

## **BREAKING CHAINS: A HISTORICAL TIMELINE TO STRUGGLE OF UNTOUCHABLES FOR EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

*This research article delves into the historical, socio-cultural, and contemporary perspectives of education for the untouchable communities in India, also known as Dalits. The education was denied to the untouchables in a highly vertical hierarchal caste system where prevalent notions of purity, endogamy, prohibition on inter-dining etc. were life death issue of higher caste Hindus. In the coming of the East India Company to the India since 1757, some of these untouchables employed in various roles in their Army, got the first hand idea of modern education and the Christian Missionaries efforts to spread their religion brought the light of education to them. After completing his course of study in Scottish Mission's High School in Pune, a young Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, opened his first school for low-caste (Shudratishudra) girls in 1848. His efforts were equally supported by her devoted wife Savitri Bai Phule and his likeminded friends, who supported his cause with money and kind. His constant demand to the Government for allowing the untouchables access to public schools brought the desired result when the British Government allowed the untouchable student's admission to Government Schools. The struggle has passed through many developments including Hunter Commission formed in 1882; the demands of affirmative action for educations, reservation in employment, scholarships have been raised from time to time by various Dalit Organizations including Satyashodhak Samaj, Shahu ji Maharaj, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action policies, Dalits have faced systemic discrimination and social exclusion,*

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*affecting their access to quality education. This paper examines various historical struggles waged by the untouchables in getting the human right of education.*

**Keywords**

*Dalits, Untouchables, Education, India, Social Justice, Equality, Affirmative Action, Dalit Education, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Satyashodhak Samaj, Shahu ji Maharaj, Dr. B.R Ambedkar.*

**Introduction**

The Indian Society has been divided on the basis of religion and castes/sects within the religion. The majority of the Indian Population follows the Hindu religion which has a very complicated and yet the single most powerful system of castes than any system of social order the worlds have seen. The India's caste system has four groups or varnas and is called the Chaturvarna system. The caste system has hierarchical division of Brahmans, the priestly class and the interpreters of religious texts and the holders of the knowledge and education; Kshatriyas, basically the Kings or the ruler or warrior class; Vaishyas or the merchant class and Shudra or the servile class. There was another class outside the Hindu social order: the untouchables, despised, denigrated and looked down upon by all the above classes. The Hindu social order was not based on equality, fraternity and liberty as it is found today. The access to education was denied to the women, the shudra and the untouchables on the premise of the religious sanction. The worst sufferer of this practice were the untouchables whose presence was unwelcome, whose touch was considered polluting, who was denied to access even public roads, wells, etc.

**Dalit Education: A question with many answers:-**

With the advent of East India Company in Bengal and Bombay since 1757, they were in need to locals for recruitment as soldiers and other support staffs. The first light of education was brought into the life of untouchables by the American Methodist Church missionaries, Scottish Missionaries, and schools established in the cantonment area. The primary motivation for these missionaries was to spread Christianity in India and preparing Trained Local Missionaries who would be spreading the Christianity among the masses. The education for untouchables was started in Bombay Presidency by some benevolent Gujrati while it was an effort of Educational policies and practices of the ambivalent colonial state. The colonial government, Christian missionaries, non-Brahman and Dalit leaders, and high-caste liberals began making efforts toward mass education at the end of the nineteenth century. Their efforts were inconsistent, torn by contradictions. While some

sympathized with Dalits' quest for education and political rights and believed they would make 'loyal' subjects, others were cautious about Dalits gaining access to political privileges before they had reached a 'high' stage of consciousness.

During both pre- British and early British rule, no attempt was made to educate the Dalits because, as with Brahmani policy, education was confined to the higher castes. Although the British considered education a 'civilizing' tool, they were silent for a long time on the question of promoting education among the native population. Nonetheless, with the Act of 1813, education became the responsibility of the colonial state and Brahmans lost their traditional monopoly over schooling. The British government did eventually take up the responsibility of 'civilizing' the 'barbaric' Indians. Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' (1835) sums up England's superiority and its task of transforming brown Indians by using law, free trade and, most importantly, education. The government did widen educational opportunities, yet there were some limitations. Actually, the colonial state, like its agents, was torn by contradictions about its perceptions of the figure of the Untouchable, as well as on the Dalit question. On the one hand, the colonial state and its agents described Untouchables as 'weak', 'lazy', 'primitive' and 'backward', yet at the same time appreciated their 'intelligence'. For example, historically speaking, the Mahars were hereditary village servants and were significant among the baaraa balutedars. The Khandesh Gazetteer in 1880 defined the traditional Mahar as a 'lazy', 'unthrifty' but 'intelligent' village servant, noting that 'they have gained a monopoly of the unskilled railway market' (Campbell et al. 1880, 116, 119, quoted in Zelliott 1994, 35). Another colonial authority spoke of the Mahars' skills, predicting that they would excel in any field and would be a growing force (Craddock 1899, 28, quoted in Zelliott 1994, 35). Thus the British had divided opinions on the Untouchables. Although significant in British eyes for their menial skills, they held lesser and lower attention as compared to the upper castes. As a result, the British favored different communities in particular historical conjunctures. When they did intervene to promote education among the lower sections of society, they were cautious and conservative about interfering with the social order or initiating any educational or social reform among Dalits. The colonial state embarked on such efforts only later – and that too discretely, sometimes miserly, and with less enthusiasm, in contrast with the efforts of social reformers, Christian missionaries, and Untouchables themselves. The state recorded educational statistics; however, their efforts were quite weak and they had limited or no understanding of Dalit social life, the constitution of the Dalit programme of education or Dalit womanhood.

### **The Turning Wheel of Education:**

The efforts for formal education for untouchables were started by Mahatma Jyotiba Phoolé from 1848 and at one time around in 1853, he was running three such schools for the children of untouchables. He made persistent efforts towards the educating women and dalits despite social, religious and political challenges and shortage of money. Similar efforts were made in northern India by the American Methodist Church missionaries (1850-1930) and the Arya Samaj from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The education provided to Dalits was limited, hierarchical, and practical, and was subordinated to the missionaries' and Arya Samajis' visions of maintaining Dalits as productive, disciplined, loyal bodies—wage workers, housewives, farmers. Dalit dreams had to create a space for themselves within a hierarchical, limited world of education and opportunities. Since, there was no reservation in jobs for the students of this class in the British India Government; there was limited motivation among the people for education.

### **Evolution of Compulsory Education:-**

**Role of Mahatma Jyotiba Rao Phoolé:** At policy level, the British Government has allowed admission to the untouchables in 1858 in schools maintained by the Government. However, its access and reach among the masses was minuscule and there was no job available for them. Phoolé in his memorandum to the Hunter Commission in 1882, accused the British for their penchant in providing educational opportunities only to the upper castes, while collecting huge revenue from the illiterate Shudras and Atishudras. He demanded for schools for the Shudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters. He demanded that (i) an increase in the number of schools (ii) special inducements in the shape of scholarships and half-yearly or annual prizes to encourage them to send their children to school (iii) primary education of the masses should be made compulsory up to a certain age, say at least 12 years (iv) Separate schools for Shudras and Untouchables where their number was large enough (v) Trained teachers out of the cultivating class, mostly shudras. (vi) associations of the educated shudras in various government roles. He had suggested the form of education as well as its course through his memorandum.

### **Baton in Right Hand**

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, as his rightful successor, had advocated for the universal compulsory education for all especially for masses. He was the main contributor to the overall social and educational development of the country during pre-independence era. His contribution in shaping the educational policy of India

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had been neglected as he spent around 40 years as student, scholar, teacher and promoter of education. Ambedkar as he deliberately chosen an open society of USA to get education and was greatly influenced by his teacher and philosopher, John Dewey of Columbia University. The influence of John Dewey on Ambedkar is so profound that he himself has declared in June, 1952, after he was conferred an honorary degree in Columbia University, that I owe my whole intellectual life to Prof. John Dewey. True to this influence, Ambedkar recognized that democracy should permeate every aspect of people's lives, including the way people think and philosophies. Democracy, for Dewey, is a way of life, the method of thinking, a manner of approach, a habit of expecting the unexpected, an attitude of openness to novelties and variety of flexibility in actively attending to and adjusting facts and conditions as they present themselves.

#### **Educational Philosophy Getting Shape:-**

As Dewey said that “the people and the relations have to be democratic before democratic institutions can have any meaning.” In his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* published in 1916, Dewey says that, “democracy cannot go forward unless the intelligence of the mass of people is educated to understand the social realities of their own time. “ “Education”, he said, “is a social process to reconstruction of society.” Thus, Ambedkar had rightly seen the education of masses as a necessity for democracy and make it a tool for social transformation during his political life. Dr. Ambedkar in the Bombay Presidency Legislature debates in 1927 had argued, “ We should at least spend on education the same amount that we take from the people in the form of excise revenue. The amount of expenditure that we incur per individual in this Presidency on education is only 14 annas, but the amount of money that we recover in the form of excise revenue is Rs. 2.17.” He has also calculated the fees income at different levels and argued that if financed 36 percent of expenditure in collegiate education, 31 percent high school and 26 percent middle school education. He said that higher education should be made cheaper so that lower classes can enter it and benefit from the opportunities it creates.

Dr. Ambedkar was of opinion that the object of postgraduate education is to train the student “to learn to distinguish between what may fairly be called matter of fact and what is certainly mere matter of opinion.” In his memorandum to the Simon Commission on, “ concerning the State of Education of the Depressed Classes in Bombay Presidency”, submitted on behalf of the Bahiskrita Hitakarini Sabha, he has pointed out that enrolment of the dalits constitute 0.87 percent of the total primary education and 0.14 percent in secondary and zero in higher education. He wanted protection for the dalits through education guarantee by making the education of

the depressed classes as the first charge on the state revenue. He considered the aim of postgraduate education to train the student “to learn to distinguish between what may fairly be called matter of fact and what is certainly mere matter of opinion.” Ambedkar using his thorough academic approach with practical insights, he has developed a vision of education starting from primary to university level. He has emphasized the economic value of education stating that, “we may forego material benefits but we cannot forego our right and opportunity to reap the benefit of the higher education to the fullest extent as education is the greatest material benefit”. The philosophy of Ambedkar on education is based on the universal humanity on the bedrock of equality and equity with aim to transform the society. He relies on universal primary education with special support for the socially and educationally classes through scholarships, reservations, etc.

He opined that the objectives of university education are to train the students (a) to make distinctions between matter of fact and matter of opinion, (b) to distinguish issues and to separate questions each on its own merits and without an eye to their bearing on some cherished theory, (c) learn to state fairly the position to those to whose practical conclusions the learner is most stoutly opposed, (d) be able to examine suggested idea and see what comes of it, before accepting it or rejecting it, and (e) to develop an original student who should be able to weigh evidence to follow and criticize argument and put his own value on authorities. He considered a university as a corporation of scholars and a place of learning in the pursuit of advancement and diffusion of knowledge.

### **Education for Social Empowerment**

Once Aristotle was asked how much the educated were superior to the uneducated: “as much”, said he, “as the living are from the dead”. The similar references to education are available in the ancient India literature. Education comes next only to life—food, clothing and shelter. The reach of education and its conception in ancient time was limited in reach and its access due to various social issues, making it a privilege of few. It has remained to be same till today. The democratic values have made education universal in its reach and access. The Education as a tool of empowering the socially and backward classes has been used in modern times. Education was defined by Newman as the “art of utilization of knowledge “. Empowerment is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, “ability to do or affect something or anything to act upon a person or thing”. Empowerment is considered as the process of increasing personal or political power so that individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situations”. Education in this parlance is considered as a liberating exercise rather than domesticating one.

The concepts of banking system of education, dialogic etc were accordingly introduced by Paulo Freire, in his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Insisting that educator should always be conscious of the cultural background of the class, gender, race, etc., of the subject, he wanted that the educator should side with the oppressed and promote learning through dialogue on the basis of the learner's experience with praxis. He told that the educator should always be conscious of the cultural background of the class, gender, race, etc., of the subject.

**Education in Transformative Society:-**

The purpose of empowerment through education is to provide capacity enhancement and capability provisioning. Education as an instrument of transformation, has laid strong basis for knowledge society. The transformative projects for empowerment of society include:-

- (i) addressing unequal social investments to achieve equality of opportunity.
- (ii) recognizing legitimate collective claims to land and livelihoods, and
- (iii) taking affirmative action in favor of disadvantaged groups especially untouchables.

Recognizing the futility of liberal arts and science courses for untouchables in a modern economy, *Ambedkar has pointed out around 1945 that, "from the point of raising the economic condition, technical education for the Scheduled Castes is more important than literacy education. But, technical education is also very costly and it is not possible for children of the Scheduled Castes to take technical education and without technical education their economic condition will not be improved.*

In India, we are having mainly three categories of school education targeting different classes and groups of the society as a result of developments of education policy during British rule. One for the wretched of the earth through municipal – panchayat schools, the aided schools for the middle classes and the private public schools for the rich and possessed. This type of graded schooling system divided the future citizens of the country and educates students into pre-defined occupied roles and assignments in the society which mostly aligns with the traditional social structure of the society.

**Educational Policy enshrined in the Constitution: -** The framers of the Constitution were aware of the importance of the education; however, efforts of B.R. Ambedkar did not result in ensuring compulsory primary education for all as a fundamental right due to want of various types of resources. It was however felt that compulsory primary education should be the responsibility of the state. The same has rightly

been included as Article 45 under Part IV Directive Principles of State Policy. It is Article 45 which was with the provision that – “The State shall endeavor 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”. Earlier education was the subject of state list and 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976 has made subject of concurrent list and Union and state both governments are making policies and law on it, however, the educational administrative activities are mainly done by the state governments.

**Present Scenario:** The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which represents the consequential legislation envisaged under Article 21-A, means that every child has a right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards.

Now the Article 45 says- “The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years.”

Article 51A(K) says- Who is a parent or guardian to provide opportunities for education to his child or, as the case may be, ward between the age of six and fourteen years.

Article 21-A and the RTE Act came into effect on 1 April 2010. The title of the RTE Act incorporates the words ‘free and compulsory’. ‘Free education’ means that no child, other than a child who has been admitted by his or her parents to a school which is not supported by the appropriate Government, shall be liable to pay any kind of fee or charges or expenses which may prevent him or her from pursuing and completing elementary education. ‘Compulsory education’ casts an obligation on the appropriate Government and local authorities to provide and ensure admission, attendance and completion of elementary education by all children in the 6-14 age group. With this, India has moved forward to a rights-based framework that casts a legal obligation on the Central and State Governments to implement this fundamental child right as enshrined in the Article 21A of the Constitution, in accordance with the provisions of the RTE Act.

It prohibits (a) physical punishment and mental harassment; (b) screening procedures for admission of children; (c) capitation fee; (d) private tuition by teachers and (e) running of schools without recognition. It provides for development of curriculum in consonance with the values enshrined in the Constitution, and which



would ensure the all-round development of the child, building on the child's knowledge, potentiality and talent and making the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety through a system of child friendly and child centered learning.

**Conclusion:** - The education is central to achieving a dignified life for marginalized communities and women. The Constitution of India explicitly recognizes the right to education. Though, the education has been a neglected area for a long time, the country seemed to have moved on to a positive trajectory in this regard in 2000s with the introduction of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The right to education became a fundamental right in 2002 by the eighty-sixth Constitutional Amendment, and to Right to Education (RTE) Act, enacted in 2009, made it a reality. The Indian education system needs to be more accessible, affordable so that quality education is available to each and every student. The instance of discrimination among children based on caste, religion is still prevalent which demotivates a child into attending school.

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