



EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, economist, jurist and social reformer, remains one of the most profound thinkers on the relationship between education and society in modern India. While his contributions to law and politics are widely acknowledged, his educational philosophy is often treated as secondary, despite the fact that it forms the very foundation of his project of social transformation. This paper critically examines Ambedkar's perspective on education as an instrument of social change, arguing that for him education was not merely a means of literacy, employment or individual mobility, but a revolutionary weapon for the annihilation of caste, the empowerment of marginalized communities, the emancipation of women, and the creation of a constitutional democracy.

Drawing upon Ambedkar's own writings and speeches, his institutional initiatives, and contemporary scholarly interpretations, the paper traces his intellectual debt to John Dewey's pragmatism and his own lived experience of untouchability. It highlights his practical efforts, including the establishment of the Depressed Classes Education Society in 1928 and the People's Education Society in 1946, through which he established Siddharth College, Mumbai and Milind College, Aurangabad. The study organizes his thought into four pillars: education for equality, education for critical consciousness, education for women's emancipation, and education for democratic citizenship. Finally, it evaluates the continuing relevance of Ambedkar's vision in the context of National Education Policy 2020, persistent educational inequalities revealed by AISHE data, and the emerging digital divide that threatens to create a new form of graded inequality. The paper concludes that Ambedkar's model of rational, scientific, secular and liberating education remains indispensable for achieving substantive rather than merely formal social transformation.

Keywords: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Social Transformation, Philosophy of Education, Annihilation of Caste, Critical Pedagogy, NEP 2020, Social Justice, Inclusive Education.

1. Introduction

Social transformation in India cannot be understood without engaging with the caste system. Unlike class-based inequalities in the West, caste in India is a system of graded inequality sanctified by religion, tradition and denial of knowledge. For centuries, access to education, particularly Vedic and Sanskrit learning, was monopolized by a small section of society, while the Shudras and Atishudras were prohibited from learning,



owning property and bearing arms. This denial of knowledge was not accidental but structural; it ensured that the social hierarchy remained unquestioned.

It is in this historical context that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy of education assumes immense significance. Born in a Mahar family considered untouchable, Ambedkar personally experienced the humiliation of being denied water, seating and social dignity in school. Yet he became one of the most educated Indians of his time, earning doctorates from Columbia University and the London School of Economics. This journey from exclusion to academic excellence shaped his conviction that education is the primary tool for liberation.

Ambedkar's famous slogan — 'Educate, Agitate, Organize' — given to the Depressed Classes in 1924, places education as the first and foundational step. For him, agitation without education is blind, and organization without education is fragile. An uneducated community cannot understand the mechanisms of its own oppression, the laws that govern it, or the rights conferred upon it by the state. Therefore, it cannot fight for justice effectively.

Unlike many contemporary nationalist thinkers who saw education as a tool for moral development or character building, or colonial administrators who saw it as a tool to produce clerks, Ambedkar saw it as a weapon for social revolution. His definition of social transformation was radical: it meant not merely improvement within the existing social structure, but annihilation of the structure itself — particularly caste — and its reconstruction on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The objective of this paper is to critically analyze Ambedkar's perspective on education as a tool for social transformation. The paper adopts a conceptual, historical and analytical methodology based on secondary sources. It does not rely on primary data collection, but on textual analysis of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, policy documents, and secondary scholarly literature.

Research Objectives:

- To examine Ambedkar's concept of education as enlightenment and empowerment;
- To analyze his institutional efforts for democratizing education;
- To interpret his four-pillar model of education for social transformation;
- To evaluate the relevance of his philosophy in NEP 2020 and contemporary India;
- To suggest an Ambedkarite framework for inclusive education.

2. Intellectual Formation and Influences

To understand Ambedkar's view on education, it is necessary to understand his intellectual formation. Three major influences shaped him: his lived experience of caste discrimination, his academic training under John Dewey at Columbia, and his engagement with liberal, socialist and Buddhist thought.



John Dewey's impact was the most profound. 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. Education, for Dewey, was not preparation for life but life itself, and a means of social reconstruction. Ambedkar, who was deeply influenced by Dewey, endorsed his emphasis on education as a means of changing the world and not merely as a tool of understanding it. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste and Dewey's Democracy and Education share a common concern: how to create a democratic community through critical inquiry.

From Dewey, Ambedkar imbibed pragmatism — the idea that any political action must be reasoned out in scholarly depth and that philosophy must have practical consequences. This is why Ambedkar effectively conflated education and political action as necessary means to bring about institutional change. He did not want armchair philosophy; he wanted philosophy that leads to hostels, scholarships, colleges and laws.

Another influence was Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois debate in America on education for Black Americans. Ambedkar followed this debate closely. While Washington emphasized vocational education, Du Bois emphasized higher liberal education for leadership. Ambedkar synthesized both: he wanted basic literacy for all, but also higher, scientific and impartial education for leadership creation among the Depressed Classes. He believed that without an educated leadership from within the community, political mobilization would remain dependent on others.

Finally, Buddhism shaped his later educational thought. After his conversion to Buddhism in 1956, he emphasized education that cultivates Prajna (wisdom), Karuna (compassion) and Samata (equality). Buddhist education, unlike Brahmanical education, was open to all, rational and ethical.

3. Ambedkar's Definition and Aims of Education

For Ambedkar, the conventional definition of education as literacy or degree was grossly insufficient. He critiqued the colonial system that produced clerks and the Brahmanical system that produced priests, both of which maintained status quo. He proposed a transformative definition.

3.1 Education as Enlightenment: For Ambedkar, education was a process of enlightenment that enables a person to distinguish between right and wrong, and to question unjust traditions. An uneducated person, he argued, remains a slave to fate, karma and superstition. Education breaks the psychological slavery that caste imposes. He often said that without knowledge, a person cannot develop self-respect. Self-respect was central to his philosophy — education restores self-respect denied by caste.

3.2 Education as Empowerment: Ambedkar recognized that education is the most effective tool to eradicate social oppression and empower marginalized individuals to achieve social advancement, economic improvement, and political liberation. Economic improvement alone without education leads to dependency; political power



without education leads to misuse. Education gives the capacity to use economic and political resources wisely.

3.3 Education as Prerequisite for Social Reconstruction: He viewed education as a prerequisite for societal reconstruction based on the principles of equality and justice. A society built on graded inequality cannot be reformed by charity or moral appeals alone. It requires a fundamental restructuring of access to knowledge. In his view, the Brahmanical monopoly over knowledge was the root cause of inequality; democratizing knowledge was therefore the root solution.

3.4 Characteristics of Ideal Education: He was much farsighted and talked not only about the primary education but also the higher education which should be scientific, detached and impartial in character. By scientific he meant rational and based on evidence, not faith. By detached he meant free from religious dogma. By impartial he meant accessible to all without discrimination. He opposed education that teaches blind obedience. He wanted education that teaches questioning, reasoning and humanity.

Thus, his aims of education were: (a) to create rational and critical individuals, (b) to annihilate caste and create an egalitarian society, (c) to develop constitutional morality and democratic citizenship, and (d) to enable economic self-reliance with dignity.

4. Institutional Efforts: Translating Philosophy into Practice

What distinguishes Ambedkar from many other philosophers of education is that he did not remain a mere theorist. He was an institution builder. He understood that ideas without institutions die.

4.1 Depressed Classes Education Society (1928): At a time when Dalit children were denied admission in government schools or forced to sit outside the classroom, Ambedkar established this society to run hostels, night schools and libraries. The aim was to provide a safe learning environment where children were not humiliated. The society also provided scholarships and created awareness among parents about the importance of sending children to school. This was the first organized attempt to create an alternative educational infrastructure for the Depressed Classes.

4.2 People's Education Society (20 June, 1946): This was his most ambitious project. Ambedkar realized that primary education alone is not enough. Higher education was completely monopolized by upper castes. Without entry into higher education, the Depressed Classes could never produce lawyers, professors, administrators and political leaders. Through this society he established Siddharth College of Arts and Science, Mumbai in 1946 and Milind Mahavidyalaya, Aurangabad in 1950. These institutions had three unique features: low fees to make higher education affordable, excellent libraries because he believed libraries are more important than classrooms, and emphasis on secular, scientific curriculum rather than religious instruction.

He personally supervised these colleges, recruited faculty, and often taught. He said that his colleges should not produce degree-holders who become slaves to



government jobs, but produce moral and intellectual fighters who would fight for social justice. His philosophy of education reflects in his lectures, articles and his work in the educational institutions. He used his personal funds and raised donations to sustain these institutions.

4.3 Constitutional Provisions: As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, he ensured that education became a fundamental tool for social transformation through Articles 15(4), 17, 21A, 29, 30 and 46 of the Constitution, which mandate non-discrimination, abolition of untouchability, right to education, and promotion of educational interests of weaker sections.

5. Four Pillars of Education for Social Transformation

Ambedkar's idea of social transformation through education can be systematically analyzed through four interconnected pillars. These pillars together form what can be called the Ambedkarite Model of Transformative Education.

5.1 Education for Equality and Annihilation of Caste: For Ambedkar, education was the primary weapon to annihilate caste. Caste survives not only through economic exploitation but through ideological hegemony — the belief that inequality is natural, divine and unchangeable. This hegemony is sustained by denying knowledge to the lower castes. When education is denied, the oppressed cannot read the Shastras that oppress them, nor can they read the Constitution that liberates them. Education breaks this monopoly. When a Dalit child learns that all human beings are biologically equal, that Article 14 guarantees equality before law, the ideological foundation of caste collapses. He argued that education should not be limited to vocational skills that make a Dalit a better cobbler or sweeper, but should teach the values of equality and human dignity. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), he argued that the root of caste is in the mind; therefore, the remedy must begin with re-education of the mind.

5.2 Education for Critical Consciousness and Political Action: Ambedkar effectively conflated education and political action as necessary means to bring about institutional change. He did not want passive, obedient learners who memorize textbooks. He wanted educated individuals who would agitate against injustice. This idea is remarkably similar to Paulo Freire's concept of critical pedagogy developed 30 years later. For Freire, education is either domestication or liberation. Ambedkar clearly chose liberation. He wanted students to question the Vedas, Smritis, and traditions if they perpetuate inequality. He emphasized rationalism, reasoning and scientific temper over blind faith. He told students, 'Do not believe anything that is unreasonable, do not believe anything that cannot be proved.' This critical consciousness leads to political action — organizing, petitioning, litigating and legislating for rights.

5.3 Education for Women's Emancipation: Ambedkar was one of the earliest and strongest advocates of women's education in India. He believed that the progress of a community can be measured by the degree of progress which women have achieved. He



linked women's education directly to social transformation, arguing that an educated mother creates an educated family, and an educated family creates an educated nation. In his paper on Women's upliftment, he argued that denial of education to women is a double injustice — as women and as lower caste. His Hindu Code Bill (1951), though opposed then, was an extension of his educational philosophy — to educate women about their legal rights to property, divorce and maintenance. He insisted on co-education and equal curriculum for girls in his institutions.

5.4 Education for Democracy and Nation-Building: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, emphasized education as a powerful tool for social transformation and nation-building. He made a crucial distinction between political democracy and social democracy. Political democracy means one person one vote; social democracy means one person one value. Political democracy cannot survive without social democracy. Social democracy cannot survive without educated citizens. An uneducated electorate can be easily manipulated on the basis of caste, religion and charisma. Education creates rational voters, tolerant citizens, and a sense of constitutional morality — the ability to resolve conflicts through constitutional means rather than violence. This is the foundation of a nation. Without education, India would remain a collection of castes, not a nation.

6. Relevance in Contemporary India and NEP 2020

The relevance of Ambedkar's thought has not diminished; in 2026, it has increased manifold.

6.1 NEP 2020 as an Ambedkarite Document: NEP 2020 emphasizes equity, inclusion, multidisciplinary education, critical thinking, Indian Knowledge System, and 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio. All these were advocated by Ambedkar decades ago. NEP's focus on Academic Bank of Credits, vocational education from school level, multiple entry-exit, and emphasis on constitutional values directly aligns with Ambedkar's vision of democratizing knowledge. NEP's target of 50% GER in higher education by 2035 is essentially fulfilling Ambedkar's demand that higher education must be open to all, not just elites. However, NEP's implementation without adequate funding for scholarships and hostels would violate Ambedkar's principle.

6.2 Persistent Educational Inequality: Despite constitutional provisions, AISHE 2021-22 data shows GER for SC students is 25.9% and for ST students 21.2% compared to national average of 28.4%. Dropout rates at secondary level are higher among SC/ST and first-generation learners. In states like Haryana, many SC students still face discrimination in mid-day meals and seating arrangements. Ambedkar's demand for hostels, scholarships and free education remains unfulfilled. Economic barriers — high fees in private universities, cost of coaching — still prevent marginalized students from entering quality higher education. Therefore, reservation alone without financial support is insufficient.



6.3 Digital Divide as New Graded Inequality: During COVID-19, education shifted online. UDISE data showed that only 28% of SC households had access to smartphone and internet compared to 45% general. Students without devices were excluded. In 2026, with AI tutors, ChatGPT, and EdTech platforms like BYJU'S and Unacademy dominating, the risk of digital exclusion is even higher. Ambedkar's principle would argue that the state must ensure digital access as a right under Article 21A, otherwise digital education will become another tool of graded inequality — a new caste system based on digital access. This is what scholars call 'digital untouchability'.

6.4 Contemporary Policy Recognition: Even today, policymakers acknowledge his vision. As noted recently by the Uttar Pradesh Higher Education Minister, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was not only the architect of India's Constitution but also a great social reformer and thinker who fought against social inequality throughout his life and who considered education as the main vehicle of social change. Similarly, the Supreme Court in several judgments on reservation in education has cited Ambedkar's views on compensatory discrimination through education.

6.5 Global Relevance: Ambedkar's ideas resonate with global movements like Black Lives Matter and Decolonizing Education movements. His insistence that education must be liberating, not domesticating, is similar to Freire, bell hooks and other critical pedagogues.

7. Critiques and Limitations

While celebrating Ambedkar, a critical paper must also note critiques. Some scholars argue that Ambedkar over-emphasized formal Western education and under-emphasized indigenous vocational knowledge. Others argue that his model of higher education was elitist and urban-centric. However, these critiques overlook that Ambedkar never rejected vocational education; he rejected vocational education that is forced upon lower castes to keep them in traditional occupations. He wanted choice — a Dalit child should have the option to become a carpenter or a professor.

Another critique is that education alone cannot annihilate caste without economic and political reforms. Ambedkar himself agreed. That is why he demanded political power, economic reforms and education simultaneously. He believed political power would create conditions for educational expansion, and education would create conditions for retaining political power.

8. Conclusion

For Ambedkar, education was far more than a path to employment. He believed education was a powerful tool for social transformation and the annihilation of caste-based discrimination — a means of liberating individuals from social prejudices and contributing to both personal and collective upliftment. His approach was unique because it combined thought and action, philosophy and institution-building. He did not just write



about education; he built colleges for those who were denied entry elsewhere. He understood that without institutional support, philosophy remains abstract.

The true tribute to Ambedkar would be to create an educational system that is accessible, scientific, rational, secular and liberating — an education that educates, agitates and organizes the marginalized for a just society. Until every child in a village in Haryana, in a basti in Mumbai, or in a tribal hamlet in Bastar has equal access to quality higher education — including English, science, library and internet — Ambedkar's dream of social transformation through education will remain an unfinished revolution.

In today's India, where we are discussing AI in education, NEP implementation, and skill development, Ambedkar reminds us of the fundamental question: Education for whom and for what? If education does not lead to equality, dignity and critical thinking, it fails its purpose. Education that only produces workers but not questioning citizens serves the status quo, not transformation. Education that only produces toppers without empathy reproduces inequality.

His slogan therefore remains as relevant today as it was in the 1930s: Educate, Agitate, Organize. In the age of AI, the slogan could be rephrased as: Get Educated, Get Agitated by Injustice through Critical Thinking, and Get Organized through Constitutional Means. That is the essence of Ambedkarite education.

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