

## Education and Vulnerable Communities- Reading B.R. Ambedkar's

### Vision

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### Abstract

*In this paper an attempt is made to understand the educational project of Ambedkar in order to liberate the vulnerable communities in the country. Ambedkar had developed an almost doctrinal belief in the efficacious and transformatory character of education and held that education must be available to all, irrespective of caste or status. 'Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone'. Ambedkar's life and mission itself is a case history of how education can shape a leader and the destiny of the depressed classes, whom he represented. In this context it is important to highlight the contributions made by Ambedkar in the education sector, his vision and the relevance of his educational philosophy in the present scenario.*

**Key Words: Education, Vulnerable Communities, Depressed Classes, Development, Untouchability, Ambedkar.**

### Introduction

'It is the education which is the right weapon to cut the social slavery and it is the education which will enlighten the downtrodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom', are the views of Ambedkar. B.R. Ambedkar, as is well known, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, devoted most of his intellectual, social and political efforts to give expression to his belief in the ideal, "Sarvenah Bhavantu Sukhinah Sarve Santu Niramayah" i.e. the good and prosperity of all and struggled throughout his life for securing the rightful place for the discriminated, deprived and downtrodden sections of our society. Though several efforts were made by Ambedkar to establish an equalitarian society in India and had been discussed widely by different scholars yet few studies are available to

project him as a great educationist. Ambedkar made an attempt to achieve this objective through his educational project also and discussed at length in this paper.

### **Role of Education in Shaping Ambedkar's Vision**

Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891, at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh. His parents belonged to the Mahar community, which at that time was considered 'untouchable'. Education was primarily the privilege of the upper castes during those days. Ambedkar had personally to go through many an ordeal during his school as well as college days. He was made to experience segregation and resultant isolation. The teachers would not care to check his homework. Some of them did not even ask him to recite poems or put any questions to him for fear of being polluted. It was during his school days that Ambedkar began to feel what it meant to be an untouchable. Facing such indignation did not deter Ambedkar from pursuing his studies. In spite of such humiliation, he was able to pass matriculation examination in 1907 and successfully completed his graduation in 1912 with financial aid of Rs. 25 per month awarded by Maharaja SayajiRao of Baroda. After passing his B.A., Ambedkar joined the Baroda State's service. His graduation and stated service could not come to his rescue to free him from the curse of untouchability. The peons in his office used to throw office files at him lest they should get polluted through personal contact.

Although Phule's works and ideas, Kabir's philosophy and the gospel of Buddha had a deep impact on Ambedkar's mind yet his education overseas predominantly changed his outlook. While studying in America and England, he was greatly impressed by the humanitarian traditions and trends in these countries. "Ambedkar's American experience seems to have marked him in giving him an unshakable faith in democracy, in encouraging a pragmatic, many faceted approaches." (Jaideva 2002: 58-59)

His western education and deep understanding of the western philosophies helped him to evolve as a visionary who had developed clear ideas for the emancipation of the vulnerable communities in India.

In 1913, Ambedkar got an opportunity to go to USA for higher studies on a Baroda State scholarship. He was the first Mahar to study in a foreign University Ambedkar entered the Graduate school of Columbia University.. His biographer, D. Keer writes, "Among the first-rate Indian political leaders, Ambedkar was the first to receive instruction in the land of Lincoln and Booker T. Washington." (Keer 1910: 26) His aim was not only to be a holder of the highest University degrees but also to be the master of social sciences. He took an enormous number of courses: political science, anthropology, sociology, economics, moral philosophy etc. It was

probably in this phase of his life that he discovered and absorbed in his mind the basic tenets; those were to be at the core of his philosophy of life.

Life in the Columbia University was a revelation to him, and it enlarged his mental vision. Against the background of bitter experiences of humiliation due to untouchability, the exposure to western values and ways of life was a wonderful and moving experience for Ambedkar. He wrote a letter to one of the friends of his father and suggested a remedy to diagnoses of the ills of his community. "Let your mission", concludes the young man of twenty, "therefore, be to educate and preach the idea of education to those at least who are near to and in close contact with you". (Keer 1910: 27)

The academic degrees, which he received in USA not only enriched him in ideas but also made him conscious of his social obligations towards his community, and perform them to the best of his ability. He recalled in 1931, "Nobody would have believed, in the period of my student career that an untouchable person like me would represent the Depressed Classes in Round Table Conferences in London and will participate prominently in framing free India's Constitution. Leave aside others, but personally, I, myself, also could not have dreamt of it.... except my personal well-being. I had no specific aim before me when I had started my journey for America for education. I had not even the slightest glimpse of the matter that I will become one with the grievances and sorrow of my people and lead them to the proper destination within so short span of time". (Quoted by Khabde 1989: 34) After two long years of toil, he obtained M.A. degree in 1915, for his thesis 'Ancient Indian Commerce'; simultaneously working on another thesis that he submitted for the degree of Ph.D. entitled 'National Dividend of India – A Historical and Analytical Study.'

Ambedkar was deeply influenced by the writings and teachings of Professor John Dewey, one of the greatest educationists of the 20th century, who happened to be his teacher at Columbia University. Ambedkar fully endorsed Dewey's emphasis on education as a means to change the world and not merely to understand it. Dewey held that democracy cannot go forward unless the intelligence of the mass of people is educated to understand the social realities of their own time. (Dewey 1916) Therefore, Ambedkar approached the problem of educational upliftment of the masses as a pragmatist. He says that education is one of the basic needs along with food, clothing and shelter. Dewey's ideas provided him the basis for a systematic analysis of problems relating to society, religion, politics, economy and history.

### **Equal Opportunity to Access Education**

Ambedkar, who developed an almost doctrinal belief in the efficacious and transformatory character of education, held that education must be available to all, irrespective of caste or status. “Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40) He examined the education policy of the British in India and found that Education in India had always remained restricted to the members of the upper stratum of society. He held that:

“During the British rule, the field of education was deliberately kept confined to the upper classes, as the British feared that the spread of education among the members of lower classes might jeopardize their existence in India. The worst sufferers of such an education policy were the untouchables. Their segregation in schools was absolute. They had to sit outside the holy precincts of the temple school. Drinking water was not available to them. Even the method of punishment meted out to the untouchable students was different from the method to punish the caste Hindu students. While the caste Hindu students were beaten with sticks, the untouchable students were hit with clods and stones from a distance lest the touchable teachers got polluted. Thus, only those untouchable students, who meekly submitted to such horrible insults and physical injuries, could receive education. Those who could not put up with inhuman atrocities ran away from the school and spent the rest of their lives ploughing in the farms owned by others”. (Quoted by Lokhande 1982:228-229)

Ambedkar’s important contribution to the education sector was his belief that ‘Education is something, which ought to be brought within the reach of every one’. The Education Department is not a department, which can be treated on the basis of *quid pro quo*. Education ought to be cheapened in all possible ways and to the greatest possible extent. He urged this plea because he felt that, “we are arriving at a stage when the lower orders of society are just getting into the high schools, middle schools and colleges, and the policy of this department therefore ought to be to make higher education as cheap to the lower classes as it can possibly be made.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40-41)

Ambedkar was against the great disparity in the advancement in education of the different classes in India. He quoted statistics from the report of Education and Hunter Commission to point out that depressed classes are the worst sufferers in education sector in proportion to their population. (For details see Ambedkar 1982: 39-44) He stressed that depressed classes should be treated as minority and similar benefits should also be extended to them as Muslims were earlier given in education sector. “Economically speaking or socially speaking, backward classes are handicapped in a manner in which no other community is handicapped. I, therefore, think that the

principle of favoured treatment must be adopted in their case. ...their position is worse than that of the Mohammedans and my only pleading is that if the most favoured treatment is to be given to those who deserve it and need it most, then the backward classes deserve more attention of Government..."(Ambedkar 1982: 42)

He also suggested other pragmatic ways to promote literacy among the depressed classes during the Legislative debate, "The second thing that I wish to say about the depressed classes is that I find a as a certain sum has been set aside in the budget for scholarships for the backward communities." (Ambedkar 1982: 43-44)

And the third thing is the method of giving scholarships to the boys of the depressed classes. Ambedkar was worried that the method of giving scholarships is really a waste of public money. The depressed class parents are too poor, too ignorant; to understand that the help given by Government is really the help for the education of the child. The parents look upon the scholarship as a family aid to meet their expenses. It is certainly not made available for the education of the boy as such, which is the primary object of the scholarship. So he urged the government that without the proper direction, the child can easily fall prey to all sorts of evil influences and gives up his education and money spent upon him is lost. "I would, therefore, put it to the Honourable Minister whether it will not be better for him to spend this money in promoting hostels which either Government may open of its own accord or which may be opened by private agency for the promotion of the education of the backward classes. Sir, it will be a double saving. A hostel, first of all, weans the boy from evil surroundings. It provides effective inspection. And when a hostel is managed by private agency, it will mean some saving of money to Government." (Ambedkar 1982: 44)

During the discussion, Ambedkar also developed logical argument in favour of equality of opportunity to be provided to all the vulnerable communities in the society which can be further developed in the context of different controversies raised on the issue of reservations after independence. "I must here emphasise that this country is composed of different communities. All these communities are unequal in their status and progress. If they are to be brought to the level of equality then the only remedy is to adopt the principle of inequality and to give favoured treatment to those who are below the level. There are some I know who object to this and adhere to the principle of equality of treatment. But I say Government has done well in applying this principle to the Mohammedans. For I honestly believe that equality of treatment to people who are unequal

is simply another name for indifferentism and neglect. My only complaint is that Government has not yet thought fit to apply this principle to the backward classes.” (Ambedkar 1982: 42)

### **Primary Education for All**

Ambedkar was convinced that primary education is very important for the vulnerable sections as it provides them necessary platform to enter into public life. Ambedkar recognized the importance of education in shaping the future and cautioned the under-privileged not to lose any opportunity, ‘We may forego material benefits, but we cannot forego our rights and opportunities to reap the benefits of highest education to the fullest extent.’ As a member, Ambedkar submitted detailed report about the deplorable condition of the Backward Communities to the Bombay Legislative Assembly, suggesting steps for the prevailing iniquitous educational System. He made a historical appeal for more grants to develop primary education for all sections during 1927 in his Legislative Council Debates in the Bombay Assembly.

Ambedkar pointed out that, “The object of primary education is to see that every child that enters the portals of a primary school does leave it only at a stage when it becomes literate and continues to be literate throughout the rest of his life.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40) Ambedkar also cautioned regarding the trend of dropout rate at the initial stage, “...if we take the statistics, we find that out of every hundred children that enter a primary school only eighteen reach the fourth standard; the rest of them, that is to say, 82 out of every 100, relapse into the state of illiteracy.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40)

Ambedkar stressed to spend more money on primary education and argued, “I therefore request the Honourable the Education Minister to spend more money on primary education, if for nothing else at least for the purpose of seeing that what he spends bears some fruit ultimately. ...unless we spend a sufficient amount of money, to see that every child that enters a school reaches the fourth standard, what we have already spent upon him is of no purpose whatsoever.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40)

Ambedkar was also against the commercialization of education and criticized the existing government, “out of the total expenditure which we incur on arts colleges, something like 36 per cent is financed from fees; out of the expenditure that we incur on high schools, something like 31 per cent is financed from fees; out of the expenditure that we incur on middle schools, something like 26 per cent is derived from fees.” (Ambedkar 1982: 40)

### **Importance of Higher Education**

Ambedkar made important interventions during the Bombay University Amendment Act and gave his views on university education that are still very relevant to promote higher education in India. Ambedkar also utilized the opportunity to give suggestions on higher education by submitting written evidence before the University Reforms Committee in 1925.

“...it must be realised that the University cannot succeed in promoting research or in promoting higher education, if it makes the examination system the be-all and end all of its existence.” (Ambedkar 1982: 45-46)

According to Ambedkar, “One of the fundamental functions of the University, as I understand it, is to provide facilities for bringing the highest education to the doors of the needy and the poor....I look upon the University primarily as a machinery, whereby educational facilities are provided to all those who are intellectually capable of using those facilities to the best advantage...”. (Ambedkar 1982: 61) As a result Ambedkar argued for the adequate representation of different communities in the senate to control the university affairs.

The objectives of university education are to train students:

- (a) to make distinctions between matter of fact and matter of option,
- (b) to distinguish issues and to separate questions each on its own merits and without an eye on 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. (Quoted by Chalam 2008:26-27)

Ambedkar’s idea of pooling the teaching resources of both city colleges and universities to avoid duplication and to improve efficiency is still valid. He held that most of the colleges in a city offer similar courses and this could be organised in such a fashion that the lecturing system was pooled and the students in the different colleges were allowed to listen and attend to the lectures to be delivered in any one particular college, the professors who are lecturing would be easily released to do some other kind of special work. (Ambedkar 1982: 47)

He also opposed the distinction between undergraduate teaching and postgraduate teaching. He said, “... if the object of the bill is to promote higher education and research, the best method would be not to separate the colleges from the University as has been done now but to

make a synthesis in which the University and the colleges would be partners on terms of equality and would be participating in promoting together, both the undergraduate and the post-graduate studies.” (Ambedkar 1982: 48)

Ambedkar also stressed the importance of research in the universities. The separation of postgraduate work from undergraduate work means the separation of teaching from research. But it is obvious that where research is divorced from teaching research must suffer. (Ambedkar 1982: 298)

Ambedkar was perhaps the first educationist who wanted power to be given to the academic council in matters of academic affairs in the university. (Quoted in Aryama2007: 348-349) He emphasized that a teaching university should really function as a teachers university in the sense that teachers hold all academic and administrative posts. (For detail see Ambedkar 1982: 292-312)

### **As an Educational Pragmatist**

Ambedkar approached the problem of educational upliftment of the masses as a pragmatist as his views on education seem to have strengthened in the course of time. As an educationist, Ambedkar practiced what he preached. The Bahshkrit Hitkarni Sabha” established in 1924 also aimed at promotion and -

- a) spread of education among the Depressed Classes by opening hostels or by employing such other means as may seem necessary or desirable.
- b) Spread of culture among the Depressed Classes by opening libraries, social centers and classes or study circles.
- c) To advance and improve the economic condition of the Depressed Classes by starting Industrial and Agricultural Schools.
- d) To represent the grievances of the Depressed Classes. (Quoted by Lokhande 1982: 55)

In 1928, he established the Depressed Class Education Society to organize the school education of his people on a sound basis and appealed to the Bombay Government to help his society to establish hostels, in which poor students could be accommodated. In response, the Governor of Bombay declared that he would sanction a scheme for five hostels for the benefit of secondary school students of the depressed classes.(Lokhande 1982: 124) Ambedkar made personal efforts to collect funds for these institutions.

On June 20, 1946, the establishment of the People’s Education Society was an important step Ambedkar took to propagate higher education among the backward classes. He established



the People's Education Society, in Mumbai in order to raise the cultural level and enlarge the mental horizon of the depressed and oppressed classes, which were denied the educational facilities for centuries.

The People's Education Society's objective is not merely to give instructions, but to impart such education as promotes intellectual, moral and social democracy. This is what modern India needs and this is what all well-wishers of India must promote, held Ambedkar. The motto of the People's Education Society is 'Knowledge and Compassion'. The Society had made good progress in this direction; running a number of colleges. <sup>i</sup>(Kadam 1993: 210-211)

In brief, the People's Education Society has significantly contributed to the spread of higher education among the vulnerable communities. The colleges gave monthly scholarships, provided cheap accommodation and paid immense attention to student's problems and encouraged progress. On the other hand, the students, after completing their education, have been working in villages and cities in various capacities in various bodies and offices. Ambedkar's voluntary efforts also included educational modernization but he said that it's a task that the state should undertake. Thus, in state socialism, he allocated a major role to the state in discharging its duties in respect of education of the unlettered millions of citizens in the country. (For detail see Ambedkar 1979)

Ambedkar wrote a letter to one of his father's friends when he was in America to pursue both male and female education in order to live a life of dignity. "We shall soon see better days and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with the female education..."(Keer 1991: 27) Later on, when he came back to India, he continuously advised his fellow brethren to educate themselves and their children. Ambedkar seems to carry forward the legacy of Mahatma Phule on the issue of education<sup>ii</sup> for girls. (Pratima 2003: 359) For Ambedkar, education was an important instrument of bringing social change and to help women to alleviate their position. Addressing a gathering of women during the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar advised them, "...Send your children to schools. Education is as necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress. As you are, so your children will be." (Keer 1991: 104)

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thus, Ambedkar suggested several policy measures for the development of education starting from primary to university that can be found to be relevant today to make the education sector effective and accountable. His ideas are full of innovations and quite pragmatic. His emphasis on the economic value of education that is the utilization of scarce resources for the

development of education, the idea of pooling the teaching resources of both city colleges and universities to avoid duplication and to improve efficiency etc. are still very relevant.

The American writer, Professor Eleanor Zelliot, in her book on Dr. Ambedkar, writes: "...Dr Ambedkar was not only concerned that the Depressed Classes have education, but that education itself is bettered. It seems to me that the documents submitted to the Southborough Commission, Indian Statutory Commission and the University Reforms Committee in 1942 illustrate much of what I admire about Dr. Ambedkar's way of thinking and action: to state exactly what is wrong, to suggest ways of correcting it, to help those most in need of help and, to always remember all the people, the whole nation. (Lokhande 1982: 231)

In a speech at the All India Depressed Classes Conferences on July 1942, he highlighted the considerable progress in education and a greater degree of political consciousness acquired by the Dalits in India. Above all the progress made by the untouchable's women was encouraging and astonishing. (Keer 1991: 351) "My final words," he concluded, "of advice to you is educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself". He actually became an ideal for the vulnerable communities, a personification of what could be achieved by a Dalit once he was educated. Though even after achieving independence, most of the deprived sections and particularly Dalit men and women are the main victims of illiteracy yet Ambedkar's advice gradually showing its influence and the vulnerable communities are displaying great dedication by spreading the word about education, self-respect, etc., in the society.

Ambedkar has deliberately included Article 45 in the Directive Principles of State

Policy that, "the state shall Endeavour 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." The government of India has passed the bill of Right to Education Act 2008 and paid a great tribute to the contributions of Ambedkar to mass education. The policy of the Government of universalization of elementary education focusing particularly on marginalized groups, poorer sections and the girl child, enhancing enrollment in secondary education as well as its commitment to expand education facilities will empower and equip youth to face the future with hope and confidence. There are several challenges to cherish Ambedkar's vision of universal education. There is need to frame such policies starting from the primary stage to the higher stage that help to realize the vision of Ambedkar.

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<sup>i</sup> . Colleges like Siddharth College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai, Siddharth College of Commerce and Economics Mumbai, Siddharth College of Law, Mumbai, Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce, Wadala, Mumbai, Dr. Ambedkar College of Law, Wadala, Siddarath College of Mass Communication, Mumbai, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar College of Arts. Science & Commerce, Mahad, Dist. Raigad, P.E Society Jr. College of Education, Navi Mumbai, Milind College of Arts, Aurangabad, Milind College of Science, Aurangabad, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar College of Arts & Commerce, Aurangabad, Dr. Ambedkar College of Law, Aurangabad. Similar other Institutions are: - Siddharth Institute of Industry and Administration, Mumbai, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial Research Centre, Rajgriha, Mumbai, P.E. Society's Marathi Medium High School, Navi Mumbai, P.E. Society's English Medium Central School, New Bombay, Marathi Medium Primary School, Navi Mumbai, Milind Multipurpose High School, Aurangabad, P.E. Society's

English Medium School, Aurangabad, MatoshriRamabai Ambedkar High School, Aurangabad, GautamVidyalaya, Pandharpur, NagsenVidyalaya, Nanded. And quite a few hostels and Ashram: - SiddharthVihar Hostel, Wadala, Mumbai, SubhedarSawadkar, Vidyarthi Ashram, Mahad, District Raigad, MatoshriRamabai Ambedkar Vidhyarthi Ashram, Dapoli, Dist. Raigad, Milind College of Arts and Science Girls' Hostel, Aurangabad, Milind College of Arts Boys' Hostel, Aurangabad, Milind College of Science Boys' Hostel, Aurangabad, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar College of Commerce & Arts Boys' Hostel, Aurangabad, SantGadgeMaharajChokhamelaVasigraha, Pandarpur.

ii . Jyotiba Phula considered if women were educated, the home could become a school where the educated mother could teach her children. He also opened a school for the untouchable girls in August 1848 at Bhide Wada in Budhwara Peth.