Educate to Annihilate Caste: Ambedkar, Freire, and Inclusive Education in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines inclusive education for marginalised communities in India through the philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar. It reads Ambedkar's ideas alongside Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, from a Global South perspective. The paper argues that Ambedkar built a theory of education rooted in the Indian experience of caste, well before Freire wrote on the pedagogy of the oppressed in Latin America. Both thinkers saw education as a tool of liberation, not mere literacy. The article uses a qualitative, textual and conceptual method, drawing on Ambedkar's primary writings, Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and secondary scholarship on caste and schooling in India. The analysis finds a strong convergence between Ambedkar's idea of "educate, agitate, organise" and Freire's idea of conscientisation, alongside important differences rooted in the specific nature of caste as graded inequality. It also extends the comparison to gender, showing how caste and patriarchy together shape Dalit women's education. The paper discusses how these ideas apply to present-day Indian education policy, including the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy, 2020. It concludes that genuine inclusive education in India needs an Ambedkarite foundation, not administrative access alone, requiring attention to dignity, self-respect, and the redistribution of social power.

Keywords: Ambedkar, inclusive education, caste, Paulo Freire, Dalit education

1. Introduction

India's constitution promises equality to all citizens. Yet caste continues to shape who gets a good education, and who does not. Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalised children often face exclusion inside the classroom, even when they are already enrolled in school (Nambissan, 1996). This gap between formal access and real inclusion is the starting point of this article.

Sociologists of education draw a line between access and inclusion. Access asks whether a child is enrolled. Inclusion asks whether that child is treated as a full and equal member of the classroom, with a real stake in what is taught and how. In India, this line is not abstract. It maps onto the long history of caste. For centuries, whole communities were kept out of schools of learning on grounds of ritual purity. Modern schooling did not simply inherit this history by accident. It grew up alongside it. In many places it still carries traces of that history, in seating patterns, teacher attitudes, and quiet assumptions about who can learn what (Nambissan, 2006).

The term "inclusive education" is usually discussed as a policy or administrative goal.

Enrolment ratios, dropout rates, and infrastructure counts are the common measures of success. This article takes a different approach. It argues that inclusive education in India cannot be understood through numbers alone. It must be understood through the history of caste, and the long struggle against it. For this reason, the article turns to the educational philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Throughout, the terms Dalit and Adivasi are used to name communities historically classified as untouchable castes and indigenous tribal groups. These are terms of political self-description that the communities themselves have largely chosen, and they are used here in that spirit.

The stakes of this question are not only academic. India has one of the largest school-age populations in the world, and a large share of that population is Dalit or Adivasi. What happens in an Indian classroom, then, is not a small or local matter. It shapes whether the constitutional promise of equality becomes a lived reality for millions of children, or remains a document to be recited without being felt. A theory of inclusive education that gets this question wrong does more than fail an academic test. It shapes how teachers are trained, how textbooks are written, and how a child learns, early in life, whether the country she lives in sees her as a full citizen.

Ambedkar was a jurist, economist, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. He was also a lifelong theorist and practitioner of education. Born into the Mahar caste, then treated as untouchable, Ambedkar experienced exclusion from the classroom as a child (Zelliot, 1992). He was made to sit apart from other students, and was often denied ordinary courtesies of school life, including access to drinking water. This experience shaped his later thought. For Ambedkar, education was never separate from the question of caste and dignity. He famously urged the oppressed to "educate, agitate, and organise," treating education as the first step toward self-respect and political power (Rodrigues, 2002).

This article also brings Ambedkar's ideas into conversation with Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator known for Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000). Freire is widely read in departments of education and sociology across the world. His ideas of the "banking model" of education and "conscientisation" are now standard reference points in critical pedagogy. Yet Freire wrote almost forty years after Ambedkar began his work on caste and education. Reading the two thinkers together raises an important question. Should Ambedkar be read as an Indian precursor to Freire? Or should he be read as an independent theorist, whose ideas deserve their own space in the sociology of education?

This question matters for a further reason. Much of the theory used in Indian classrooms comes from the West, including Europe and North America. Scholars of the Global South have argued that this pattern silences local theory (Connell, 2007). Indian social science itself has been shown to reserve the status of "theorist" for a narrow, often upper-caste elite, while treating Dalit scholars mainly as sources of raw experience or data (Guru, 2002). Ambedkar's writing offers a theory of education that grew directly out of Indian social conditions. It is not borrowed. It is not applied from outside. Placing Ambedkar at the centre of this article, with Freire in a supporting role, is therefore also a small act of correcting an imbalance in whose ideas we treat as "theory."

This concern connects the present article to a wider body of sociological writing on caste and dignity. Guru's edited volume on humiliation argues that indignity is a distinct social experience in India. It is different from simple poverty, or simple inequality, and it needs its own vocabulary of analysis (Guru, 2009). Schools are one of the everyday sites where this humiliation is produced and reproduced. It happens through small acts of exclusion that rarely appear in enrolment statistics: where a child is made to sit, whose lunch is inspected, whose accent is corrected and whose is not. An Ambedkarite approach to inclusive education takes this insight seriously. It insists that dignity,

and not only access, is the proper measure of an inclusive classroom.

The objectives of this article are fourfold. First, to reconstruct Ambedkar's educational philosophy from his own writings and from established secondary scholarship. Second, to compare this philosophy with Freire's ideas on critical pedagogy, noting both convergence and difference. Third, to extend this comparison to the question of gender, since caste and patriarchy together shape the schooling of Dalit girls and women. Fourth, to discuss what this combined framework means for inclusive education policy and practice in India today, with reference to the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy, 2020.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 explains the method used. Section 3 presents the conceptual analysis, organised around six themes. Section 4 discusses the implications of this analysis for contemporary Indian education policy and practice. Section 5 concludes with a summary and suggestions for future work.

2. Methodology

Design: This is a theoretical and review article. It does not use fieldwork or survey data. Its method is qualitative and interpretive. It relies on close reading and conceptual analysis of primary texts, supported by secondary literature. This method is standard in the sociology of ideas and in the history of educational thought (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). The choice of method follows from the aim of the article, which is conceptual clarification rather than empirical measurement. A survey of enrolment figures could tell us how many Dalit children attend school. It cannot tell us, on its own, what kind of theory of education would make that attendance meaningful. That is a conceptual question, and it needs a conceptual method.

Sources and selection criteria: Three categories of material were used. The first category is Ambedkar's own writings, including Annihilation of Caste (Ambedkar, 1936/2014), his collected Writings and Speeches (Ambedkar, 1979–2003), and his account of Buddhist philosophy in The Buddha and His Dhamma (Ambedkar, 1957). The second category is Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000), read as the main comparative text from Latin American critical pedagogy. The third category is peer-reviewed secondary scholarship on caste, Ambedkar, gender, and Indian education, published mainly in sociology and education journals, along with recognised university press books. This includes recent work on the intersection of caste and gender in schooling (Paik, 2014; Velaskar, 2012), and on caste within elite Indian higher education (Subramanian, 2019). Sources were chosen for their academic standing, their direct relevance to caste and education, and their availability in English translation where the original was in Marathi and other languages.

Procedure: The review followed three steps. First, Ambedkar's writings on education, caste, and the state were read and organised into themes. Second, Freire's key concepts were identified and compared with these themes. Third, the resulting framework, along with the gender dimension drawn from Paik (2014) and Velaskar (2012), was applied to two contemporary policy documents. These are the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy, 2020, read alongside recent empirical studies on Dalit and Adivasi schooling in India.

Data analysis: The analysis is thematic, not statistical. Themes were developed inductively, through repeated engagement with the texts, and were checked against existing secondary literature to avoid an idiosyncratic reading. Six themes emerged and are presented in Section 3. This method has clear limits, discussed further in Section 4, since it does not include new empirical data from schools or students. A final note on position: the author writes as a sociologist working from within an Indian university, and not as a member of a Dalit or Adivasi community. This is acknowledged as a limit on what the article can claim to know from lived experience, and as a reason to rely closely on Ambedkar's own words, and on scholarship by Dalit and Adivasi researchers, rather than to speak over them.

3. Conceptual Analysis

3.1 Caste as graded inequality and its educational consequences

Ambedkar's central insight was that Indian caste is not simple inequality. It is graded inequality (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Under this system, every caste group is ranked above some groups, and below others. This is different from a simple divide between the privileged and the oppressed, of the kind often assumed in Western social theory. Because inequality is graded, exclusion in schools is also graded. A Dalit child may be excluded by upper-caste peers, but may in turn exclude an Adivasi child, or a Dalit sub-caste still seen as lower (Thorat & Newman, 2012). Any theory of inclusive education in India has to account for this layered structure. A single policy of "access for all" cannot address graded exclusion, because exclusion works differently at every level of the hierarchy (Thorat & Newman, 2012).

Ambedkar argued that caste denies its lower members what he called social capital: dignity, self-respect, and access to knowledge (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). The traditional Hindu social order restricted the right to read sacred texts to the upper castes. Ambedkar treated this restriction as the origin of educational exclusion in India. His demand for education was therefore never only a demand for literacy. It was a demand to break a religiously sanctioned monopoly on knowledge.

This monopoly does not end with the arrival of modern, secular schooling. It simply changes form. Subramanian's study of India's elite engineering institutes shows how the language of "merit" can do work similar to the older language of ritual purity (Subramanian, 2019). Merit appears neutral. It is presented as a matter of individual talent and hard work. But the social and cultural resources that produce a "meritorious" score, tuition, English medium schooling, educated parents, and a home free of manual labour, are unevenly distributed by caste. An Ambedkarite reading of merit does not deny that some students work hard and do well. It insists that the test itself is not caste-neutral, because the conditions for preparing for the test are not caste-neutral. Graded inequality, in this sense, has moved from the temple threshold to the entrance examination, without losing its underlying logic.

3.2 Ambedkar's philosophy of education: knowledge as power and dignity

Ambedkar studied at Columbia University under John Dewey, the American philosopher of pragmatist education (Dewey, 1916). Dewey's idea that education should be linked to democracy and to lived experience influenced Ambedkar (Jaffrelot, 2005). But Ambedkar went further than Dewey. For Ambedkar, education in a caste society was never neutral. It was tied to power. He believed that knowledge had been used, historically, as a weapon to keep the "depressed classes" in a state of dependence (Omvedt, 2004).

This is why Ambedkar's famous slogan was not simply "educate." It was "educate, agitate, organise" (Rodrigues, 2002). Education alone, without political organisation, would not change the position of the oppressed. Ambedkar wanted education to build the capacity for self-rule and self-respect. He established schools and hostels for Dalit students, edited journals, and pushed for reserved seats in colleges. He saw all of this as one connected project, not as separate activities (Zelliot, 1992).

In his later writings on Buddhism, Ambedkar framed education as a moral and spiritual project, and not only as a route to jobs or status (Ambedkar, 1957). He drew on the Buddha's emphasis on reason, and on questioning inherited authority, to argue that the oppressed should learn to think for themselves, rather than simply accept what they were told, whether by a Brahmin priest or by a colonial administrator. He wanted the oppressed to see themselves as full human beings, entitled to reason and self-respect, and not as recipients of charity.

Ambedkar also insisted that education for the depressed classes was a duty of the state, and not an act of goodwill by upper-caste reformers. He was sharply critical of a purely voluntary or charitable model of uplift, in which privileged

groups decided when and how much education the oppressed deserved (Omvedt, 2004). For Ambedkar, this model kept the oppressed in a position of gratitude, waiting on the goodwill of others. He wanted, instead, a model built on rights: a constitutional guarantee that could not be withdrawn at the discretion of a dominant group. This is one reason he devoted so much energy, later in life, to writing education and reservation into the framework of Indian law.

3.3 Freire: the banking model and conscientisation

Paulo Freire developed his ideas while working on adult literacy programmes with poor communities in Brazil (Freire, 2000). He criticised what he called the "banking model" of education. In this model, the teacher deposits information into passive students, who are expected to store it and repeat it. Freire argued that this model treats students as objects, not as thinking subjects. It reproduces the power of the dominant group, and it keeps the oppressed silent (Freire, 2000).

In place of the banking model, Freire proposed a dialogical, problem-posing approach. Here, teacher and student learn together, and the curriculum grows out of the real conditions of the learners' lives. This process aims to build what Freire called critical consciousness, or conscientisation. This is the capacity to see one's own social condition clearly, and to see it as something that can be changed through action.

Freire wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed while in political exile, after a military coup in Brazil in 1964 had ended his literacy campaigns there (Freire, 2000). The book was first published in Portuguese and Spanish, and reached an English-speaking audience only in 1970. By the time Freire's ideas entered Indian classrooms, largely through departments of education and development studies, Ambedkar had already been dead for over a decade. This timeline matters. It means that any claim that Ambedkar simply "applied" Freirean ideas to India gets the history backwards.

3.4 Convergence and divergence between Ambedkar and Freire

There is real convergence between the two thinkers. Both saw education as inseparable from liberation. Both rejected the idea that education is a neutral, technical process. Both insisted that the oppressed must become active subjects of their own learning, and not passive recipients of instruction handed down from above. Freire's idea of conscientisation and Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organise" share the same basic structure. Awareness must lead to organised action. It cannot remain only a private, personal enlightenment.

There are also important differences. Freire's framework was built primarily around class, in the context of Latin American peasant and worker communities. Ambedkar's framework was built around caste, a form of hierarchy that combines religious sanction, ritual status, and economic deprivation in ways that class-based theory does not fully capture (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). Caste discrimination can persist even when a Dalit person gains wealth or formal education, because the stigma is tied to birth, and not only to economic position (Teltumbde, 2018). Freire's model, focused on literacy among the rural poor, does not by itself explain this feature of graded, birth-based exclusion.

A second difference concerns method. Freire worked mainly through informal, community-based literacy circles. Ambedkar worked through both community education and formal state institutions. He pushed for representation in universities, for reserved seats, and eventually for constitutional guarantees (Jaffrelot, 2005). Ambedkar did not reject the state. He tried to use law and the constitution as tools for inclusion, alongside grassroots consciousness-raising. This dual strategy, of law together with a self-respect movement, is a distinct contribution. It goes beyond Freire's largely informal, community-level pedagogy.

A third difference concerns scale and durability. Freire's literacy circles were, by design, small and local, built around a particular group of learners and their immediate world. Ambedkar worked at

the scale of a whole national polity, because he judged, correctly, that caste is a structure reproduced by law, religion, and the state, and not only by local habit. A movement built only at the community level, however successful in a single village or a single circle, would leave the larger legal and institutional architecture of caste untouched. Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional change reflects this judgement about scale.

3.5 Reading Ambedkar from the Global South

Global South scholarship has criticised the tendency of academic disciplines, including the sociology of education, to treat theory as something produced mainly in Europe and North America, with the rest of the world supplying only "data" or "case studies" (Connell, 2007). Guru has described a related pattern inside Indian social science itself. He argues that Indian academia often divides labour between "theoretical Brahmins" and "empirical Shudras": a small, usually upper-caste group credited with abstract theorising, and a much larger group, including many Dalit scholars, whose work is read mainly as raw testimony or data for others to theorise about (Guru, 2002). Freire himself is sometimes read in this same one-directional way in Indian classrooms, as the universal theorist whose framework must be applied to Indian conditions.

This article suggests a different reading. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste, written in 1936, already contained a theory of oppressive education and of liberation through knowledge. This was more than three decades before Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed was translated into English (Freire, 2000). Ambedkar deserves recognition as a Global South theorist in his own right, and not only as an example that happens to fit a Brazilian framework. Reading Freire alongside Ambedkar, rather than reading Ambedkar through Freire, better reflects the actual history of ideas. It also fits the wider argument of Southern theory: that thinkers from the Global South can generate original concepts, and not merely local instances of concepts developed elsewhere (Connell, 2007).

This has a practical implication for how sociology and education are taught in India. A course that introduces Freire in week one, and mentions Ambedkar only later, as a national application of Freire's ideas, repeats the very hierarchy Guru describes. A course that introduces Ambedkar first, on his own terms, and then places Freire alongside him as a later, independent parallel from another part of the Global South, treats both thinkers as theorists in their own right. This is a small curricular choice. It carries a larger argument about whose knowledge counts as theory.

3.6 Gender within graded inequality: Dalit women's education

Ambedkar's own writing was concerned mainly with caste, and did not develop a sustained theory of gender. This is a genuine limit in his work, and not a matter of oversight to be politely set aside. Later scholarship has extended his framework to show how caste and gender interact in the schooling of Dalit girls and women.

Velaskar reconstructs Ambedkar's own practice on this question, and shows that women were not incidental to his movement. They were treated as political educators in their own right, and were mobilised as active participants in the wider struggle for Dalit liberation, and not only as beneficiaries of male-led reform (Velaskar, 2012). Ambedkar encouraged Dalit women to attend his conferences, to speak publicly, and to take up teaching as a form of political work. This history complicates any simple story in which caste reform was carried out only by men, for the benefit of women who remained passive.

Paik's historical study of Dalit women's education in western India describes what she calls a "double discrimination": exclusion on grounds of caste, compounded by exclusion on grounds of gender (Paik, 2014). A Dalit girl in a government school may face humiliation from upper-caste classmates and teachers because of her caste. She may also face pressure, at home and in the wider community, to leave school

early, to help with domestic labour, or to marry young. These two pressures do not simply add together. They interact, and together they can produce a pattern of exclusion sharper than either caste or gender bias would produce alone.

Rege's work on Dalit women's testimonios shows how this double discrimination is remembered and narrated by the women who lived through it, in their own words, rather than through the accounts of male reformers or of upper-caste researchers (Rege, 2006). An Ambedkarite approach to inclusive education, properly extended, has to take this testimony seriously. It cannot treat "the Dalit student" as a single, ungendered category. Gender is not an add-on to Ambedkar's framework. It is a necessary extension of his own insistence that graded inequality has many layers, and that a single, undifferentiated policy of access cannot address all of them at once.

4. DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis in Section 3 has direct relevance for present-day Indian education policy. The following subsections take up, in turn, the Right to Education Act, the National Education Policy, the persistence of rote learning, questions of gender and disability, teacher education, and the limits of the present framework.

4.1 The Right to Education Act: access without inclusion

India's Right to Education Act, 2009 (Government of India, 2009), made elementary education a legal right for all children aged six to fourteen. This was a major step for access. Enrolment of Dalit and Adivasi children rose sharply after the Act (Sedwal & Kamat, 2008). The Act also introduced a quota of seats for economically weaker and disadvantaged groups in private schools, extending the reach of the right beyond government schooling alone.

However, several studies show that access did not automatically bring inclusion. Nambissan's research on Dalit children in Indian schools found continuing discrimination inside the classroom: in seating arrangements, in the mid-day meal, and in everyday interaction with teachers and peers (Nambissan, 2009). Dalit children were often placed at the back of the classroom, or made to sit separately during meals. This is close to exactly what Ambedkar predicted. Legal access, without a change in social attitude, does not remove graded inequality. It only moves the exclusion from outside the school gate to inside the classroom.

Studies of the private school quota under the Act point to a similar pattern. Children admitted under the quota often report a warm welcome on paper, and a cooler one in practice: fewer invitations to birthday parties, quiet exclusion from friendship groups, and, in some schools, separate sections for quota and non-quota students in all but name. The legal category of "beneficiary" does not, by itself, produce the social category of "equal classmate."

4.2 The National Education Policy 2020: equity in language, not yet in power

The National Education Policy, 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) speaks the language of equity and inclusion. It names Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other "socio-economically disadvantaged groups" as priority categories. This language is a genuine advance over policy documents that ignored caste altogether. An Ambedkarite reading, however, asks a further question. Does the policy address the redistribution of social power, or only the redistribution of resources such as scholarships and infrastructure?

Ambedkar would likely have argued that resources are necessary, but not sufficient. Curriculum content, the caste composition of the teaching workforce, and everyday classroom culture all need direct attention. Subramanian's account of merit ideology in elite Indian institutions is a useful caution here (Subramanian, 2019). A policy can expand scholarships and still leave the underlying idea of merit untouched, an idea that continues to read caste advantage as individual talent. Simply building more schools, without changing who teaches, what is taught, and how students are treated day to day, risks repeating the pattern

Nambissan and others have documented (Nambissan, 1996, 2009).

4.3 The banking model in the Indian classroom

Freire's idea of the banking model is useful here. Much of Indian schooling, including in government schools serving Dalit and Adivasi children, still relies on rote learning and one-way instruction (Ramachandran, 2018). A curriculum that does not reflect the history, language, or lived experience of marginalised students can alienate them, even when they are physically present in the classroom.

A Freirean, dialogical approach, combined with Ambedkar's insistence on dignity and self-respect, points toward a different kind of pedagogy. It would treat marginalised students as thinking subjects with valid knowledge of their own lives, and not as blank slates to be filled with upper-caste, urban, middle-class content. A history lesson that mentions Ambedkar only as a footnote to Gandhi, for instance, teaches a Dalit child something about whose history counts as central, and whose counts as a side note. A dialogical classroom would instead invite students to bring their own family and community history into the lesson, as material worth studying in its own right, and not only as an illustration of a point made elsewhere.

4.4 Beyond caste: gender, disability, and intersecting exclusions

There are clear limits to Ambedkar's framework when it is applied uncritically today. Ambedkar wrote before the large-scale entry of women, religious minorities, and children with disabilities into the mainstream inclusive education debate. His focus was primarily on caste. Contemporary inclusive education must widen this lens, to include gender, disability, religion, and language, while retaining Ambedkar's core insight that formal access is not the same as substantive inclusion.

As Section 3.6 discussed, Rege, Paik, and Velaskar together show how caste and gender combine to produce specific forms of exclusion for Dalit girls and women, a dimension that requires attention beyond Ambedkar's own writings, though it remains consistent with his general framework of graded inequality (Paik, 2014; Rege, 2006; Velaskar, 2012).

The National Education Policy also names children with disabilities as a priority group, and commits to accessible school infrastructure and trained special educators (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). An Ambedkarite lens is useful here too. It asks whether a disabled Dalit child, who sits at the intersection of two forms of marginalisation, is visible to the system at all, or whether policy categories that treat caste and disability as separate boxes end up losing sight of children who belong to both. Graded inequality, again, is the more accurate description of the problem than any single-axis category.

4.5 Teacher education and caste literacy

Teacher education is another area where this framework has practical weight. Most teacher training programmes in India spend little time on caste as a live classroom issue. Teachers are rarely trained to recognise their own caste position, or to notice how it shapes their expectations of different students.

An Ambedkarite approach would place caste literacy, alongside subject knowledge, at the centre of teacher preparation. A Freirean approach would add to this the practice of dialogue, training teachers to listen to students' own accounts of their lives, rather than assuming a single, uniform classroom experience for all children. Guru's account of academic hierarchy (Guru, 2002) suggests a further, uncomfortable question. If Indian universities themselves have not fully reckoned with caste as a structuring force in whose knowledge counts as theory, it is not surprising that the teacher training programmes housed inside those same universities have not done so either. Caste literacy for teachers, in this sense, cannot be separated from caste literacy in the wider academy that trains them.

4.6 Limits of this framework and directions for future research

This article is a conceptual and theoretical review, and not an empirical study. It does not present new classroom data. Its conclusions should be tested against fresh empirical research, across different Indian states and different school types, government and private.

Future work could examine how teacher training programmes engage, or fail to engage, with Ambedkar's ideas. It could also examine how Freirean methods have been adapted, if at all, in Indian classrooms serving marginalised communities, and how the intersection of caste, gender, and disability plays out in specific schools, rather than in policy documents alone. A comparative study of Right to Education Act quota students and their non-quota peers, tracking not only enrolment but friendship networks and self-reported dignity, would be one useful next step.

A further limit concerns language. This article has relied on English translations of Ambedkar's Marathi writings, and on an English translation of Freire's Portuguese text. Something of the original voice of each thinker is inevitably lost in translation, and a reader who can work with the Marathi originals would be able to test some of the claims made here more closely against Ambedkar's own words. This is offered as an honest limit on the present analysis, not as a reason to set the comparison aside.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that inclusive education in India needs a foundation in Ambedkar's thought. Ambedkar treated caste as a system of graded inequality, and treated education as a tool for dignity, self-respect, and liberation, and not simply for literacy or employment. His slogan, "educate, agitate, organise," links personal awareness to collective action, in a manner that closely parallels, and predates, Freire's idea of conscientisation.

Reading Ambedkar alongside Freire, rather than through Freire, corrects a common imbalance in how the sociology of education treats theory from the Global South. Ambedkar's writing is not merely an Indian case study for a Brazilian framework. It is an independent, and in key ways an earlier, theory of oppressive education and educational liberation.

The article has also shown that this framework is incomplete on its own. Extended through the work of Velaskar, Paik, and Rege, it becomes clear that graded inequality operates along the axis of gender as well as caste, and that any Ambedkarite programme for inclusive education has to take the schooling of Dalit girls and women as a central concern, and not as an afterthought.

For policy and practice, this means that Indian inclusive education needs to move beyond enrolment statistics. It needs curriculum reform, teacher sensitisation on caste, and classroom cultures that treat every child, regardless of caste, gender, or ability, with equal dignity. The Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy, 2020, are necessary steps. They are not sufficient on their own. Genuine inclusion, in Ambedkar's sense, requires a change in social power, and not only a change in access.

Future research should test these theoretical claims against classroom-level evidence from across India. It should extend the Ambedkar-Freire framework further, to other axes of marginalisation, including religious minority status and disability, building on the gender analysis offered here. The larger claim of this article is a simple one. An Indian classroom becomes inclusive not on the day a child is enrolled, but on the day that child is treated, without qualification, as an equal.

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