



## DALITS AND EDUCATION IN WESTERN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW OF DALIT EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM IN COLONIAL PERIOD

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to provide an overview of educational activism conducted by Dalit activists during the colonial period. It seeks to focus on the period between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the mid 1940s. It is an important period in the history of modern India as it witnessed a rise of vocal and assertive brand of Dalit politics under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's leadership and a powerful discourse articulated by Jotiba Phule. It was in this period the orientation of the organized Dalit politics were fundamentally shaped, and resultantly, it influenced the succeeding decades of the Dalit politics. This paper argues that with the rise the organized Dalit politics in the decade of the 1920s, Dalit educational activism proliferated. Therefore, the relationship between the then Dalit politics and the educational activism of Dalits was largely shaped in the period between 1920s and the 1940s. This paper would provide a brief account of important educational institutions started by Dalit activists during this period. This paper is however not an exhaustive account of educational activism conducted by Dalits.*

**KEYWORDS:** History of Dalit Education, Ambedkar, Dalit Politics, Caste, Untouchability, Bombay Presidency

### Introduction

This paper seeks to provide an overview of educational activism among Dalits in Western India in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. There is conspicuous absence of academic

writings on the history of educational initiatives taken by Dalits in colonial India. Since education has been instrumental in the making of assertive Dalit politics in modern India, there is a strong need to understand the relationship of Dalit politics with the educational initiatives taken by Dalit activists of the time. Education became one of the most important concerns for the organized Dalit politics in modern India. Dalit activism in colonial western India provides a testimony of how Dalits envisaged education as an impactful (and sometimes fiercest) weapon against the Brahmanical caste hegemony. However, this paper would mainly focus its interest on the period between 1920s and the 1940s. It is an important period in the history of modern India as it witnessed a rise of vocal and assertive brand of Dalit politics under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's leadership. It was in this period the orientation of the organized Dalit politics were fundamentally shaped; and resultantly, influenced the succeeding decades of the Dalit politics. This paper will attempt to unfold the contours of relationship between the organized Dalit politics and Dalit educational activism in the late colonial India. This paper is however not an exhaustive account of educational activism conducted by Dalits. It is rather a preliminary attempt to understand Dalit politics from a perspective of educational activism.

### **Organized Dalit Politics and the Rise of Educational Activism**

Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha was an organization established by B.R. Ambedkar in 1924. It offered a new slogan to the then untouchable community of western India, who were still struggling to build a formidable political organization of their own. The slogan, 'Educate-Agitate-Organize', was borrowed from the Fabian Society, a prominent British socialist organization founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Teltumbde, 2011). This slogan eventually became one of the iconic catchphrases of the vibrant Dalit movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It evidently illustrates how education became one of the most important concerns of the organized Dalit politics of modern India. Educational initiatives taken by Dalit activists of western India in the earlier twentieth century significantly shaped the question of education vis-à-vis Dalit politics.

This period was largely dominated by iconic leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, but it was also simultaneously inhabited by the lesser known activists, who played crucial role in propagating education among the masses in the mofussil towns. Dalit activists like Jivappa Aidaley from Solapur, Bhaurao Gaikwad of Nashik, R.G. Khandale of Pune, and S.A. Upsham and M.V. Donde of Bombay played an equally instrumental role in either establishing different educational institutions for Dalits or promoting importance of education among them. Even Ambedkar's

prominent Dalit political opponents, like KK Sakat and Ganesh Akkaji Gawai, acquired political significance through establishing schools and hostels for Dalit students of their regions. Thus, there is noticeable relationship between organized Dalit politics that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Dalit educational activism of the period.

It has been rightly pointed out that modern education in colonial India not only became the significant site of conflict between colonial power and its subjects, but it also emerged as a site of everyday political struggle and resistance for Dalits (Paik 2014). Hence, it is important to understand the social, political and economic contexts in which the educational institutions led by Dalits developed in different cities, villages and mofussil towns of western India. Although there is growing body of historical writings dealing with various aspects of Dalit movements in India, but literature dealing with education and its relationship with Dalit protest movement, however, is scarce. Many scholars working on the history of Dalit movement have seldom focused their research beyond Ambedkar, thereby, leaving aside a significant chunk of historical narrative of Dalit history out of academic discussion. Most of the historical writings (or secondary literature) takes refuge mostly in Ambedkar's scholarly writings, thereby avoiding loads of important documents, sources and events, which had shaped and inspired Ambedkar and the organized Dalit politics.

Very few scholars have touched upon the relationship between organized Dalit politics and rise of educational institutions. Shailaja Paik has extensively worked on an important aspect of Dalit education in modern India. Her work, *Dalit Women's education in Modern India*, however, is confined to question of Dalit women's education, and therefore, it doesn't fully address the actual significance of educational institutions built by Dalit radicals in this period. There has been virtual absence of secondary literature on Dalit educational institutions in western India. Eleanor Zelliot has documented initiatives taken by Dalit activists in building educational institutions in western India from 1850s to the 1990s (Bhattacharya, 2002; Rao, 2014). Although the study conducted by Zelliot is immensely informative, it does not examine the actual efforts made by Dalit activists in building these institutions in the given period. On the other hand, Changdev Khairmode has attempted to document the activities of different Dalit activists in his magnum opus biographical volumes on B.R. Ambedkar (Khairmode, 2010 and 2003). These writings have provided a much required base for the empirical understanding of the situation. It has certainly helped in enriching our exposure towards Dalit politics of that period. But it is

equally true that most writings have been unable to conclusively sketch the impact of the organized Dalit politics and educational activism started by the newly politicized Dalits of the early twentieth century.

### **Education and Dalits in Colonial India**

With the defeat of the Peshwas in 1818, Marathi speaking region of western India witnessed a new phase in its history. Thus, the English East India Company was finally able to overpower the Marathas, who were the Company's most formidable political challengers in the subcontinent. The Company assumed power with the force but it was reasonably aware of the challenges it would face in the course of time. It assumed control by establishing huge bureaucratic and administrative networks. In the course of time, the Company also took considerable interest in establishing educational institutions, albeit with altered resources and extreme caution. It all started in 1813, when extraordinary measures were introduced by the British parliament which were to impact the future of education in India. Through the Charter Act of 1813, the British Parliament had introduced important initiative to introduce modern institutional education in India. The Charter Act brought two major changes which greatly affected the course of education in colonial India (Viswanathan, 1989): Firstly, through this Act the Company assumed a new responsibility toward native education, and secondly, it relaxed the restrictions on the missionary activity in India. These changes greatly affected the relationship of colonial power with its colonial subjects. But the initiative taken by the colonial power was not as innocuous as it seemed to be. Gauri Viswanathan had finely explained how the colonial power adapted and shaped a new curriculum that vitally impacted the social and political control of Britain.

Nevertheless, educational initiatives taken by the Company brought profound changes in the educational apparatus of the country. After the assumption of power in western India, the Company established number of schools for the natives in different towns and the cities. From the 1830s and 40s onwards, the impact of education could be particularly seen with the concomitant rise of native newspapers. With the men like Balshastri Jambhekar, Bhau Mahajan, and Gopal Hari Deshmukh (Lokhitwadi), who were at the forefront of the burgeoning Marathi public sphere, western India witnessed its first ideological churning (O'Hanlon, 1985). But it was under Jotiba Phule's leadership in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the churning achieved impeccable sharpness and considerable mass appeal. Phule was involved in establishing schools for untouchables, lower castes and women, which was unique in itself. Phule's activism had

continuously and emphatically asserted the emancipatory role of education for the marginalised masses. On the other hand, the educational campaign started by Phule exemplified the cleavages created through modern education. Phule's leadership provided a formidable and articulate voice for a group which came to be largely identified as the Non Brahmins. It brought the conflict between Non Brahmins and the upper castes, particularly Brahmins, who were also one of the earliest recipients of modern western education. Phule's campaigns also highlight the limited role played by the colonial power in bringing about the marginalised groups into the ambit of education.

Phule's ability to connect caste question with education and women's reforms widened the appeal of his Satyashodhak movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many Non Brahmins, along with Dalits, joined the Satyashodhak movement. Dalit activists like Gopal Baba Walangkar and Kisan Faguji Bansode were actively involved with Phule's movement as leading activists and community organizer (Omvedt, 2014). From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, after taking inspiration from Phule, Dalits began to vocalize their concerns against everyday Brahmanical caste practices. With the vocalization of these concerns, education increasingly became a focus of attention for the nascent Dalit politics. There are ample references in the local newspapers (for example, *Dnyanodaya*, *Din Bandhu*, and *The Times of India*) regarding the continuous difficulties faced by Dalit students registered in different educational institutions. In 1894, for instance, Gopal Baba Walangkar, the founder of *Anarya Pariharak Mandali*, and one of the earliest Dalit leaders, disappointedly stated in one of his articles that existing caste practices observed in educational institutions, were biggest hindrances in the education of Dalits. He argued that the difficulty in getting school education was one of the reasons for perpetual backwardness of Dalits (Pantavane, 1987). Eighty years later, in the 1970s, Dalit Panthers, a radical anti-caste organizations founded in 1970s in western India, only reiterated the old Dalit grievances on education. In its charter of demands incorporated in the *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, they demanded the Indian State to provide free education to Dalits, along with other basic facilities like medical assistance and food (Murugkar, 1991). Thus, the history of Dalit movement in western India clearly suggests that Dalit educational activism was intimately linked with the political discourse of Dalits.

### **Educational Activism and Dalit Politics in Western India**

Active involvement of Dalits in educational activism began with the onset of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Shivram Janba Kamble, a Mahar leader from Pune and a pioneer educational activist, opened

hostels for Dalits in the early twentieth century (Khairmode vol.1, 2010; Kshirsagar, 1994). Shivram Kamble had argued that the prosperity of any community/nation could be achieved only through knowledge, and knowledge is imbibed through education. Therefore, for him, if Dalits want to attain material prosperity, they would have to enter schools and formal educational institutions (Pantavane, 1987). On the other hand, in the Nagpur region (of the Central and Berar Provinces), leading Dalit activists like Kisan Faguji Bansode and Jaibai Chaudhary opened number of schools and hostels, which imparted education to hundreds of Dalit children of the region (Kshirsagar, 1994). This was also a period dominated by burgeoning non-Brahmin political activism with newly instilled energy under Shahu Chatrapati, a native ruler of Kolhapur princely state. Shahu is credited to have built number of schools and hostels for non-Brahmin castes.

His aggressive position against the intellectual and political hegemony of Brahmins had inspired many of his contemporary non-Brahmin activists and followers. As a result, they were actively involved in establishing educational institutions in western India. Among the newly proselytized Non Brahmin activists, Bhaurao Patil, founder of Rayat Shikshan Sanstha (or Rayat Education Society) and Vitthal Ramji Shinde, founder of Depressed Classes Mission Society of India, played a crucial role in disseminating education among Dalits. Patil started his educational activism with the establishment of the All-caste hostel in the village near Satara, and admitted Dalits into this hostel and he consciously practiced intermingling of students from different caste background (Kadiyal, 1998). On the other hand, Vitthal Ramji Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission (DCM) began its activity in 1906 and, in the course of time, it became a prominent educational institution for Dalits (Pawar, 2004). The establishment of the Ahilya Ashram, a school cum residential boarding in 1922 based in Pune could be considered as one of the most important contributions of Shinde's Depressed Classes Mission. The Ahilya Ashram produced prominent Dalit leaders like B.C. Kamble, R.R. Bhole, and D.G. Jadhav, who became closely associated with Ambedkar's movement in the later period (Bhattacharya, 2002).

With Ambedkar's arrival on public scene in 1920, rapid changes in Dalit political activism began to unfold in western India. He was able to galvanize the masses, which subsequently led to the establishment of organized Dalit politics in western India. Dalit leaders like Shivram Kamble and Kisan F. Bansode and Non Brahmin leaders like Vitthal Ramji Shinde had to give way to Ambedkar's leadership. With the establishment of the *Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha* (BHS), under

his leadership, aggressive campaigns for spread of education had begun with new energy. One of the first hostels started by Ambedkar on behalf of the BHS was based in Solapur (Keer, 1995). In 1928, the Sabha established a boarding school at Panvel (Khairmode, vol.2, 2003). In Bombay city, Ambedkar along with the Social Service League, an organization closely allied with the BHS, were actively involved in management of Adult Education School, which was primarily meant to cater the Bombay based Working classes (*The Times of India*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1925). The two Marathi Newspapers founded by Ambedkar in the 1920s, *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrut Bharat*, provided important glimpses of the state of affairs on education. Reports in these newspapers strongly suggest that education had become one of the key concerns for Dalit political activism. Resolutions passed in different Dalit public meetings conducted across Marathi speaking regions, also suggest that education remained a topmost agenda of discussion in these meetings (For e.g. *Bahishkrut Bharat*, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1927 and 29<sup>th</sup> March 1929). Reports and editorials in these newspapers, particularly in the *Bahishkrut Bharat*, clearly suggest how caste practices were blatantly followed in the educational institutions, including those influenced by Non Brahmins political activism (For e.g. *Bahishkrut Bharat*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1927).

In the decade of the 1920s, many Dalit activists, including many of Ambedkar's political opponents began their public career as educational activists. One of them, P.N. Rajbhoj, a Chambhar by caste, who later joined Ambedkar, was a founder of Mahatma Phule Hostel and Kamla Nehru Hostel in Pune in 1928 (Paik, 2014). K.K. Sakat, a leader from Mang caste, who was closely associated with the dominant reactionary Brahmin group (who were primarily Tilak supporters) of Pune, was also one of the founders of a Hostel for Untouchables based in Pune. Educational institutions played important role in foregrounding Dalit politics in different regions of western India. Therefore, at the backdrop of the Round Table Conference, when Dalit mass mobilization reached its peak due to Ambedkar's epic clash with Gandhi, there is an emergence of several small scale educational institutions (including hostels and libraries) in different parts of western India. Marathi newspapers including Ambedkar's *Janata* bear testimony to this development. One of such institutions was founded by R.G. Khandale, a Mang supporter of Ambedkar at Daund, a small town near Pune. It was reported in many Marathi newspapers including the *Janata*. Such instances provide us a testimony of how political consciousness among Dalits led to establishment of many educational institutions.

In the 1930s, Ambedkar had consciously distanced himself from active involvement in the educational activities due to his busy engagement with politics. However, his organizations initially, Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha, and later, the Independent Labour party and Scheduled Caste Federation were deeply involved in these activities. In this period, he was often criticized by his Dalit opponents for not personally focusing enough on educational activities (*Janata* 8<sup>th</sup> June 1931). He rather chose to inspire many of his fellow activists and colleagues, to establish new educational institutions in different parts of the western India. Punaji Lalingkar of Dhule district was one of them. He was inspired by Ambedkar's radical politics and his charismatic leadership. Taking inspiration from him, Lalingkar established the Paschim Khandesh Shikshan Prasarak Mandal in 1939 in Dhule and a hostel at Nadurbar (Paswan, 2002). Ambedkar's newspaper, the *Janata* provides immense information on such local small scale educational institutions. For example, in one of the issues of the *Janata* in the 1937 there is a reference to one Kulaba based Asprushya Vidyarthi Ashram, established by Subhedar Sawadkar in 1928, and which housed around 100 students (*Janata* 12<sup>th</sup> March 1937). Such institutions are often ignored in the historical literature as they are difficult to trace in the archives. It is equally important to understand that these institutions were also the nerve centers of Dalit political movement.

In the 1940s and 50s, Ambedkar founded People's Education Society and established two new institutions of higher learning. In 1946, he established Siddharth College at Bombay. Few years later, he founded Milind College at Aurangabad. In the 1950s, Siddharth College attracted many politically active Dalit students and teachers who played significant role in the future course of Dalit politics. R.D. Bhandare, one of the prominent leaders of the Scheduled Caste Federation (a political party founded by Ambedkar in 1942) and Republican Party of India (RPI) was a Professor of Political Science at Siddharth College. Many prominent leaders and ideologues of Dalit panthers movement received their education from Siddharth College. These institutions (Milind and Siddharth Colleges) became important hub of Dalit political activism. Apart from Ambedkar, there were many prominent Dalit activists, during the 1940s and 50s, like Bhaurao Gaikwad, Dadasaheb Rupavate, M.V. Donde, S.A. Upsham, M.B. Chitnis, B.H. Varale, S.S. Rege, and Ghanshyam Talwatkar, who had significantly contributed to the cause of Dalit education in western India. These men not only built strong educational institutions but they also played important role in reinvigorating grass-root political activism in western India. In 1950s, many educational institutions founded by Dalit activists were freely used as a platform to propagate Buddhism among Dalits.

## **Dalits and Alternative Ideas of Education**

Dalit educational activism was profoundly influenced by the Non Brahmin political activism of the 1920s. As mentioned earlier, the Non Brahmins like Vitthal Ramji Shinde and Bhaurao Patil had profoundly inspired others to establish large number of educational institutions in Bombay presidency. But most Non Brahmins (which mostly consisted of middle ranking castes) were patronizingly indifferent to the problem of untouchability. Their main concern was to wage a fight against the caste prejudices of Brahmins. Therefore, the question of untouchability in educational institutions was often ignored by the leadership. In 1927, Ambedkar wrote an article in his periodical *Bahishkrut Bharat*, regarding the caste prejudices Dalit students faced in a government run teacher's training College at Pune (*Bahishkrut Bharat*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1927). Ambedkar wrote elaborately about the incident that took place at the college's dining room where Dalit students were prohibited by the Non Brahmin students to dine with them. He highlighted the duplicity of Non Brahmins, who carry immense caste prejudices vis-à-vis Untouchables, but become vehement when the Brahmins possessed the same with regard to others.

Ambedkar began to distance himself with the Non Brahmin politics from the late 1920s onwards. Before distancing himself, he had been involved with many prominent Non Brahmin leaders and ideologues like Keshavrao Jedhe, Dinkarrao Jawalakar, and Sripatrao Shinde. The distancing of Dalit movement with the Non Brahmin politics was moreover at a symbolic level. Non Brahmin politics, irrespective of its differences with the new Dalit leadership, substantially shaped the ideological contours of Dalit politics of the late colonial period. As far as the question of education was concerned, the institutional models founded by the likes of Vitthal Ramji Shinde and Bhaurao Patil were seldom refuted. Non Brahmin educational institutions though radical in its approach were unable to provide substantial alternative to the mainstream/colonial/'Brahmanical' mode of education.

Similarly, despite their overwhelming emphasis on education, Dalit leadership during this period was also unable to provide ideological and material infrastructure to deal with varied concerns of education and pedagogy. Unlike Gandhi, Dalit activists and leaders seldom attempted to question the content of institutional education which was imparted to the students in the schools and colleges. They therefore could not devise an alternative framework to critique colonial and 'Brahmanical' narratives which dominated the school curricula. As a result, anti-caste Dalit

political discourse in the Ambedkar and post-Ambedkar period faced immense difficulties to counter the dominant ideological narratives. The absence of alternative pedagogy subsequently helped in peculiarly shaping the nature and form of Dalit movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century western India. There is a greater need to investigate into the nature of educational institutions founded by Dalit activists during the late colonial period. Simultaneously there is even greater need to explore the pedagogical approaches practiced by Dalits of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This will not only unfold the history of educational activism conducted by Dalits but also help to understand the impact enforced by dominant pedagogical practices of the time.

## **Conclusion**

Education began to prominently figure within Dalit political vocabulary primarily due to the rise of Ambedkar led Dalit politics in the 1920s. It brought assertive, aggressive and yet articulate leadership of Dalits to the fore. Even before the rise of the organized Dalit politics, education remained an important concern for Dalits. Jotiba Phule's leadership played instrumental role in assertively placing the question of education in the then public sphere. Under Phule's extraordinary influence, early Dalit leaders passionately advocated education for Dalits. But with the arrival of the 1920s the question of education was profoundly shaped by the rise of educational activism among Dalits. The rise in educational activism was directly influenced by the concomitant emergence of organized Dalit politics under Ambedkar's leadership. Public meetings held across the region during this period, or essays published in the newspapers like *Bahishkrut Bharat*, *Mooknayak*, and *Janata*, consistently exhorted Dalit men and women to educate their children. This is a testimony of how education became a main concern of Dalit politics at a mass level. With the rise of new political consciousness among Dalits in the 1920s, there was significant proliferation of institutions including night schools, hostels and libraries, which were established by local Dalit activists. These institutions were clear manifestations of the new course of Dalit politics.

Despite many inherent problems, Dalits were responsible for creating strong and vibrant institutions which invariably influenced the generation of Dalits. The resources built by these Dalit activists, howsoever meager they were, undoubtedly provided a new orientation to the then Dalit movement. These institutions i.e. hostels, schools and colleges, became a platform for young Dalits to build social and cultural networks, and motivated them to organize politically. It

eventually paved the way in creating a new leadership which profoundly influenced the course of Dalit politics, particularly after Ambedkar's death.

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