

Dr. Ambedkar

A Universal Educator

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Abstract

Although Ambedkar, who spent more than forty years of his life in association with different educational institutions, holding disparate positions, has never been given the status of a mainstream educator, he has done work that is of fundamental importance in this regard. When India was in the process of becoming a modern nation state and universalisation of education was the task at stake, Ambedkar made sure that those who had remained ignored in the realm of education for centuries, no longer remained so. The role that Ambedkar played in the upliftment of Dalits of Hindu social order is an apparent example, but his efforts extended far beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Born in a poor family of *Mahar* caste, which was designated impure and untouchable in Hinduism, Ambedkar reached the highest stage of educational distinction from the most renowned institutions of the time such as Columbia University, America and London School of Economics, London. However, his educational journey, unlike that of many of the contemporary scholars of his time (most of whom belonged to upper castes), was not smooth due

to the caste status. He came across caste based discriminations for the first time in his school where he, along with one of his brothers, was made to sit in the corner of the class room¹. They were not allowed to touch the water tap and pour water from the water tank that was close to their school when they were thirsty and desired to drink water. He could not earn the desirable support from his teachers and fellows only because of the stigma of untouchability that his caste prescribed in Hindu social order.

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Even after receiving education from the west, when Ambedkar returned home, he again faced caste based austerities. He could not arrange shelter for himself and was forced to spend nights on railway stations. He encountered similar humiliations in the office where he was a military secretary, but was being treated as a lapper. Even poor illiterate peons considered it sinful to hand over office papers and files to Ambedkar and used to throw them on his table from a distance². Drinking water, like in his childhood, was not available for him even in the office where he held a reputed position³.

He applied for the post of professorship of political-economy in the famous, Sydenham College and got selected in November 1918. He also worked as a professor of Mercantile law on a part-time basis for three years at Batliboy College Accountancy Institute, and later appointed as a full time professor at law college in Bombay. However, his Gujarati Brahmin fellows were unable to except him as equal to their status, and objected to his drinking water from the pot reserved for the professorial staff in the college premises.

Despite all, Ambedkar, who faced immense discriminations in educational institutions due to his low caste status, became a founder of several educational institutions and organisations in his later life. The institutions that he established for promoting education were fundamentally different from the

ones that he had attended.

This paper aims to study those institutions which Ambedkar had himself established for the purpose of the emancipation of Dalits. It argues that Ambedkar had universalised education by providing access of educational institutions to those sections of the society which were considered unfit to acquire knowledge. The sections of the society include not only schedule castes of Hindu social order, with upliftment of whom Ambedkar is often associated, but rather all those who were marginalised under the traditional stratification of Indian society. In a way, he used education as a modernist project to launch counter-hegemony against traditionally dominant castes who claimed their absolute right on education.

AMBEDKAR'S INSTITUTIONS AND HIS EDUCATIONAL AGENDA

Right from the origin of the Indian civilization, education remained the monopoly of *Brahmins*⁴. It is mentioned in the *Purushsukta* that the right of reading and writing would be reserved for the Brahmins who originated from the head of the divine body. *Shudras*, who originated from the feet of divinity, were denied access to any kind of knowledge, particularly that which pertained to the study of religious scriptures⁵. This trend continued for centuries without any resistance.

As far as the education of the socially marginalised sections in

modern India is concerned, colonial state showed reluctance in this regard due to its non-interference policy in the social issues of Indians. British East India company was busy in expansion and consolidation of Indian state in the first half of the nineteenth century⁶. This was the reason why the institutions that were established by the British East India Company in the beginning were mostly established, keeping in line with the institutions that had been already present in the sub-continent for centuries. Later, the same policies were followed by the British crown. Missionaries formed the first non-governmental organisations that worked for the cause of upliftment of weaker sections. However, their work failed to leave remarkable imprints in the realm of education since their primary goal was religious proselytisation. The task was taken up by Indian reformers, and Ambedkar was primary amongst them.

It must be recalled here that Ambedkar, who had faced immense discriminations in educational institutions due to his low caste status, grew up to become the founder of several educational institutions and organisations. He had worked as a teacher, principal and professor with several educational institutions in different regions of pre-independent India during the early period of his career. He first worked as a professor of political-economy at the famous Sydenham College, and later as a professor of mercantile law on a part-

time basis for three years at Batliboy College Accountancy Institute. He was appointed as a full time professor at law college of Bombay and later, was honoured as the principal of the college as well. But the efforts that he made to start educational institutions for the purpose of spreading education among the masses deserve special attention.

In the course of his public career which lasted more than thirty years, Ambedkar was fully convinced that organisations are key instruments that can sustain the fight for liberation of backward communities. In other words, he wanted his ideas to be promoted by an institutional mechanism since he believed that the progress of a community lies in the strong hands of the organisations which devote themselves completely for the cause of the community. In this context, he believed that organisations must be governed by the same group of people that it represents. As early as 1940, he had started contesting the need of establishing a central organisation for the backward classes of the Indian society⁷. He stated that there must be some sort of harmony in different organisations working for the same cause and even smallest of the organisations must be tied to powerful organisations working in the field. In this context, he seemed to be of the opinion that the spread of education in the backward classes can be successfully delivered by constituting interconnected organisations that

strove for the purpose. Therefore, he constituted many organisations and institutions with the aim to uplift backward classes educationally. Although some of the organisations were not established specifically for educational purposes, but education was certainly an important agenda for them.

It was in 1924 when Ambedkar founded an institution named '*Bhahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha*' which worked exclusively for fulfilling educational desires of backward classes. Opening-up educational institutions like boarding schools, hostels, libraries for backward classes' education was one of the main agenda of this organisation. Subsequently, another organisation that was similar to '*Bhahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha*' was established by Ambedkar and named as '*Samta Sainik Dal*'. One of the important aims of this 'Dal' was to unite the youth of the backward classes under a single banner. All India Depressed Class Student Organisation, which was established in 1928, was also founded under the leadership of Ambedkar. The aim of this organisation, like previously established institutions, was to organise the people of backward classes as a single and united front. Under one of the objectives of this organisation, Ambedkar wanted the students of depressed castes to discard caste consciousness, and develop the culture of studying, like other castes. Safeguarding the interests of backward classes, coordinating with

the students of backward classes for the welfare of schedule caste people, and also taking all of these issues to the working committee for the purpose of approval were some the other goals of the organisation⁸.

During the early 1940s, Ambedkar worked with labour classes, and started a political front to flag their demands. The organisation was named '*Independent Labour Party*'. This was the only political party of the time which included education in its agenda. It aimed to increase the efficiency and productivity of the labour class by educating them into newly developed technical skills. The party also undertook analysis of important issues such as compulsory primary education and adult education. It had been declared in the party's agenda that the party will endeavour to provide facilities for the improvement of higher education in India and as well as abroad, in order to aid the deserving persons from communities that are socially backward. He also began the '*All India Schedule Caste Federation*' in 1942. This federation undertook the task of opening schools for backward classes and taught them art and craft.

Ambedkar engaged with a bigger educational project in the later phase of his public life. On 8 July 1945, he established the famous '*People Educational Society*' with the purpose of encouraging people of depressed sections of the society to acquire higher education. The aim of the society, as stated by Ambedkar

himself, was not merely to educate people, but to inculcate intellectual and moral habits in them. While addressing a conference for the students of depressed class in Pune, he stated that their role in life was of tremendous consequence and, was bound to contribute to the progress of destiny of the depressed classes⁹. The society focused upon opening public institutions like colleges, libraries, play-grounds, Buddhist seminaries and *Viharas* in Maharashtra and various other parts of India. An interesting fact about the educational aim of this society is that it included both religious and scientific education in its agenda¹⁰. In 1952, Ambedkar established '*Buddhist Society of India*' in which more or less similar goals, such as promotion of higher education, opening colleges for religious and scientific education, were to be fulfilled. In 1956, he founded the '*Republican Party of India*'. Although it was a purely political front, education occupied some space in the agenda of this party. Promoting secular political values by education was one of its important goals.

One of the life-long missions of Ambedkar was the organisation of backward classes as a single and united front. He seemed to be recognizing the fact that educational institutions like 'hostels and libraries' will not only help people of backward classes to acquire appropriate information, but they will also promote in them, a sense of belongingness to a group or community. Ambedkar's aim was not

limited to unite the backward classes as a single and coherent front; he wanted to educate them in order to 'agitate' them for their fundamental rights that were being denied under the caste system. These public institutions may be considered as one of his earnest efforts to agitate the backward classes mentally for their fundamental rights. In his opinion, a group cannot "agitate and organise" for a common mission without being educated. It must get itself educated in order to liberate its thoughts so that it can collectively organise agitated minds. Educated mind, as Ambedkar puts it, would force educated people to form organisations and they would act to fix the problems.

These public institutions can also be interpreted as an effort of Ambedkar to strengthen the common masses to strive for their civil and political rights, in the struggle for social justice. These institutions, as the manifesto of some of these institutions show, were a sincere effort of Ambedkar to involve the youth of backward classes into the larger movements of Dalit emancipation, and also to make these social groups participate actively in the socio-political activities, empowering them with an efficiency in governing and managing skills. Whichever organisation or party Ambedkar founded in the course of his public life, they were administered by the people of backward classes itself. For instance, there were many educated depressed caste intellectuals of

the time, such as Dr. Purushotam Solankey and Shivtarker, who came to actively engage with the 'All India Depressed Class Association'. These organisations and the active space that they provided to the masses could also be interpreted as the realisation of one of the primary aims of Ambedkar, which was to prepare the masses to participate in political fronts, and which later reflected in the Constitution of independent India, where he gave central importance to the allocation of political and constitutional mechanism into the hands of the people of the country.

After the analysis of the aims and objectives of institutional efforts that Ambedkar had put forth, it can be argued that he played an important role in the upliftment of the backward classes, since he provided these groups a wider access to knowledge and attempted to arrange for them institutions where they could pursue education without facing discriminations. He arranged for them the platforms where they could participate in a common activity, and share and communicate relevant information. These organisations can be interpreted as realisations of one of the dreams of Ambedkar, since he often argued that every social institution in general and educational institution in particular, while being secular in nature, should also be equally accessible to each and every individual, irrespective of their caste and class status.

CONCLUSION

The above provided analysis of the educational contributions of Ambedkar must be studied as an effort made by him to universalise education as he strove to expand the domain of education from some privileged sections of the society to the common people of the society. He was amongst the first few educators of the nation who conceptualised education as a wealth which could empower the masses, in the place of a tool that was utilised by a privileged few to control the resources and structure of society. In the orthodox and semi-urbanized nation where interests of common people were not recognised, he ventured to open several organisations which aimed to universalise the right of education by spreading education amongst the masses at the lowest of expenses. The description of the aims and objectives of these organisations and parties clearly shows that each of these organisations were established with the aim to make backward communities equal to the other social groups, with the help of education as a tool for progress. He wanted the people of backward classes to not face the insulting and inconvenient environment in which he himself had studied. Many a times he emphasised that each and every person, particularly those belonging to educationally backward sections, should be given easy access and opportunities to acquire higher

education. The primary goal of the educational institutions that were established by Ambedkar was to educate those who were forbidden from attaining education in other private and governmental institutions of the society. He wanted the people of the backward classes to experience education and attain enlightenment

without the barriers of caste, creed and race¹¹. His educational aims, hence, were not limited in nature; they extended not only to include Dalits, but all those sections of the society that had remained exploited under the traditional stratification of the Indian society.

Endnotes

¹G. Ombvedt, *Ambedkar towards an enlightened India*, New Delhi: Penguin, 2004, p. 5.

²D. Keer, *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar life and mission*, New Delhi: Popular Prakashan, 1977, p. 8.

³B. R. Ambedkar, *Waiting for a visa*, Mumbai: Peoples Educational Society, 1999, p. 2.

⁴E. Zelliott. 2000. 'Growth of education among the Dalit-Bahujan communities in modern Andhra, 1893-1947', in Bhattacharya, S. (Ed.), *Education and the disprivileged in 19th and 20th century India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, p- 35-49.

⁵J.J. Shukla.1998. *B.R. Ambedkar, Gandhi, Tagore-A comparative study on education*, New Delhi: Karnavati Publication, p- 5.

⁶J. P. Naik and S. Nurullah, 1974. *A student's history of education in India 1800*, New Delhi: Macmillan, p. 5.

⁷N. C. Rattu. 1967. *Dr. Ambedkar: Important messages, sayings, wits and wisdom*. Wolverhampton: Dr Ambedkar memorial committee of Great Britain, p. 45.

⁸Y. D. Sontakke. (Ed.). 2004. *Thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar*, New Delhi, Samyak Prakashan, p. 310. Op.Cit, 95.

⁹Ibid, 318.

¹⁰N. C. Rattu. 1967. *Dr. Ambedkar: Important messages, sayings, wits and wisdom*. Wolverhampton: Dr. Ambedkar memorial committee of Great Britain, p. 45.

¹¹K. S. Chalam. 2008. *Modernization of Dalit Education: Ambedkar's Vision*, New Delhi: Rawat Publication. p. 49.