



The Role of Education in the Reform Movements of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule

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ABSTRACT

Education has traditionally been instrumental in the fight against caste based disparity in India. In a societal framework in which knowledge has traditionally been a privilege of privileged audiences, education became a strong tool of social change and liberation. The paper discusses how education contributed to the reform activities of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, two of the most prominent anti-caste philosophers in the contemporary Indian history. The work of Phule in the nineteenth century was aimed at increasing accessibility to education among Shudras, Dalits and women by creating inclusive educational institutions as well as criticising the Brahmanical monopoly of knowledge. In the twentieth century, Ambedkar, a follower of this intellectual tradition, laid stress on education as the basis of social justice, democratic citizenship, and constitutional equality. The study brings out the persistence and transformation of their educational philosophies through a qualitative and interpretive examination of their writings, reform initiatives and historical contexts. The article takes the position that education was a major initiative in the anti-caste movements as it enabled the oppressed groups to disrupt the processes of social domination and assert intellectual and political

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power. The concepts of Phule and Ambedkar are very topical in the discussions of inclusive education, social justice and democratic development in India today.

1. Introduction

Education has been a key issue of social justice in India. In the ancient caste hierarchy, knowledge and formal education were almost restricted to the privileged classes, and Shudras, Dalits and women were effectively locked out of the schools and the intellectual community. This exclusion was not just a social practise but an institutional process where caste structure was maintained and replicated even at the generational level. The monopoly of information by the elite social strata strengthened the inequality patterns and barred the marginalised groups of people to engage in intellectual and political activity (Galanter, 1984; Guru and Sarukkai, 2012). The democratisation of education, therefore, became a significant part of the wider movement aimed at the struggle with the caste oppression and the social equality.

In the nineteenth century, a number of reformers started doubting the validity of caste-based limitations on education. One of the most prominent of such individuals was Jyotiba Phule, who organised western Indian activism as one of the first systematic attempts to make education available to the marginalised groups. Phule claimed that the education deprivation was the key to the ongoing creation of Brahmanical supremacy and inferiorities of the lower castes and women. He tried to undermine the intellectual hegemony of the dominant castes and achieve social empowerment through education through his writings and social programmes such as an attempt to start schools to educate girls and lower castes at Pune in 1848 (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994; Omvedt, 2008). The reform movement led by Phule was therefore one that associated education to the wider cause of fighting caste hierarchy and social exclusion.

This intellectual project was furthered and enriched in the twentieth century by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who developed a broader vision of the educational empowerment. To Ambedkar, education was a tool of both personal progress and social liberation and political involvement. The famous phrase of educate, agitate, organise was based on the assumption that intellectual empowerment was crucial to toppling ideological pillars of caste and helping the marginalised communities to settle their rights in a democratic polity (Ambedkar, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2005; Rao, 2009). Ambedkar also stressed that democracy was not going to work in society where there existed pronounced social inequalities, unless historically suppressed groups of people would have access to education and institutional opportunities (Omvedt, 2011).

The given paper analyses the place of education in the reform movements of Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar with the emphasis on how the two thinkers imagined the notion of education as a powerful means of social justice. The study also brings up the intellectual continuum of their projects by examining their concepts and reform projects as well as recognising the key distinctions of their approaches and their historical setting. The paper states that the role of education in anti-caste movements was a key strategy and it is still a factor in the current controversy on equality and inclusive development in India (Thorat and Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2013).

2. Significance of the Study

Education has played a very important role in intellectual history of social reform in contemporary India. The historical distribution of knowledge has been associated with social power distribution in a hierarchical society like a caste. This barrier to education to the elite groups not only strengthened the caste-based inequalities but also hindered intellectual and political involvement of the marginalised communities. In this respect, education became the focal point of reform movements organised by Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, as they were trying to oppose the established social hierarchies and support equality (Galanter, 1984; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). Their thoughts point to the democratising power of education as a tool of enabling historically marginalised populations.

This study is important because it will discuss the role of education as a strategic tool in the anti-caste movements organised by Phule and subsequently extended by Ambedkar. The attempt of Phule to establish schools among girls and lower castes in nineteenth century Maharashtra was one of the first attempts at intellectual monopoly of dominant castes and the ability to give marginalised groups access to knowledge and social mobility (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994; Omvedt, 2008). Ambedkar later made this intellectual framework more relevant by laying stress on higher education, political awareness, and institutional access in terms of social justice and democratic equality (Jaffrelot, 2005; Rao, 2009).

The issues of inequalities that persist in the sphere of educational institutions still seem to be observed in the debates on the idea of inclusive education, social justice, and the policies of the modern India. Although in post-independent times, the number of educational opportunities has grown, structural barriers that influence marginalised populations are still considerable (Thorat and Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2013). This study has helped to revisit the educational philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar, and with this, one can appreciate the role that education could play as an important tool to promote democratic citizenship and social equality.

3. Objectives of the Study

The current research aims at analysing the place of education as a transformative tool into the social reform movements of Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar. Both philosophers considered education as an effective tool of oppressing the caste system and empowering marginalised groups of people to engage in social, political, and intellectual life. Although Phule highlighted the role of basic education to Shudras, Dalits and women as a means of destroying the Brahmanical domination in the Indian society in the nineteenth century, later Dalit activist Ambedkar highlighted the role of education in democratic citizenship, political empowerment, and equality before the constitution (Jaffrelot, 2005; Omvedt, 2008).

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the educational philosophy of Jyotiba Phule and his efforts to advocate education to the oppressed social groups.
2. To examine B. R. Ambedkar's views on education as a foundation for social justice and democratic transformation.
3. To draw a comparison between the education strategy of Phule and Ambedkar in the context of anti-caste reform movements.
4. To determine the topicality of their education concepts in discussing inclusive education and social equality in India.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach to examine the role of education in the reform movements led by Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The research is primarily based on textual and historical analysis of key writings, speeches, and reform initiatives associated with both thinkers. The study focuses on understanding how education was conceptualized as a tool for social transformation within the broader context of anti-caste movements in nineteenth and twentieth-century India.

Primary sources include major writings and speeches of Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, which provide direct insight into their philosophical arguments and reform strategies. In addition, relevant historical records and published compilations of their works are examined to understand the institutional and social initiatives undertaken to promote education among marginalized communities.

Secondary sources consist of scholarly books and academic studies that analyse the intellectual contributions of Phule and Ambedkar as well as the historical development of social reform movements in India. Through comparative analysis, the study evaluates similarities and differences in their educational philosophies and explores the broader significance of education as a catalyst for social justice and democratic transformation.

5. Results / Findings

The comparison of the reform movements of Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar shows that education was the tool of the primary purpose to challenge the caste hierarchy and secure social emancipation. The two philosophers realised that lack of education had traditionally been one of the tools of social inequality in India. Therefore, their reforms were aimed at democratising knowledge and empowering the disadvantaged communities by enhancing education. Although Phule was mainly concerned with the spread of basic education among Shudras, Dalits and women in the nineteenth century, Ambedkar took his vision further by correlating education with political empowerment, constitutional rights and democratic political participation in the nineteenth century (Jaffrelot, 2005; Omvedt, 2008). The results thus suggest that education was not only a social reformist act but a revolution strategy that was to destroy the caste-based oppression system.

5.1 Jyotiba Phule's Educational Reform Movement

Jyotiba Phule is given a central role in the history of social reform in India because of his innovative ideas in the democratisation of education among the marginalised groups. Educational opportunities were mostly controlled by upper caste groups in the Indian society in the nineteenth century, Shudras, Dalits and women were systematically locked out of learning institutions. Phule knew that this deprivation of education was no mere coincidence but a regular machine by which the social supremacy of Brahmanical domination was secured. Accordingly, he saw education as an important tool of intellectual enlightenment and social liberation of oppressed groups of people (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994).

The social reforms initiated by Phule were based on the belief that knowledge access would disrupt the social stratifications that were deeply rooted in the society as well as enable the marginalised groups to challenge the oppressive socio-cultural practises. He opened one of the first girls schools in Pune in 1848 along with Savitribai Phule, a move which brought a major change in the history of female education in India. This initiative was a radical challenge to social norms since female education was not encouraged at all during that period and was in most cases discouraged by conservative social groups. Phule wanted to

instil a sense of critical awareness and intellectual self-respect in the socially disadvantaged communities through these schools so that they would be able to oppose caste inequality structures (Omvedt, 2008; Zelliott, 2004).

Phule also expressed his criticism of caste hierarchy and social inequality in such powerful works like *Gulamgiri* (Slavery). In this he maintained that the subordination of lower castes by Brahmanical ideology had historically been sustained through knowledge monopoly and through the educational opportunities it provided. Phule argued that education of Shudras, Dalits and women had to be expanded to break these systems of domination and create a more egalitarian social order (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 2011).

Phule integrated intellectual criticism and practical education programs and thereby established the grounds upon which a larger movement emerged that would associate education with social justice and equality. His work had a profound impact on the subsequent anti-caste movements such as the one spearheaded by B. R. Ambedkar who expanded the concept of education as a transformational power that can reform the Indian society (Jaffrelot, 2005).

5.2 Ambedkar's Philosophy of Education and Social Justice

In the Indian society, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar considered education as one of the most potent tools of securing social emancipation and democratic equality. Ambedkar was born in a society where caste discrimination was highly practised and he himself was discriminated and humiliated by the Dalit in the institutions of learning. These exposed him to the belief that historical rejection of education to the discriminated communities has been a source of the hierarchical order of the caste system. As a result, Ambedkar accorded an unprecedented importance on education as a tool of intellectual empowerment and social mobility of the oppressed groups (Jaffrelot, 2005; Rao, 2009).

Ambedkar was known to have given the call of educate, agitate, organise in which he believed that education was the initial mode in a wider process of social change. To him, education was not only a way to personal progress but also a way of developing critical consciousness of the marginalised communities, and critiquing the ideological basis of the caste oppression. Through education, he argued, the oppressed groups would know their rights, mobilise as one and actively engage in the democratic institutions. In this respect, education served as a source of social consciousness as well as political empowerment (Ambedkar, 2014; Omvedt, 1994).

In contrast to other reformers in the past, who were more concerned with education at the elementary education level, Ambedkar saw the role of higher education and professional training as key instruments of

achieving social mobility. He contended that the barriers to universities, technical education, and administrative places would be opened up to members of historically disadvantaged groups who could confront the already established systems of privilege and hold power in the social and political hierarchy (Rao, 2009; Zelliot, 2004). By speaking in favour of education rights and institutional representation, Ambedkar attempted to establish possibilities of Dalits and other suppressed groups to engage in the full lives of the people.

The educational philosophy of Ambedkar was also connected closely with his social democratic vision in general. He kept on insisting that political democracy was not sustainable in a society which was characterised by strong social inequalities. Education was not only necessary to empower individual but also to create a democratic society that is based on the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Galanter, 1984; Jaffrelot, 2012). Political activism and institutional projects coupled with his writings made Ambedkar change education into the key component of the social justice and democratic revolution in contemporary India.

5.3 Comparative Insights: Educational Thought of Phule and Ambedkar

There is also a basic similarity in the educational philosophies of both Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar in that both are committed to the process of breaking caste-based inequality by democratising knowledge. These two philosophers acknowledged that historical exclusion of lower castes, Dalits and women to education was one of the primary mechanisms of social stratification in the Indian society. They, therefore, did not perceive education as an individual tool of personal development but as a societal tool of social liberation and change of the status quo that was oppressive (Omvedt, 2008; Jaffrelot, 2005). Their concepts focused on the idea that knowledge access would provoke hierarchical structures and help marginalised groups gain intellectual independence and social consciousness.

The vision of education of Phule developed in the framework of the social reform movements in colonial India of the nineteenth century. He mainly dealt with the spread of elementary education to the Shudras, Dalits, and women who had been out of the formal education system. By introducing schools to the marginalized populations and ensuring the education of women, Phule attempted to disrupt the intellectual monopoly of powerful castes and create social mobility within the oppressed communities. His reform programs thus were directly related to a wider criticism of Brahmanical power and the ideological principles of caste inequality (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994). Phule was trying to instil a sense of critical consciousness in the socially disadvantaged groups to help them overcome the oppressive social traditions.

Ambedkar strongly influenced by the previous reformers like Phule, formed a more detailed educational philosophy of the twentieth century. Although he recognised that basic education is important, he laid stress on higher education, professional training, and institutional representation, as key avenues of social mobility. According to Ambedkar, education would enable the marginalised communities in the society to engage in active participation in the democratic institutions and demand their constitutional right to be treated as equal citizens (Rao, 2009; Zelliott, 2004). In that regard, education empowerment was directly related to his overall idea of social democracy and political equality.

Although these two thinkers had variations concerning the historical context and approach, they both viewed education as the source of social justice. The early efforts of Phule were the foundation of subsequent anti-caste movements and further elaboration of this intellectual tradition was carried out by Ambedkar with combining the educational empowerment with constitutional rights and democratic change (Jaffrelot, 2012). Their works collectively prove that the educational reform has played a central role in the fight against caste oppression and will remain a source of information in modern discussions of equality and inclusive development in India.

6. Discussion

As the above discussion has shown, education played the key role in the reform movements of both Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar as a strategic instrument of fighting against the established caste hierarchies and ensuring social equality. These two philosophers acknowledged that the historical limitation on access to knowledge had been a key factor in perpetuating caste domination structures. The intellectual and institutional monopoly of education by the elite groups in society guaranteed that minority groups failed to participate in intellectual and institutional aspects. Through his education reform, Phule and Ambedkar were aiming at democratising knowledge and letting oppressed communities challenge and oppose social inequality systems (Galanter, 1984; Omvedt, 2008).

The focus on education by Phule was closely related to his attack on Brahmanical power and the systematic discrimination of lower castes and women in the formal education. His efforts to create schools to girls and marginalised groups was not just a reform in education but a social protest to address the ideological basis of caste hierarchy. Through educating the oppressed groups, Phule aimed at developing intellectual self-consciousness and critical thinking that would help people challenge the inherited social hierarchy and demand their respect in the society (O'Hanlon, 1985; Omvedt, 1994). In this regard, education played the role of neutralising the ideological validity of caste-based domination through a potent tool.

Ambedkar broadened this view by associating the education empowerment with the democratic citizenship and the constitutional rights. To Ambedkar, education was critical in enabling the marginalised communities to gain a meaningful role in the political institutions as well as enjoy their rights in a democratic state. He postulated that social democracy cannot be achieved in the absence of intellectual empowerment of oppressed communities because education would lead to critical awareness and new communal political power. His support of higher education, professional education and institutional representation was a more comprehensive outlook of social change based on equality and constitutionalism (Jaffrelot, 2005; Rao, 2009).

These concepts are still relevant in modern India. Despite the fact that since independence, educational opportunities have increased significantly, structural inequalities remain as a factor in determining access to good education. Unequal distribution of resources, discrimination on caste, and hindrances to higher education still remain in most of the nation. Reconsidering the educational philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar thus offers useful lessons to the present policy discussions of inclusive education and social justice. Their intellectual legacies show the importance of education as a transformational power that could promote equality and empower the democratic society (Thorat and Newman, 2010; Deshpande, 2013).

7. Conclusion

The education reform movement of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar reflects how education took a transformational path in fighting the caste inequality in India. The two philosophers understood that the systematic denial of education to the marginalised communities had been a potent tool in perpetuating social hierarchy in the past. They therefore made education to be central in their quest to enhance social justice, equality and human dignity. Phule and Ambedkar aimed to empower the oppressed groups to question the structures of domination that were deeply rooted and engage more in the social and political life through promotion of greater access to knowledge.

The innovative movement of education to Shudras, Dalits and women by Phule was one of the first systematic attacks on Brahmanical knowledge and intellectual dominance. His work provided intellectual basis in the subsequent movements that perceive education as a social awakening and collective empowerment. This vision was extended by Ambedkar in the twentieth century who associated education with the right to democratic citizenship, constitutional rights and representation by institutions. His focus on education and intellectual empowerment of the marginalised communities through his focus on higher education put forward the role of knowledge in empowering the marginalised communities to demand their rights in the democratic society.

Combined, the concepts of Phule and Ambedkar highlight the timeless value of education as an agent of social change. Their educational ideological approaches still have a lot to offer to the modern day issues in terms of equality, social justice and inclusive growth in the contemporary India.

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