

EDUCATION, RESERVATION AND EMANCIPATION: ANTI-CASTE INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS IN MODERN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the central role of education, reservation, and emancipation in the intellectual traditions of anti-caste movements in modern India. While colonial modernity introduced Western education as a tool of governance, anti-caste thinkers from Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule to Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and B.R. Ambedkar reconceptualized education as an instrument of critical consciousness and liberation from caste slavery. The study traces how this emphasis on education evolved into a political demand for representation and reservation in legislatures, public employment, and educational institutions. Drawing on primary writings such as Phule's Gulamgiri (1873), Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste (1936) and States and Minorities (1947), and Periyar's editorials in Kudi Arasu, the paper argues that reservation was not envisioned as a welfare measure but as a mechanism for ensuring equal citizenship and dismantling monopolies over knowledge, power and capital. Through a historical-analytical approach, the research shows that anti-caste traditions linked emancipation not merely to social reform but to structural transformation — securing self-respect, rationalist thinking, and democratic participation. The paper concludes that the triad of education, reservation and emancipation remains a foundational framework for understanding social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords-Anti-Caste Thought, Education and Emancipation, Reservation, Social Justice, Jyotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Periyar, Dalit Intellectual History, Modern India.

Introduction

Modern India witnessed two parallel projects: the nationalist project for political independence and the anti-caste project for social emancipation. While the former sought freedom from colonial rule, the latter sought freedom from internal hierarchies of caste, gender and labour exploitation.

For anti-caste intellectuals, ignorance was not a natural condition but a socially produced one. Denial of education to Shudras and Atishudras was seen as the root of their subjugation. Jyotirao Phule in the mid-19th century argued that without education, reason would not develop, and without reason, morality and freedom would remain impossible. This insight was carried forward by Savitribai Phule, who opened the first school for girls and Shudra-Atishudra children in Pune in 1848, by Pandita Ramabai, and later by Ambedkar and Periyar.

Education, in this tradition, was not limited to literacy. It meant critical, rationalist, and scientific education that could question sacred texts and social customs. However, thinkers soon realized that education alone was insufficient if dominant castes monopolized state institutions. Hence, the

demand for reservation - or adequate representation - emerged as a logical extension. From the Communal G.O. of Mysore (1918), to the Communal G.O. of Madras Presidency (1921), to Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates and later for reservation in the Poona Pact negotiations and the Constitution, the trajectory shows a consistent link between knowledge and power.

Emancipation, therefore, in anti-caste thought, meant more than reform. It meant annihilation of caste, self-respect, and creation of a democratic public based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

Education, Reservation, and Emancipation

Education, reservation, and emancipation form a powerful triad in the struggle for social justice and equality, particularly in the context of historically marginalized communities in India. Together, they serve as the structural framework for breaking down caste-based and social hierarchies.

The Interconnected Triad

- **Education as the Foundation:** Education acts as the primary tool for intellectual liberation. It empowers individuals with knowledge, critical thinking, and the skills necessary to challenge systemic oppression. As social reformer **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** famously stated: "*Educate, Agitate, Organize.*"
- **Reservation as the Enabler:** Reservation (affirmative action) provides the structural pathway to access this education and representation. Due to centuries of institutionalized discrimination, a level playing field does not exist naturally. Reservation acts as a corrective measure to ensure marginalized groups gain entry into premier educational institutions and government employment.
- **Emancipation as the Ultimate Goal:** Emancipation is the state of complete social, economic, and political freedom. It is achieved when marginalized communities no longer rely on protective discrimination because systemic inequality has been eradicated. Education and reservation are the vehicles; emancipation is the destination.

Comparative Overview of Roles

Pillar	Core Function	Impact on Society
Education	Human capital development and intellectual awakening.	Destroys the monopoly of privileged classes over knowledge.

Pillar	Core Function	Impact on Society
Reservation	Equitable distribution of opportunities and state power.	Ensures diverse representation in administration and academia.
Emancipation	Structural liberation from caste and class hierarchies.	Realizes the constitutional ideal of true equality and fraternity.

While policy mechanisms exist, several bottlenecks slow down the process of complete emancipation:

- **Quality Disparities:** Reservation grants access to institutions, but systemic gaps in primary schooling mean marginalized students often face a steep learning curve.
- **Social Backlash:** Affirmative action policies frequently face resistance from dominant social groups, leading to polarization rather than integration.
- **The "Glass Ceiling":** Entry into institutions or jobs does not automatically eliminate workplace discrimination or institutional bias.

Significance of the Study

Intellectual Significance: It recovers a distinct intellectual tradition of modern India that is often absent from mainstream intellectual history, which focuses on nationalist and liberal thinkers.

Policy Significance: Current debates on caste census, extension of reservation in private sector, EWS quota, and New Education Policy can only be understood in light of this historical debate.

Social Significance: It clarifies misconceptions that reservation is a charity or poverty-alleviation scheme, and re-establishes it as a principle of representation and anti-monopoly over power.

Educational Significance: It offers insights into how education can be made emancipatory rather than reproductive of hierarchy — a key concern for Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan students today.

Objectives of the Study

To trace the evolution of the idea of emancipatory education in anti-caste thought from Phule to Ambedkar.

To analyze how anti-caste intellectuals linked denial of education to caste-based economic and social domination.

To examine the historical emergence of reservation as a concept — from representation to communal share to constitutional safeguard.



To compare the approaches of key traditions — Satyashodhak Samaj, Self-Respect Movement, and Ambedkarite movement — on education and reservation.

To assess the notion of emancipation in anti-caste thought beyond formal equality towards social democracy and self-respect.

Research Methodology

Nature of Research: Qualitative, Historical and Analytical. Based on textual interpretation.

Theoretical Framework: Ambedkarite framework of graded inequality and social democracy; Phule's theory of cultural power; and Critical Pedagogy approach to education.

Primary Sources:

Jyotirao Phule - Gulamgiri, Shetkaryacha Asud (Cultivator's Whipcord), and writings of Satyashodhak Samaj.

Savitribai Phule - Poems and letters.

B.R. Ambedkar - Annihilation of Caste, Who Were the Shudras?, The Untouchables, States and Minorities, Constituent Assembly Debates.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy - Kudi Arasu and Viduthalai editorials, Why Were Women Enslaved?

Government Orders: Mysore Communal G.O. 1918, Madras Presidency Communal G.O. 1921, Poona Pact 1932, Constitution of India Articles 15(4), 16(4), 17, 46, 335.

Secondary Sources: Scholarly works by Gail Omvedt, S. K. Thorat, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, V. Geetha, S.V. Rajadurai, Sharmila Rege, and Sukhadeo Thorat.

Method: Thematic analysis and comparative intellectual history. The paper triangulates historical events, policy documents, and philosophical arguments.

Period of Study: 1848-1950 — from the first anti-caste school to the adoption of the Constitution.

Results and Discussion

A. Education as Counter-Hegemony

The study finds three distinct models of emancipatory education:

Phule Model: Education for critical reason and productive labour. Phule opened schools for Shudra girls to challenge both caste and patriarchy. His curriculum included practical knowledge, not just scriptural learning.

Ambedkar Model: Education for self-help and leadership. Ambedkar's emphasis on higher education, hostels like Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha hostels, and People's Education Society

colleges aimed at creating an intellectual class from Dalit communities who would lead the movement.

Periyar Model: Rationalist education to destroy superstition. Self-Respect Movement promoted self-respect marriages, rationalist literature, and atheist critiques to free the mind from caste-religious authority.

All three agreed that Brahminical education was monopolistic and reproduced hierarchy, hence a new pedagogy was needed.

B. Reservation as Representation and Anti-Monopoly

Findings show reservation evolved in four phases:

Phase 1 - Non-Brahmin Representation (1900-1925): Demand by Justice Party for communal representation to break Brahmin monopoly in Madras administration.

Phase 2 - Depressed Classes Rights (1925-1932): Ambedkar's argument at Round Table Conferences that untouchables are a distinct minority needing separate electorates.

Phase 3 - Compromise and Safeguards (1932-1947): Poona Pact replaced separate electorates with reserved seats, but Ambedkar ensured provision for educational scholarships and public service quotas.

Phase 4 - Constitutionalization (1947-1950): Reservation became a fundamental tool for equality of opportunity under Articles 15(4) and 16(4), linked to Article 46 (promotion of weaker sections). Discussion highlights that for anti-caste thinkers, reservation was not about economic uplift alone but about sharing state power and breaking cultural hegemony.

C. Emancipation as Social Democracy

Emancipation in this tradition has three layers:

Psychological - self-respect and annihilation of inferiority complex;

Social - annihilation of caste and endogamy;

Political - state socialism, labour rights, and gender equality. Ambedkar's final emphasis on conversion to Buddhism shows emancipation as ethical and spiritual rebirth.

The study finds a tension between the state-centric approach (Ambedkar) and society-centric approach (Phule/Periyar), but both converge on the need for education plus power-sharing.

Conclusion

The anti-caste intellectual traditions offer a coherent philosophy where education, reservation and emancipation are inseparably linked. Education without power-sharing leads to tokenism;



reservation without critical education leads to co-option; both without a vision of emancipation remain incomplete. Phule, Savitribai, Periyar and Ambedkar did not see education as a ladder for individual mobility but as a collective weapon for dignity. Similarly, they did not see reservation as a concession but as a democratic right to representation proportional to population and oppression. Revisiting this triad today is crucial when education is being commercialized and reservation is being debated narrowly as merit vs. quota. The anti-caste tradition reminds us that merit itself is socially constructed when access to quality education has been historically unequal. Therefore, emancipation requires both redistribution of educational resources and restructuring of power.

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