize their sensitive consciousness and question the caste question. This paper will try to reflect on how Ambedkar's individual consciousness helped women to analyze their situation and raise pertinent questions. His ideology acted as an ignition for women to educate themselves and collectively work and win over their struggles to question the derogatory caste system. For addressing this question, the researcher will use feminist historiography.*

**Keywords:** Caste, Caste System, Ambedkar, Women's Education, Mahad Satyagraha, Feminist Historiography

## Introduction

Historians who have majorly focused on nationalist discourse and Gandhian principles are indulging in politics which shows him as a villain who wanted to alienate Dalits from Brahmins. Being a feminist researcher who is working on Phule's pedagogical instances, I was shocked when my parents said not to engage with Ambedkar much because they interpreted that he felt only Dalits were suffering and rest all were just trivializing the freedom struggle. Another friend of mine called and said, "Please avoid posting quotes that are put up by Jai Bhim groups." These two instances pushed me further to inquire why history still remained biased toward Dalits in general and Dalit women, in particular. Therefore, I assert that *Debrahamanizing History* is a continuous process while we interpret history in the Indian context even during contemporary times. My research questions would remain an embodiment of what I have felt about various social issues from a feminist perspective. But the question of caste still remained a conflictual area because I did not face casteism. Although I faced exclusion being a woman who questioned hierarchies in educational

systems, I had not faced any caste-based discrimination. I chose to conduct this research so as to understand Ambedkar's relevance in contemporary times as his political ideologies have been conceived differently by different sects of society. For instance, Braj Ranjan Mani in his book *Debrahmanizing History* (2023, Revised Ed.) stated that "Ambedkar was seen as an unpatriotic reactionary for his 'politicization of caste' and his insistence that the untouchables were a separate social category, a subordinated one and are not a part of Brahmanic Hinduism." The friend who called me up for not sharing posts related to Ambedkar also followed the same philosophy which Mani has pointed out. It was quite interesting to notice the consequential damages that have been made by two conflictual biases running on the back of each other. But there seems no resolution at the end. Because, as per these ideo-centric notes, one group hates another. Then, whose problems should be addressed first? They would be ready to fight in the name of caste for the cause of assertion and identity. Here, I want to assert that the path walked by the Phule couple in creating a balance between the upper and lower caste should be followed otherwise caste politics will continue to bear its violent history where one would assassinate another while the games of 'voting' in politics will keep coming up in much more refined ways. Here, we need to organize and collectively work towards eradicating the system irrespective of whatever caste we belong from. However, Mani asserted that 'from the days of Phule, it was seen as an upper-caste mobilization for power in the name of patriotic unity and freedom' (2023, pp.337). Mani had also claimed that the census of 1901 and 1911 and congress' move to include untouchables in the Hindu fold to bolster their majoritarian politics were significant examples of what I claimed that they have significantly used as 'pawns' in the game of 'voting' politics.

### **The History of Word 'Dalit'**

The word 'Dalit' has its own history, claimed Lella Karunyakara (2021) in his historically significant work, *History of Dalit Identity*. He poignantly traces the history of the word 'Dalit' and asserted that the term Dalit has two meanings. Primarily, Dalit refers to a person or a race as an identity and secondly, it refers to backward or depressed condition of a person or a race (pp. 71). Karunyakara claimed that the primary meaning is an identity which is born out of historical context and the secondary meaning is an inference that is reflecting on the socio-cultural status of Dalits. Therefore, Karunyakara said that the secondary meaning is wrong. According to him, Dalit refers to identity and it is not social status. However, Karunyakara claimed that Ambedkar never used the term Dalit in his English writings because he wanted to highlight the condition of Dalits who were socially and economically low, backward and depressed. Hence, he used terminologies like, 'Depressed classes' which was coined by Shahu Maharaj, 'Bahishkrut (Excluded)', 'Untouchables' and Scheduled Castes. Karunyakara also claimed that he used Dalit as an identity of his community in his Marathi writings or speeches. However, the followers of Hinduism claimed that the Varna Shudras became Dalits in the contemporary times. Even if follow the Varna system, Dalits are still a community because Shudra is a Varna, a community of workers and artisans.

## Decoding experiences from a truth-seekers position: My interactions with the marginalized community

There are riddles in Hinduism, claimed Ambedkar which I strongly affirm. I am not carrying a manipulative nationalist ideology to build in a discourse that certainly has mocked mythical characters like Eklavya and Karna. But to some extent, I am asserting that we should be afraid to use knowledge for convenience's sake. It is a tumultuous riot that I am fighting to date from the day when I interacted with marginalized communities of *Malas* and *Madigas* from Kuchinarella Village, Telangana where I could come face to face with the everyday exclusion of marginalized communities. A 90-year-old woman from the *Mala* community bowed down in front of us because she thought we were learned Brahmins. Firstly, when I saw her doing it, I felt that she was going to faint but then, I noticed she opened her slippers too. Meanwhile, I had to literally fold my hands and ask for penance because that day I felt it was not a matter of pride to be a Brahmin in a society that disrespects the dignity of labour in its cruelest virtues because Varna was based on professions and it considered Shudras, the service-renderers, as the backbone of the society. In another incident, I was bound to experience that I had committed a sin to be brought up in a Brahmin family because a family from *Madiga* community went to a nearby shop to get a Bisleri bottle just because they were socially chained to think that they were inferior or impure as compared to elite Brahmins like us. They also believed that being a Brahmin, I would not drink water from their '*ghar ka matka*'. A truth that reveals itself in manifold realities claims to be seen from the position of *Nyaya Philosophy*.

As I further conduct a reproach from my own existential positioning, I could also see class conflicts existing between Dalits while I was interacting with the sweeper's community during the COVID times back home in Chhattisgarh. They said that even the educated officers belonging to their community, are not even ready to pay rupees ten for the services they render. To add more to this, they also said that some women of the colony abused his mother and called her an 'opportunist' for the same reason. After the incident, I could only interpret that the one who has the power, rules the system. Therefore, there are graded inequalities in our society and social reflections. Hence, I aim to use feminist historiography as a method of interrogating why Ambedkar's thoughts should be taken into consideration while we discuss caste.

Meanwhile, I assert that history is factual but how we interpret it changes from time to time. While we draw comparisons from the facts that we have uncovered, we should remain intact with its rigour. Therefore, the structure of the research article is in the form of storytelling as Janaki Nair (1994) had said that oral histories and autobiographies are important doctrines of creating history. 'Narratives of marginalization, lost cultural worlds, resounding archival absences and subjugated knowledges-in short, the contracting opportunities for the exercise of female power-by no means exhaust the historical possibilities for women in the Indian subcontinent,' said Nair while addressing the significance of feminist historiography. Paik (2021) has rightly stated that dalit histories cannot be captured in archives and we need to develop a view of the critical past through the 'eyes of the present'. It is impertinent to share their oral testimonies to understand how Ambedkar's philosophies have shaped their lives and the language they use to narrate their experiences. Personal narratives of Dalit women offer them a place from where we can see the stories of



resistance and silence running parallel. It is here that we should use the language of interpretation and semiotics, the hermeneutics.

### **Babasaheb's ideological lens from his wife's perspective: An intimate autobiography**

Savita Ambedkar in her book, *Babasaheb: My Life with Ambedkar* has reflected on her life where she stated that Dalit leaders forced her to get separated from the community. She also stated firmly that nobody can deny that negative propaganda followed by some dalit leaders destroyed my image among the people from the community. She criticized them and said that they have humiliated the works done by their 'noble benefactor'. Ambedkar gave his followers the message to get an education. He got an entire generation educated during his lifetime. Adding to this, she posed a critical question, 'Have the educated become educated and knowledgeable in the real sense? Did the Ambedkarites understand the real meaning of the word education? I have to say with deep regret that my answers are negative.' She claimed rightfully that Dr. Ambedkar's meaning of education was not just related to acquiring a few degrees but also meant the acquisition of perception and wisdom. She reflected that 'bury caste discrimination' was the slogan of Ambedkar but Ambedkarites themselves forget to follow it. While talking about his positioning on caste-based discrimination, she said that 'throughout his life, he penned and voiced his concerns related to caste-based practices mandated by the *Manusmriti*. He awakened the sense of identity and self-respect among depressed classes of India.'

Ambedkar pioneered women's rights and encouraged women to participate in events like Mahad Satyagraha. He saw women as agents of change and wanted them to fearlessly revolt against the discrimination meted out to them. In his book, Bojja Tharakam (2018) pointed out significant differences between Gandhi's Dandi March and Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha. Tharakam stated that all Dandi marchers were men. Although women volunteered to participate, they were not permitted to take part in it, he added (2018, pp.16). On the other hand, the Mahad march comprised both men and women. It also witnessed the participation of children. Tharakam used visual language poignantly to describe what was going on during both marches. He said, 'Women carrying their babies in arms and men carrying children on their backs marched to the destination.' To add to this, he also stated that these men and women chose their path to freedom and annihilation from social bondage. Tharakam commented that if British rule was like a curse for Gandhi, so was the Hindu rule for the Depressed classes. On March 5, when it was suggested that four to five women could accompany the Dandi marchers, Gandhi clearly stated that women should remain in the ashram, quoted Thakaram (2018, pp.18). Gandhi also gave an explanation stating that women would get enough opportunities to offer Satyagraha. He used the symbolism of cow to denote Indian women's purity and claimed, 'Just as Hindus do not harm a cow, the British do not attack women as far as possible.' Additionally, Gandhi said, 'For Hindus, it would be cowardice to take a cow to a battlefield. In the same way, it would be cowardice to have women accompany us' (pp. 17). On the other hand, there was a large contingent of women who took part as Mahad marchers. Also, women attended every meeting addressed by Ambedkar in large numbers. Sometimes, Ambedkar used to conduct exclusive women's gatherings before he addressed the public. Henceforth, we can claim that Ambedkar helped women to realize their potential

and become 'political' decision-makers to bring changes in society (pp.17). By addressing women's issues, he did not just champion women's rights issues but also brought them to the forefront to fight their own struggles while educating them. So, we can see how Ambedkar used his '*pragya*', '*sheel*', and '*karuna*' concept of Dhamma to awaken the spirit of womanhood among marginalized women. He used his self-consciousness to help in building a dialogical and cooperative approach wherein women could successfully come out to claim their rights. Therefore, Ambedkar wanted women to primarily get an education so that they were able to raise their social and economic status which will further help them to set themselves free from the graded inequalities that have been marked by the patriarchal boundaries.

### **Education for liberation**

Ambedkar's social and educational thought remains surprisingly neglected in the sociological discourse. However, Ambedkar considered education as a tool for revolutionaries for claiming an equal and just society, said Velaskar (2021). To add to this, Velaskar (2021) stated that he identified it as a tool of liberation from an oppressive caste system as well as reconstructing a new social order. She also stated that 'gender was an important component of Ambedkar's philosophy of social democratic liberalism and permitted women an authentic identification with its underlying principles with a view to achieving a full and enlightened citizenship.' Even Rege (2021) focused on Phule-Ambedkarite's Pedagogies and stated that education should be seen as '*Trutiya Ratna*'. She reiterated the polemic play by Jotiba Phule and said that education can lead to liberation only if there is consciousness-raising among the depressed classes as suggested by Ambedkar.

### **Analysis and Discussions**

The roadblock that India continues to face in terms of providing mass education to the entire population is limited as education for the entire population was never karma-intended for masses belonging to lower castes. Thus, children tend to suffer due to disjunctive contradiction of worldview systems that are invisible and seldom discussed but are always present (Wolf, 2008). About six students commit suicide due to academic failure every day in India, stated Sindwani (2019). The country has recorded the highest student suicide rate with nearly 38,000 students committing suicide since 2015 (Sindwani, 2019). It points towards the flaws existing in our education system that are insensitive towards the diverse backgrounds of the students (Acharya, 2019). Around 23 Dalit students committed suicide in higher educational institutions between 2008 and 2016 (Acharya, 2019). All these students were facing caste-based discrimination including, caste-based bullying. In another example cited by Danavath and Bania (2021), they mentioned that 'premier institutes like TISS pretend to be diverse and inclusive but are casteist in nature'. The caste-based discrimination experienced by the students of the TISS Hyderabad campus is quite common. The SC-ST students are often name-called and bullied as GOI (Government of India) students which is not just derogatory but simply casteist. Herein, the GOI student tag refers to 'meritless students who receive reservations from the government and are not eligible to study in premier institutions like TISS (Danavath; Bania, 2021). In TISS Hyderabad, foreign exchange programs are only accessible to Savarna students. At the TISS Hyderabad campus, not a single student has been selected from the SC-ST community for the (BA & MA) foreign exchange programs since 2014 (Danavath; Bania, 2021). Thus, we can see the

institutionalization of the caste system at every level of education. The historical context might have changed but the systemic institutionalization of caste-based discrimination has not changed. In this light, we need to understand Ambedkar's inclusive and democratic educational thoughts and follow them inside and outside classrooms. In India, learning remains textbook-ridden and teaching remains focused on memorization instead of critical thinking and the generation of consciousness.

Chatterjee (2023) said that hierarchies can't free either the pupil in consideration or the teacher. Then, how is knowledge-sharing possible between those who think he/she knows all and who thinks he/she is incapable to resume the process altogether? Here lies the conflictual bias where it's situational and depends on the objectives of the intended course of action. When I say that education is a trap, it simply means where there is a hierarchy, there is no freedom of expression. Once the fundamental rights get neglected, it undervalues the identity of the pupil as a curious citizen who wants to know more in order to sustain and give back to society. Power discourses that run the education system cannot help a student to rise above his/her limitations because the concept of merit does not allow a student the chance to rise above. He/she thinks that it was never his/her strength to win over certain situations that were created by power discourses. On a similar note, Meena (2017) stated that Ambedkar wanted to use education to establish principles of democracy in praxis. He wanted to promote constitutional morality through education and affirmed that education should impart moral values. According to Ambedkar, good behaviour and good conduct arise from logical reasoning and education can help in acquiring it through the means of dialogue and experience (Meena, 2017).

Chatterjee (2023) notes that merit is an undemocratized process where limitations are not encouraged. Even today, women from marginalized communities are unable to pursue higher education. Once a friend of mine who was supposedly studying at the Azim Premji School of Education, TISS Hyderabad mentioned if I knew that she was belonging to the '*Chamar*' caste. I was taken aback by her statement as I could not figure out what went wrong. I felt as if I did something wrong to her unknowingly. Then she just laughed at my expressions and shared her history. What we miss on the academic front is the idea of great storytelling. Oral histories have captured instances of caste and caste-based violence in a comprehensive manner but somehow, we reduced Social Sciences to a mere sense of objectivity. There is a subtle gap between what we feel and how we act on that feeling. This is the gap that hermeneutics can fill. Chatterjee (2023) states that there are several instances where pioneers like Savitribai Phule, Chandraprabha Saikinia, Fathima Sheikh, Durgabai Deshmukh, and others redefined the meaning of education for women and people belonging to marginalized communities. What we fail to understand now is that holding epistemic privilege is not about being sophisticated, but it is an honest reflection of the perceived realities emerging from dialogues inside and outside the classrooms. The environment may change but the person's identity follows him/her as a shadow. Nevertheless, caste has always been normalized and is considered a way of life. It irks me as a writer and researcher that we decided to emphasize too much on Dalits which is just another way to monopolize the epistemology of truth and normalize casteism out of which caste is born. There are plausible flawed silences that have shaped the discourse where we think that twice-born castes have no prejudices and that talking



about Dalits is the only politics that will sell their research. In this context, I do not want to demean my work on Savitribai Phule or someone else's work on the marginalized communities but what I am trying to assert is that we might actually not understand what people from lower castes face when we do not understand practices observed by upper caste people. The framed identities of isolating one caste from another can never annihilate the caste system. Similarly, Meena (2017) stated that Ambedkar was not against Brahmins but he was against brahmanical ideology. Therefore, it is necessary to collaborate when it comes to researching caste. We could even look forward to conducting inter-caste research.

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