From Structural Humiliation to Dignity: Educational Empowerment of Marginalized Women through an Ambedkarian Perspective

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Abstract
Women belonging to marginalized communities in India often experience multiple forms of oppression manifested through caste, gender discrimination, and structural humiliation. The philosophical ideas of B. R. Ambedkar provide a powerful framework for understanding and addressing these inequalities. This study explores Ambedkar's vision of women's emancipation with particular emphasis on education as a transformative tool for restoring dignity and social equality. Using qualitative content analysis, the study examines selected writings and speeches of Ambedkar from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches to identify key themes related to women's empowerment, social justice, and educational liberation. The analysis reveals that caste operates as a system of structural humiliation, reinforced by religious ideology and institutional practices that sustain gender and social inequality. It further demonstrates that Ambedkar viewed education as a fundamental means of challenging caste-based patriarchy, enabling marginalized women to resist exclusion and reclaim their agency. The paper argues that Ambedkar's educational philosophy remains highly relevant for addressing contemporary issues of gender injustice and social marginalization in India. By situating his ideas within an intersectional framework, the study contributes to ongoing debates on social justice, feminist theory, and educational empowerment. It further suggests that educational policies informed by Ambedkarian thought can play a crucial role in fostering dignity, equality, and agency among marginalized women.

KEYWORDS: Marginalized women, Structural humiliation, Intersectionality, Women's dignity, Educational empowerment, Ambedkarian perspective

INTRODUCTION

Women in patriarchal societies such as India have long experienced systemic oppression, which continues in diverse forms (Nigam, 2014). However, women's empowerment in India cannot be adequately understood without examining the intersection of caste, gender, and social hierarchy (Sharma & Geetha, 2021; Mal & Saikia, 2024). Marginalized women, particularly from lower castes, face overlapping forms of oppression embedded in social, religious, and institutional structures, resulting in "double marginalization." As Sharma and Geetha (2021) argue, Dalit women occupy a distinct social position shaped simultaneously by caste discrimination and gender subordination. These intersecting inequalities have historically restricted access to education, property, and public spaces, while undermining dignity and

freedom of choice. Mainstream feminist conversation has often overlooked these realities, reflecting upper-caste perspectives and failing to address the compounded challenges of Dalit women, including poverty, violence, and exploitation (Sharma & Geetha, 2021).

The caste system, a rigid form of social stratification, reinforces structural humiliation and inequality (Bailey, 1963; Mamgain, 2023). Ambedkar (1936), in Annihilation of Caste, argues that caste is sustained through control over marriage and reproduction, positioning women as central to its continuity. Practices such as endogamy and denial of education illustrate the gendered mechanisms through which caste is reproduced, while religious ideologies legitimize these inequalities.

B. R. Ambedkar's writings provide a critical and transformative framework for understanding these structures. He not only exposed the interconnection between caste and gender oppression but also proposed education, legal reform, and social equality as pathways to empowerment. His advocacy for women's rights, including through the Hindu Code Bill (Ambedkar, 2003), and his engagement with egalitarian philosophical traditions highlight a vision centered on dignity and justice. In this context, the present study examines educational empowerment through an Ambedkarian lens using qualitative content analysis, focusing on how education and reform facilitate the transition from structural humiliation to dignity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have consistently highlighted that caste and gender are deeply intertwined systems that reinforce social inequality in India. Uma Chakravarti (1993) conceptualizes caste as sustained through the control of women's sexuality, particularly via endogamy, while Leela Dube (1997) emphasizes the role of kinship and gender norms in maintaining caste structures. Extending this perspective, Gopal Guru (1995) argues that caste inequality must be understood through its gendered dimensions, as marginalized women experience both social exclusion and gender subordination. Together, these studies establish caste as a system of graded inequality reproduced through gendered control mechanisms.

The experiences of Dalit women are further examined through intersectionality, highlighting their position as doubly marginalized. Sharmila Rege (1998) critiques mainstream feminism for its upper-caste bias and stresses the need to foreground Dalit women's voices, whose realities are shaped by caste, class, and gender. Similarly, Ruth Manorama (2006) notes that Dalit women face intersecting forms of deprivation, including economic exploitation, social exclusion, and violence, underscoring the structural nature of their marginalization.

Within this discourse, B. R. Ambedkar's writings provide a foundational framework. In Castes in India, he explains that caste is sustained through control over marriage and women's sexuality, particularly endogamy, while in Annihilation of Caste, he conceptualizes caste as a system of social control. In The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman, he links women's declining status to Brahmanical patriarchy, demonstrating that gender subordination is structurally embedded within caste and religion. Education is widely recognized as a key instrument of empowerment. Amartya Sen (1999) views it as enhancing capabilities, while Naila Kabeer (2005) sees it as enabling strategic life choices. From an Ambedkarian perspective, education functions as a means of liberation, fostering dignity, equality, and resistance against social hierarchies.

Despite extensive scholarship, limited studies have examined these issues through an Ambedkarian framework using qualitative content analysis. Moreover, the role of education in enabling the transition from structural humiliation to dignity among marginalized women

remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by offering a thematic analysis of Ambedkar's writings to understand education as a transformative pathway for empowerment.

Research Questions

How do caste, religion, and institutional structures contribute to social and gender inequality in the writings of B. R. Ambedkar?

How is education conceptualized as a pathway to women's empowerment in Ambedkar's perspective?

Objectives

1. To examine the caste, religion, and institutional roles in shaping social and gender inequality in Ambedkar's writings.
2. To analyze the education as a pathway to women's empowerment in Ambedkar's perspective.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the educational empowerment of marginalized women through the perspective of B. R. Ambedkar. The analysis is based on purposively selected primary texts, including Annihilation of Caste and relevant sections from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, with a specific focus on discussions related to caste, religion, and women's status. The selected texts were chosen due to their direct engagement with issues of caste-based oppression, gender inequality, and social reform. Given the legal, philosophical, and discursive nature of these writings, the study employed paraphrased thematic extraction to interpret key ideas without altering their original meaning. The analytical process involved systematic coding of textual data into predefined and emergent categories such as caste oppression, religious legitimation, institutional inequality, and women's empowerment. An inductive thematic analysis was then conducted to generate broader conceptual themes, enabling an understanding of the transition from structural humiliation to dignity. Rather than relying on a single text, the study integrates insights from multiple writings and speeches of Ambedkar, ensuring a comprehensive and detailed interpretation of his perspective on women's empowerment and the transformative role of education.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The content analysis revealed four major themes, which are discussed below:

Theme 1: Caste as a System of Social Humiliation and social exclusion

The analysis reveals that caste operates as a deeply entrenched system of social humiliation characterized by hierarchical inequality, exclusion, and dehumanization. The data highlight that caste is described as "one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organization," reflecting its pervasive and oppressive nature across different regions. This is further reinforced by observations that "each region of India has lovingly perfected its own unique version of caste-based cruelty," suggesting that caste-based discrimination is normalized and culturally embedded within society.

The findings also demonstrate that caste functions as a mechanism of social control through practices of segregation and restriction. For instance, the denial of access to public roads, wells, temples, and schools illustrates the institutionalized exclusion faced by marginalized groups. Similarly, the notion that "caste is another name for control" underscores its role in regulating social interactions and maintaining hierarchical boundaries. The everyday practices of

discrimination are further evident in statements such as "a high caste man will allow a low caste man to fill his lota, but will not drink from it," which reflect deeply internalized notions of purity and pollution.

Moreover, the intersection of caste and gender intensifies this humiliation, particularly for Dalit women. The finding that Dalit women are expected to serve as midwives in privileged-caste households highlights a paradoxical condition of inclusion for labor and exclusion from dignity. This indicates that marginalized women are integrated into the social system only in subordinate roles, reinforcing both caste-based and gendered hierarchies.

Overall, these patterns suggest that caste is not simply a system of social stratification but a comprehensive structure of humiliation that operates through exclusion, control, and everyday practices of discrimination. It systematically denies marginalized communities, especially women, access to resources, respect, and human dignity.

Theme 2: Religion as a Tool for Ideological Control

The analysis indicates that religious beliefs and scriptural interpretations play a central role in legitimizing caste hierarchy and sustaining social inequality. The coded excerpts reveal that caste-based stratification is not only socially enforced but also ideologically justified through religious doctrines. The findings further demonstrate that religion institutionalizes social separation through prescribed norms and practices. The principle of maintaining caste boundaries through restrictions such as "do not intermarry" and "do not interdine" highlights how religious ideology regulates everyday social interactions. These practices not only sustain caste divisions but also internalize notions of purity and pollution within individuals and communities.

Moreover, the analysis reveals the gendered dimension of this ideological control. Women are positioned as "gateways of the caste system," indicating that control over their sexuality and reproductive roles is essential for maintaining caste purity. Practices such as child marriage and enforced widowhood exemplify how religious norms are used to regulate women's autonomy and reinforce patriarchal control.

Overall, these patterns suggest that religion functions as a powerful mechanism of ideological control that legitimizes caste-based discrimination while simultaneously reinforcing gender-based subordination. By embedding inequality within a moral and divine framework, it ensures the continuity of both caste hierarchy and patriarchal structures.

Theme 3: Institutionalized Social and Gender Inequality

The analysis reveals that caste-based inequality is deeply institutionalized through social norms, legal prescriptions, and everyday practices, forming a structured system that perpetuates exclusion and subordination. The coded data indicate that marginalized communities, particularly lower castes and women, are subjected to systematic denial of fundamental rights, including access to education, property, and meaningful social participation. Caste is described as "the most degrading system of social organization," reflecting its entrenched and dehumanizing nature.

The findings highlight multiple and interconnected dimensions of inequality. Social exclusion is evident in practices that restrict interaction between castes and regulate access to shared spaces and resources. Economic exploitation is reflected in expectations of unpaid or underpaid labor, as seen in norms requiring marginalized groups to render services without entitlement to fair compensation. At the same time, educational deprivation emerges as a key mechanism of control, with explicit restrictions indicating that women and shudras were not entitled to education and that providing education to them was perceived as a threat to social order.

Gender inequality is further reinforced through rigid prescriptions governing women's behavior, mobility, and participation in both public and private spheres. The analysis of normative frameworks attributed to Manu (as cited in B. R. Ambedkar, 1936) reveals a systematic structure of patriarchal control. Women are constructed as dependent beings, expected to remain under constant male authority throughout their lives, with no autonomy in matters of education, property, or personal decision-making. Practices such as prohibiting women from accessing sacred knowledge, restricting their participation in social activities, and denying them rights to divorce or property reinforce their subordinate status. Furthermore, norms that legitimize corporal punishment and demand absolute obedience to husbands illustrate the extent of institutionalized gender domination.

Additionally, the intersection of caste and gender intensifies marginalization, particularly in the case of Dalit women. The findings indicate that while they are incorporated into the social system for labor purposes, they remain excluded from dignity and equality. Restrictions on dress, behavior, and social participation further highlight their subordinated position. This dual marginalization reflects a system where caste-based and patriarchal controls operate simultaneously, reinforcing one another.

Overall, these patterns suggest that inequality is systematically embedded within the social order. It is maintained through interconnected structures of caste hierarchy, religious norms, and patriarchal control, which collectively deny marginalized communities, especially women of their rights, autonomy, and dignity.

Theme 4: Women's Empowerment as Restoration of Dignity and Equality

In contrast to oppressive social structures, the analysis highlights B. R. Ambedkar's vision of women's empowerment as a transformative pathway toward dignity, equality, and social justice. The findings reveal that Ambedkar not only critiqued systems of caste and patriarchy but also proposed alternative frameworks that enabled women's agency and participation. In particular, references to Buddhist traditions illustrate a social order in which women were provided opportunities for education, property ownership, and equal engagement in intellectual and spiritual domains, thereby challenging the hierarchical norms of Brahmanical patriarchy.

The data further indicate a redefinition of key social institutions, especially marriage. The conceptualization of marriage as a contract rather than a form of subjugation reflects a significant shift toward recognizing women's autonomy and individual rights. This perspective challenges traditional notions that position women as dependent or subordinate within familial structures. Additionally, the findings emphasize that women could acquire property and pursue learning, highlighting their capacity to function as independent and empowered members of society.

Ambedkar's assertion that "the progress of a community is measured by the degree of progress which women have achieved" reinforces the centrality of gender equality in broader social development. He asserted in July 1942 (p. 283), "Each girl who marries stand up to her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave.".In another document he asserts before the depressed class women. He said on August 14, 1931, "If you stand by your resolve to extirpate your slavery root and branch and undergo all trials and tribulations for it, the credit and success of my being able to discharge the onerous task will be yours."

Overall, these patterns suggest that women's empowerment, in Ambedkar's thought, is intrinsically linked to the restoration of dignity, rights, and equal status.

Theme 5: Education as a Pathway to Empowerment

The analysis identifies education as a critical instrument for transforming conditions of social humiliation into empowerment, dignity, and equality. The coded data reveal that the denial of education to women and marginalized communities functioned as a deliberate mechanism for maintaining caste hierarchy and social control. Restrictions on access to knowledge not only limited individual development but also ensured the continuation of structural inequality across generations.

In contrast, the findings highlight B. R. Ambedkar's strong advocacy for education as a means of social transformation. Education is conceptualized not merely as an avenue for individual advancement but as a collective force capable of reshaping families and communities. This is reflected in the assertion that "if you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole family," emphasizing the multiplier effect of women's education on broader social progress. His assertion is July 1942(p 282): "I am a great believer in Women's organization. I know what they can do to improve the condition of society"

Furthermore, the analysis indicates that access to education enables women to challenge entrenched structures of oppression, assert their rights, and achieve economic and intellectual independence. References to the contributions of Buddhist women to religious and literary traditions further illustrate the empowering potential of education in enabling women to participate as equal contributors in knowledge production and social life.

Overall, these patterns suggest that education serves as a foundational pillar in the transition from marginalization to empowerment. It not only facilitates the restoration of dignity and self-respect but also functions as a transformative tool for achieving social justice.

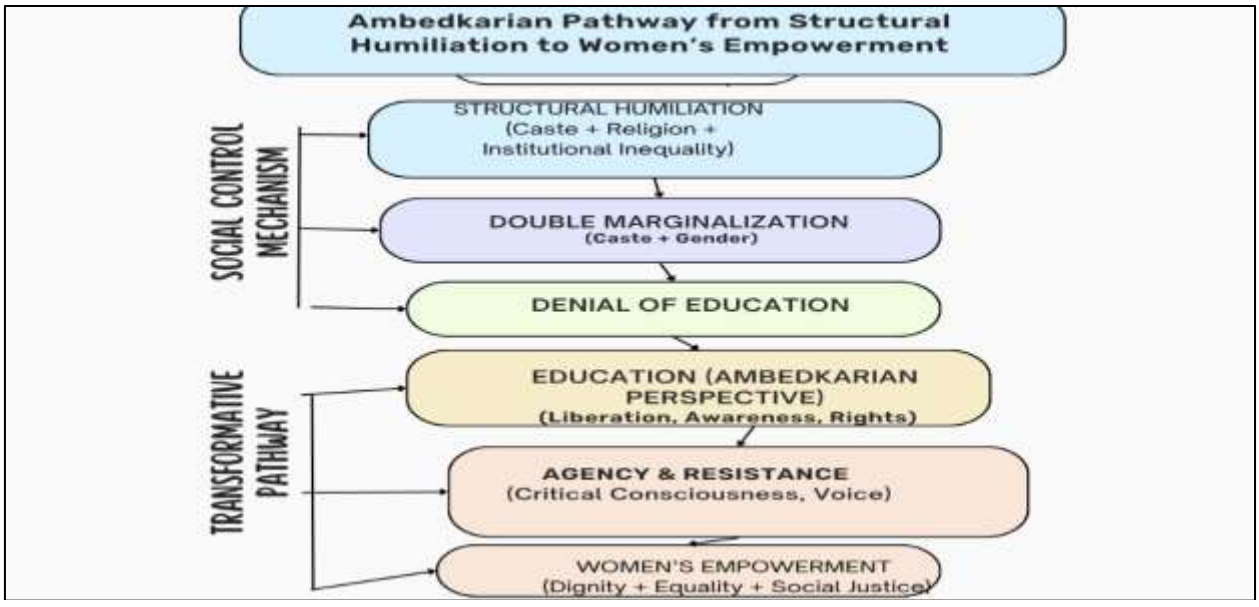


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the Ambedkarian pathway from structural humiliation to women's empowerment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reveal that caste operates as a deeply entrenched system of structural humiliation, reinforcing Ambedkar's characterization of caste as a system of "graded inequality" that institutionalizes hierarchy and social exclusion (Ambedkar, 1936; Chakravarti, 1993). This finding is consistent with sociological and feminist analyses that highlight caste as a

hierarchical system of exclusion, while also emphasizing the differentiated and marginalized experiences of Dalit women within this structure (Ambedkar, 1936; Chakravarti, 1993; Guru, 1995). The exclusion of marginalized groups from basic resources such as education, public spaces, and social participation demonstrates the normalization of humiliation within caste-based social organizations, supporting Ambedkar's critique of caste as a control mechanism rather than a functional division of labor.

The second major finding, which identifies religion as a tool of ideological control, is consistent with Ambedkar's argument that religious doctrines legitimize social inequality by presenting it as divinely ordained (Ambedkar, 1936). This finding resonates with feminist historiography, particularly Uma Chakravarti's formulation of "Brahmanical patriarchy," which emphasizes how religious ideology regulates women's sexuality to preserve caste purity. The present analysis further confirms that practices such as endogamy, child marriage, and restrictions on women's autonomy function as mechanisms through which caste boundaries are maintained, supporting Ambedkar's earlier assertion that caste is sustained through the control of women's reproductive roles. This is confirmed by Chakravarti's lines, "Women's cooperation in the system was secured by various means: ideology, economic dependency on the male head of the family, class privileges and veneration bestowed upon conforming and dependent women of the upper classes, and finally, the use of force when required".

The study also highlights the deeply institutionalized nature of social and gender inequality, demonstrating that oppression is embedded not only in ideology but also in everyday practices, legal norms, and social expectations. This finding is consistent with the work of Gopal Guru (1995), who argues that caste-based inequality must be understood through its gendered dimensions, as Dalit women experience marginalization not only through caste-based exclusion but also through patriarchal domination within and beyond their communities. This perspective highlights the intersectional nature of oppression, thereby necessitating recognition of Dalit women's distinct voice and agency. In support, Rege (1998) emphasizes that Dalit women occupy a distinct social location shaped by the intersection of caste, class, and gender, which renders their experiences fundamentally different from those of upper-caste women. The findings of the present study corroborate this perspective by illustrating how Dalit women are simultaneously included within the labor structure and excluded from social equality, thereby reinforcing their "double marginalization."

Furthermore, the analysis of prescriptions attributed to Manu, as discussed by Ambedkar, reveals a structured framework of patriarchal control that systematically denies women autonomy, property rights, and legal agency. This supports Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanical texts as instruments that institutionalize gender subordination and legitimize male dominance. The study of Dube (1997) demonstrates that kinship systems function as a critical structural framework shaping gender relations, where patriarchal arrangements significantly restrict women's autonomy, rights, and social position. Thus, the findings affirm that gender inequality is not incidental but structurally embedded within family and kinship systems, which regulate access to resources, mobility, and social roles.

In contrast to oppressive social structures, the analysis highlights B. R. Ambedkar's vision of women's empowerment as a transformative pathway toward dignity, equality, and social justice. The findings reveal that Ambedkar not only offered a critique of caste and patriarchal systems but also articulated alternative frameworks that enabled women's agency and participation. In particular, his engagement with Buddhist traditions reflects a social order in which women were accorded opportunities for education, property ownership, and participation in intellectual and spiritual life, thereby challenging the hierarchical norms of Brahmanical patriarchy (Ambedkar,

1987). This perspective resonates with feminist scholarship, which argues that patriarchal control over women is historically embedded within religious and social institutions that regulate their autonomy and access to resources (Chakravarti, 1993; Dube, 1997).

The analysis further indicates a redefinition of key social institutions, especially marriage. Ambedkar's view of marriage as a social contract rather than a form of subjugation represents a shift toward recognizing women's autonomy and individual rights, directly challenging traditional structures that place women as dependent in familial relationships. This is consistent with the findings of Dube (1997). Additionally, the findings emphasize women's right to acquire property and pursue education, underscoring their capacity to function as independent and equal members of society. Such assertions parallel development-oriented frameworks that conceptualize empowerment as the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices and exercise agency (Kabeer, 2005; Sen, 1999).

Ambedkar's assertion that "the progress of a community is measured by the degree of progress which women have achieved" reinforces the centrality of gender equality in social transformation (Ambedkar, 1936). His advocacy for reforms granting women equal rights in property and inheritance, most notably through the Hindu Code Bill, further reflects his commitment to institutional restructuring aimed at restoring women's dignity and legal status. This emphasis on legal and structural reform is supported by broader feminist and sociological scholarship, which highlights that meaningful empowerment requires transformation at both institutional and ideological levels (Kabeer, 2005; Chakravarti, 1993). His address to women in July 1942, urging them to assert equality and reject subordination, along with his earlier appeal to depressed-class women in 1931 to resist all forms of oppression, underscores the importance of self-respect, resistance, and collective agency in achieving empowerment. This aligns with intersectional perspectives that emphasize the need to address overlapping structures of caste, class, and gender in order to achieve substantive equality and social justice (Rege, 1998; Guru, 1995). The findings also underscore the central role of education as a pathway to empowerment, reinforcing B. R. Ambedkar's emphasis on education as a means of social liberation. This aligns with broader theoretical frameworks that conceptualize education as a critical resource for enhancing individual capabilities and enabling marginalized groups to challenge oppressive structures (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2005). Furthermore, critical pedagogical perspectives argue that education extends beyond the transmission of knowledge to fostering critical consciousness and resistance against domination (Freire, 1970). In this context, Ambedkar's assertion that the education of women contributes to the upliftment of entire communities reflects a transformative understanding of education as both an individual and collective process of social change.

Importantly, the present study advances this perspective by demonstrating that the denial of education operates as a deliberate mechanism of social control, sustaining hierarchical inequalities and limiting women's agency. This interpretation is consistent with sociological analyses that view education as a site of both social reproduction and transformation, depending on access and structural conditions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Thus, access to education emerges not merely as a developmental goal but as a critical means through which marginalized women can reclaim dignity, autonomy, and social participation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that caste, religion, and institutional practices operate in an interconnected manner to sustain structural humiliation, particularly for marginalized women. At the same time, Ambedkar's framework offers a comprehensive pathway for transformation, wherein education, legal reform, and social equality function as interrelated strategies for dismantling oppressive structures. This perspective is further supported by

intersectional approaches, which emphasize that meaningful empowerment requires addressing overlapping systems of caste, class, and gender simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989; Rege, 1998). Consequently, the relevance of an Ambedkarian framework lies in its ability to provide a holistic and structurally grounded understanding of empowerment, positioning education as a foundational element in the transition from marginalization to dignity and social justice.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The present study examined the intersection of caste, gender, and religion through an Ambedkarian lens to understand the educational empowerment of marginalized women. The findings reveal that caste operates as a system of structural humiliation, reinforced by religious ideologies and institutional practices that restrict access to resources and deny dignity. Women, particularly from lower castes, experience intensified marginalization due to the intersection of caste-based exclusion and patriarchal control.

At the same time, the study highlights B. R. Ambedkar's transformative vision of empowerment through education, legal reform, and social equality. His emphasis on women's rights and education underscores their role in restoring dignity, agency, and collective social transformation. Thus, the transition from marginalization to dignity is conceptualized as a process enabled by access to education, expansion of rights, and institutional restructuring.

The study has important policy implications, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive and inclusive curricula, equitable access to education, and interventions addressing structural barriers. It further underscores that empowerment is a multidimensional process involving education, rights, and social transformation, essential for advancing inclusive social justice.

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