

Dalit Struggle for Education: With Special Reference to Barak Valley

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Abstract: *Traditionally Dalits, the 'ex-untouchables' were denied education by the vedic scriptures. Identified as Scheduled Castes (SCs) under Article 341 of the Indian Constitution, the Dalits today, constitute one of the marginalized sections of society, the basic reason of which is lack of education. Having known the immense significance of education required for their liberation from socio-economic and political subjugation, Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Guruchand, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and a few others emphasized on Dalit education. This paper provides a historical account of the struggle of the Phule couple, Guruchand and Dr. Ambedkar. While Guruchand recognized that 'Education, Wealth and Political power' can only uplift the Bengali Dalits, Ambedkar reinforced Phule's agenda and struggled to uplift these social groups with his famous slogan 'Educate, Organize and Agitate'. Despite such relentless struggle, the Bengali Dalits of present day Barak valley, unaware of their contribution, became victims of casteism whereby they remain in the margins of development. This is because, their lack of education resulted in their lack of ability to write on their own problems, which in turn led to their lack of awareness, the only solution to which is education, for it can awake the Dalits here, paving the path for their development.*

Keywords: Bengali Dalits, Subjugation, Marginalized, Barak Valley, Education, Awareness, Development

1. Introduction

"Shudras are not entitled to education, to amass wealth, or bear arms. A Brahman can take away any possession from a Shudra since nothing at all can belong to him as his own".

Braj Ranjan Mani

In Debrahmanising History, 2005:57

As the theme conveyed by the title raises a number of terminological issues, clarifying them is a prerequisite to its understanding. Though some of these issues may be obvious, especially to the academicians, but it may not be the case with the rest. Also dismissing them would affect the theme's overall perspective. So, first let us take a look at these issues.

As Indian society boldly entered into a covenant with itself to be secular (with no role for caste and religion in the affairs of the state and by implication in public arena), democratic, and egalitarian only in 1950, against its highly rigid caste-based hierarchical structure, with its ascending order of privileges and descending order of disabilities, which operated for about 3,500 years, an overwhelming majority of it is still backward – socially, economically, politically and most importantly educationally. These victims of entrenched backwardness broadly comprise the present scheduled castes (SCs) and other marginalized sections including few ST communities and women mostly from the adivasis, minorities and immigrant population. Though all these categories are together known by the generic term backward classes, the nature and magnitude of their backwardness are not the same. For instance, the STs were traditionally animistic, did not belong to, profess or practice Hinduism, and were not victims of the prejudices of the traditional caste system. Of these groups, the first one is the most backward in context to the prejudices faced by them. Hence, the term 'Dalit' is used here to mean the 'Scheduled Castes' of independent India.

2. Dalit Struggle for Education

"Ignorance, caste discrimination and discrimination based on language are the bane of this country. When everyone is sad, the question often arises of whom to help. But instead of being paralysed by this question into inaction, it is better to help those for whom the suffering is the most....They can only overcome this suffering through knowledge. So, I first started work for them."

Jotirao Phule

In Sundararajan: 2008, 11

Traditionally, education was denied to the Dalits. They were prohibited from going to school. The doors of empowerment through education were closed to these people because they were not entitled to gain resources of whatever kind, intellectual or material due to their lowly birth status as per the traditional Hindu norms. However, with the advent of British Raj in the early nineteenth century, education – which was for a very long time the privilege of the upper-castes alone – gradually became accessible to castes lower down in the hierarchy. Knowledge brought with it desire to be recognized and to be respected that strengthened the resolve of Dalits to struggle against discrimination. It was thus the Dalits got an opportunity to get education under the Christian missionaries which ultimately led to the emergence of a few visionary social reformers and political leaders to begin their struggle for upliftment of the larger masses of Dalits through education.

2.1 Contributions of Jotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule

"Haunted by 'The Gods on Earth',
For two thousand years,
The perpetual service of the Brahmins,
Became the plight of the Shudras
Looking at their condition,

The heart screams its protest,
The mind blanks out,
Struggling to find a way out
Education is the path,
For the Shudras to walk,
For education grants humanity
Freeing one from an animal-like existence”

Savitribai Phule,
In Kavya Phule, 1854

Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a Shudra belonging to gardener community, studied in a Christian Missionary school. He placed great importance to education as it can empower the Dalits. Phule recognised knowledge, education and science as the weapons of advance for the exploited masses. He underscored that with education came the ‘Tratiya ratna’, the ‘third eye’ meaning ‘critical consciousness/thinking’ which was necessary to bring about a cultural emancipation of the lower classes. He strongly felt that education was the panacea for almost every social and religious evil. He stated that, “Without knowledge, intellect was lost; without intellect, morality was lost; without morality, dynamism was lost; without dynamism, money was lost; without money, Shudras were degraded (demoralized), all this misery and disasters were due to the lack of knowledge!” And then there were a series of historic events when the Phule couple begun schools as a part of their mission of educating the Dalits. Initially, they decided to begin with the Dalit girls, because they knew that the progress of a country was impossible without educating the ones who are the most oppressed in a given society. And to them it was the girls from the Dalit community who were the most exploited. This is reflected from the words of Jotirao Phule which he spoke in an interview to Dynanodaya on 15 September 1853-

“It did occur to me that the improvement that comes about in a child due to the mother is very important and good. So those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started the school for girls first.”

Facing difficulties in finding teachers, Phule encouraged his wife Savitribai (1831-1897) to pursue education and actively involved her in all his public activities. She was the first Indian woman teacher and the first Indian to spark a revolution in Indian education by opening it up to girls and to low-caste children because alike Jotirao she too understood that the underprivileged Dalits could not be uplifted unless they are educated. To her, “The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. Learning has a great value. One who masters it loses his low status and achieves the higher one”. Thus, Savitribai, along with her husband, started a school in Pune in August 1848 for Dalit Muslim girls (ibid., 11). But the orthodox society could not allow her to work so easily which made her to face strong opposition from different social groups, not excluding her own father-in-law. And thus Jotirao spoke-

“But my caste brethren did not like that I was educating girls and my own father threw us out of the house. Nobody was ready to give space for the school nor did we have money to build it. People were not willing to send their children to school but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar convinced their caste brethren about the benefits of getting educated...”

This was not enough because when Savitribai went to school, people used to throw stones at her. But the desperate Savitribai took all the hardships to educate the Dalits, leaving behind a new beginning for the community, specifically women. The Phule couple walked on their mission together, and finally there was the historic event of 24th September 1873, when they established the first non-Brahmin social organization named as The Satyashodhak Samaj (The Truth Seeker’s Society). Savitribai understood that education is the master key to resolve women’s problem, which made her to work by every possible way to emancipate the Dalits and women until 1897 when she finally ended her life by serving plague infected people.

2.2 Contributions of Guruchand

At around the same time when the Phule couple was fighting hard to educate the Dalits of Southern India, Guruchand, born in a Namashudra (a Dalit community of Assam and Bengal, who were called as Chandals during that time) family, carried forward the agenda of his father Harichand Thakur (1812-1877) to uplift the Dalits of erstwhile Surma Valley (of undivided India). Born in 1847, Guruchand began his movement (from the year 1867) against the iron rules of Manusmriti to enable the Namashudras so that they can live a life of humans. He too recognized that education can be the only way to uplift the degraded Dalits. Thus he begun the first school for them in 1880 at Orakandi and the first teacher of his school was Raghunath Sarkar of Dhaka (at present Bangladesh). Gradually he established 1812 schools altogether because alike the Phule couple, he too understood that ‘Education, Wealth and Political Power’ were the key areas that can help the Dalits to live a life of humans. The struggle of the Dalits went on, when, the entire country was getting ready to witness a new movement under the visionary leader to be called by people as ‘Babasaheb’.

2.3 Contributions of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), the father of modern India, reinforced the Phule-Sahu agenda, by viewing education as a means for enlightenment that would provide a base for resistance to oppression. This man, son of a Dalit school teacher in the British Army, was highly educated, a Ph.D. from Columbia University, a Doctor of Science from London School of Economics, affectionately known as Babasaheb. He stood for the emancipation of the Dalits and he thought that education was a primary factor to achieve it. Ambedkar thus extended Phule’s agenda, but in a large scale under the aegis of People’s Education society’, established on 8th July 1945. Ambedkar put special responsibility on the state for the development of education and also enhancement of ownership of capital assets. The denial of the right to education, property rights and business led to high illiteracy,

landlessness and lack of ownership of capital assets. For him, 'without power on one side it is not possible to destroy power on the other side'. Hence he raised his slogan-'Educate, Organize and Agitate'.

Dr. Ambedkar, being a great champion of human rights and empowerment of Dalits thus, educated, organized and inspired them to effectively use political means gained through education, in order to achieve their goal of social equality. He participated in the Round Table Conferences, in London in 1930 and 1931 and submitted a concrete program of action called "A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of the Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of Self-Governing India", demanding adequate representation in public services. Further, it demanded representation in the legislatures, and the rights of the depressed classes to elect their own representatives through separate electorates. The relentless struggle by Ambedkar at the Round Table Conferences and Gandhi's fast until death, finally culminated in the signing of the Pune Pact between Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi on 24 September 1932. In addition to political representation for Dalits, the Pune Pact, clause 8 in particular, admitted, "there shall be no disabilities attaching to anyone on the ground of being a member of depressed classes in regard to appointment to public services. Every endeavor shall be made to secure fair representation of the different classes in this respect." This was the first time that the representation of depressed classes in public services was accepted at the national level by the denial of separate electorates. This shows how Ambedkar grounded the case for remedies against discrimination of the Dalits in citizen right framework and thus at present there is 22% reservation for the Scheduled Castes of India. However, it took more than a decade to implement reservation, as it had to face stiff opposition from the upper caste communities.

3. Bengali Dalits of Barak Valley

When the Dalits of Southern India were struggling hard to live a life of humans, this part of India, aloof from such struggles, were facing their own problems. There exist a number of Dalit communities in India but the nature and magnitude of their problems vary based on their geographical area and culture. One thing in common among all these communities is that they are discriminated. Similar is the case with the Dalits of Barak valley, majority of whom are from the Bengali community. Today, the Dalits of Southern India are much more advanced than the Dalits of Assam, more specifically Barak valley. Let me share something. I wanted to write on my community 'Sutradhar', one of the ten Bengali Dalit communities of Barak Valley, who have been given the status of Scheduled Castes in Part III of the Scheduled Castes Order, 1950. But I was unfortunate enough to discover that there is very limited or no literature at all, which made me to think why is it so, and go deep into the matter. There is Marathi Dalit literature in the state of Maharashtra, Gujrati Dalit literature in Gujrat, even the Dalits of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are writing on their own problems. But then where is the problem with the Bengali Dalits of Assam, specifically Barak valley (Brahmaputra Valley being dominated by the Assamese

people). Why there is no literature on the Bengali Dalits of Barak valley? If the Dalits of this valley are educated than why do they abstain from writing about their communities?

Writing about ones problem requires two things. In the first context, Dalits of this valley have very low rate of literacy. According to the statistics on elementary education in India, Assam has only 9.66% of SCs enrolled in schools of which 9.26% are enrolled for primary classes. More specifically, Cachar have the highest percentage of SCs (14.4%) of the total Dalit population of Assam (As per 2001 census) but only 2.5% of them have educational qualification of graduation or above (As per 2001 census). And as regards our community -'Sutradhar' only 1.7% are graduates and above. When the vast majority of Dalits are not educated, it would be totally wrong to think that they will write on their own problems. Another reason for this lie in the many dysfunctional primary and secondary schools, in the villages and towns of India, characterized by an absence of learning materials, teachers and sometimes, even classrooms. Compounding the problem of dysfunctional schools is the poverty of parents, many of whom are Dalits, who cannot afford to keep children on at school; indeed, given the poor quality of schooling that their children receive, they see no reason for making sacrifices for their children's education.

In the second context, these 2.5% educated youths do not recognize the real problem and when one cannot identify ones problem, there is no question of solving them. Instead of pulling the toiling masses, they move forward alone. They began to be concerned of their own lives, own problems, rather than uniting their community members and uplift the community. The reason behind is that they are not provided proper education, which means education with proper social awareness. In other words, education that provide students power to think, that is to say critical education is not present among them. Education is not to learn alphabetical order, rather the ability to think. The Dalits are not aware of the real problems of the society, which is more social then individualistic.

Back to the point, when the masses do not understand the real problem, how will they write on their problems, and where from will evolve 'Bengali Dalit Literature'. Compared to the Dalits of other parts of India, the Dalits of this valley are more backward, as because the most important aspect which lead to the development of any group of human, education is lacking in them. It is not that none of them are educated, but the percentage of students in professional studies like medical, engineering, as well as higher education is very low or negligible compared to their population. For instance, there is one central university, a National Institute of Technology (NIT) located in the district, but how many Dalit students of this place are enrolled there? The situation is worse in the rural areas of Barak Valley. For instance, majority of the Dalit students are not even aware of the name Dr. B. R Ambedkar, who gave his life for the Scheduled Castes of India. It was Dr. Ambedkar, for whom, the Dalits got reservation. Such is the level of awareness among the Dalits of this valley.

Reservation is the affirmative action, meant for the upliftment of the Scheduled Castes of independent India. In all the centrally-controlled higher educational institutions, 15 per cent of the seats are reserved for SC members and 7.5 percent for ST members; these ratios were established to reflect the corresponding shares of Dalits and adivasis in the national population. The policies apply only to public institutions. However the Dalits are not getting the fruits of affirmative action policies, and the difficulty is not only for the scarcity of detailed data on the composition of higher educational enrolments, but also for the complexity of the way in which India's reservation policies in the educational sphere are structured and administered. The majority of Indian higher educational institutions are indeed under central- or state-level government control; but the number of private institutions has been growing rapidly since the early 1990s. Affirmative action policies, which are implemented to boost the deprived group's employment rate, suffer from several defects. In reality, they have only a small effect when the group's educational base is low. SC and ST reserved seats often go unfilled -especially at the more selective schools - because there are not enough applicants from these groups who have completed secondary education and otherwise met the requirements for admission.

The effectiveness of jobs reservation is also limited when the educational base of the beneficiaries is low. Given the fact that majority of Dalits are uneducated, they cannot claim for reservation. Only 2.5% graduate Dalit youths of Assam are eligible for jobs, leaving the vast majority lying behind. And of these 2.5% some get jobs, and some others do not. Those who get jobs and are in better position, in most cases, forget that they are Dalits and have to work for their community members. *For instance*, they would change their 'titles' pretending to be upper caste for they are ashamed of being called Dalits, generally SCs. They would not hesitate to look down their own brothers and sisters toiling for a piece of bread. They would see the discrimination against the SCs but would still maintain silence. One such form of discrimination is the non-implementation of the reservation policy. And of these 2.5%, there is a very negligible number of Dalits who voice against such kind of problems but are not successful as they are very small in number. It is these people who face discrimination the most for they know about the discrimination. As to the vast majority, they even do not know that there is discrimination for which it is required that they seek resources, and here it would mean economic power through jobs in good position. Another point to be noted is that there is lack of social mobility among the Dalits. Confined within their places of origin, the Dalits are not able to see the real situation. Here again, I would like to give an instance. Among the Sutradhars, a majority of people are living in the rural areas. And it's a surprising fact that even now many of them marry their daughters at the age of just 16. A man when asked about this replied, "The earlier we marry daughters, the more early our task is over". Is it that those girls are burden on their family? They don't like to educate her because they believe that even after studying further they had to cook in their in-laws family, which is the fate of a woman. Besides this, if somehow they get a job, the money would go to her husband's home. Such is the mind-set of the people that exist even in many urban areas. However, it has

been observed that the majority of the people who has such mind-sets are either illiterate or studied upto primary level only. Lack of education prevented them to think correctly, in a rational way. It is not that they are wrong, but because the culture is formed thus. There is lack of social mobility as well as consciousness. In order to know the reason behind, one need to go back to history.

Historically, the Dalits of Barak valley are different from the Dalits of other parts of the country. Partrition and the India - Bangladesh issue has a deep impact on the people of this valley. Most of the people of this valley have their origins in either Pakistan or Bangladesh of undivided India. They are more concerned with religious matters, than the social ones. Lack of education is a social problem, but instead of emphasizing on education, they would emphasize on religion as a source of or to solve their problems. Socially and culturally they are different from the Dalits of Upper Assam, but are similar to the Dalits of Bengal. All along the places, the problem is more or less similar, as because education, the most important necessity for any individual is not given priority, despite the fact that only education can uplift the people. Instead people would do all the *pujas* to gain knowledge. While the Dalit leaders like Phule and Ambedkar emphasized on educating the masses as a means to uplift them, the Dalits of this region are not doing that. No such struggle has, so far, been found in this valley, excepting the Namasudra movement of 19th century. And this is one of the major reasons for their backwardness.

4. Conclusion

In the concluding view it can be said that, although the nature and magnitude of the backwardness of the Dalits in different places of India are not the same, it is true that they are backward. Places where they questioned the structural inequality of India's social system and became curious enough to know the reason behind their backwardness through relentless struggles to educate the masses are the ones most developed today. This is known best from the cases of Dalit status in Southern and North Eastern parts of India. While the Southern part witnessed the beginning of Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, this part of India had mostly remained ignorant of the struggle. The only few who were aware could not or did not spread it among the masses. Another reason is that, even if some non-Bengali Dalits of other parts of the country try to spread awareness among the Bengali-Dalits of this valley, they become victimized by the cruel policies of Brahmanism. The fear of losing their position probably make the cunning believers of Brahmanism to throw those non-Bengali Dalits outside the valley and state, thereby restricting any changes in the system of caste based discrimination. Many a times, the Bengali Dalits themselves are used as mere instruments to throw their own breathens outside the land, who unknown of the fact about who is their real friend, are diverted of their main task of emphasizing on the education of the Dalits. This is because they are prevented from critical thinking as their minds remain under the veil of ignorance that unconsciously considers their own breathen as enemy. And this is why years of independence could not bring independence for the Dalits,

and that independence is nothing but the independence of mind from such hegemonic cultural traits of Brahmanism, which compel them not to think of attaining knowledge rather divert their mind to other issues. Unless they attain knowledge, they can't work for the upliftment of their community. They need to follow Babasaheb's words- 'Educate, Organize and Agitate'. It's already late, but still they need to step forward to attain education for it can only help them to move on to the other two steps. Since the vast mass of educationally and economically deprived people in India are Dalits, education is their only requirement, whereby they can not only meaningfully enter the portals of universities and institutes of higher education, but also enable their Tratiya ratna to open. It is this education which can help them to lead a life of dignity and guarantee their status in the centre of development; and this is not the end, rather the beginning!

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Author Profile



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