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Maadhuri Hireker: Education, Emancipation, and an Ambedkarite-Buddhist Woman's Journey from India to the UK

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Abstract

This article presents a transnational oral history of Maadhuri Hireker (b. 1940), a first-generation educated Ambedkarite woman whose life traverses rural Maharashtra, the historic moment of Buddhist conversion in 1956, and the institutionalization of Ambedkarism in postwar Britain. Grounded in extended first-person narrative, it advances an Ambedkarite feminist methodology that treats lived experience as a site of theory production rather than illustrative data. It argues that Ambedkarism circulates not as abstract ideology but as an ethical and socio-political practice, enacted through education, refusal of humiliation, gendered agency, and institution-building across borders.

Situating Maadhuri's life within Ambedkar's core commitments—the annihilation of caste, education as emancipation, ethical self-respect, and resistance to graded inequality—the article foregrounds the gendered labour through which Ambedkarite ethics are sustained and transmitted in the diaspora. Placing her experiences alongside Ambedkar's writings and subsequent scholarship, it shows how her life challenges patriarchy, caste, and untouchability while extending Ambedkarite thought in practice. Rooted in rural Maharashtra, Maadhuri drew on a distinct cultural and political inheritance, including witnessing Dr. Ambedkar firsthand, which shaped her trajectory toward emancipation. By centering her voice, the article addresses a significant gap in scholarship on Dalit women's leadership within the global Ambedkarite movement while also contributing to broader discussions on caste, feminism, oral history, and migration. The article is embedded in a longitudinal project documenting the oral histories of first-generation Ambedkarites who migrated to the UK between the 1950s and 1970s and laid the foundations of contemporary Ambedkarism.

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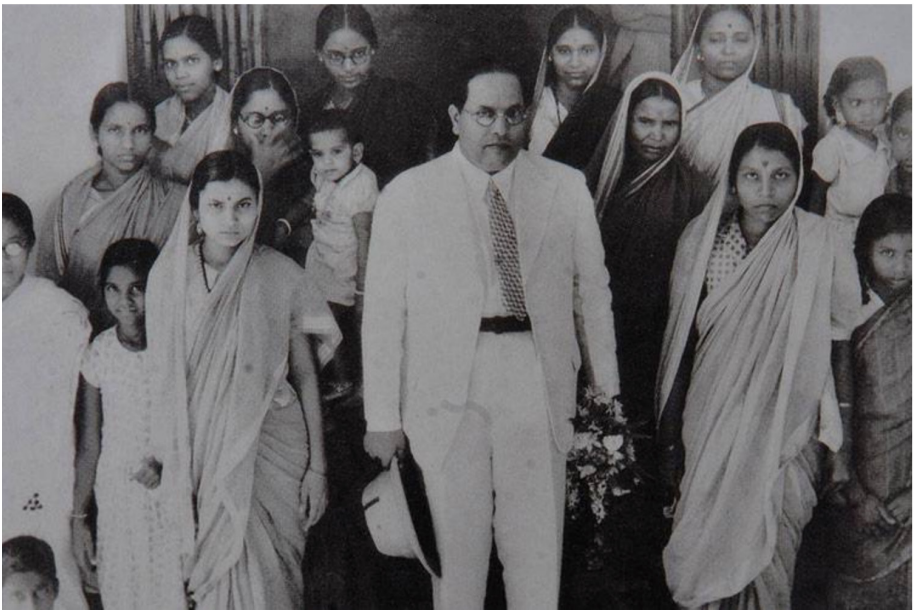
Introduction to Ambedkarism

Ambedkarism is a transformative socio-political and intellectual tradition grounded in the life and thought of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a distinguished Indian jurist, economist, political philosopher, social reformer, chief architect of the Indian Constitution, and a key figure in the revival of Buddhism in modern India. At its core, Ambedkarism advances the abolition of caste, the pursuit of social justice and civic rights, and the emancipation of Dalits and other marginalized communities through constitutional morality, education, and sustained political action. In India and across the diaspora, it upholds rationalism, human rights, and gender equality, and endorses conversion to Buddhism as an ethical pledge and simultaneous political rejection of caste oppression. Moving beyond identity-based politics, Ambedkarism constitutes a comprehensive framework for social transformation, committed to building an egalitarian society grounded in liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice.

Ambedkar repeatedly insisted that caste is not merely "a division of labour but a division of labourers" (Ambedkar 1944, p. 47), sustained through everyday practices, affective discipline, and gendered regulation. Women, he argued, were made the gatekeepers of caste, bearing the burden of ritual purity, endogamy, and social reproduction. Yet Ambedkar also insisted that women, once educated and politically awakened, would be among the most radical agents of social transformation. Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the equal education of girls and boys from a young age, a commitment reflected in his personal efforts to educate his sisters and in a letter written at age twenty-five stressing that social progress would be accelerated if male and female education advanced together (Saha 2017). Ambedkar regarded women's empowerment as foundational to dismantling structural inequalities.

Ambedkar's engagement with women's rights was inseparable from his project of the *Annihilation of Caste*. He conceptualized untouchability as a deeply gendered condition, arguing that caste oppression was reproduced through women's bodies and reproductive roles. As Gopal (2023, p. 288) notes, Ambedkar questioned the moral contradiction that rendered birth from Dalit women a "sin" while birth from dominant-caste women was considered a 'merit', exposing how caste hierarchies were sustained through the stigmatization of Dalit motherhood. This emphasis on education and empowerment as tools of liberation resonates with bell hooks' later articulation that "education as the practice of freedom enables the oppressed to reclaim their agency

and envision a life beyond domination (hooks 1994: 13)," linking Ambedkar's work with broader struggles for emancipation across time and context.



Dr. Ambedkar with women delegates of the Scheduled Caste Federation during their annual Conference on July 8, 1942 at Nagpur (*Source*: *Forward Press*, April 14, 2016)

In addition to advocating education, Ambedkar emphasized women's economic independence and legal rights, most notably through his support for maternity benefits and gender-equal provisions in the Hindu Code Bill. His firm belief in women-led movements was evident during the Mahad Satyagraha on 20 March 1927, where over 300 women participated. His commitment is reflected in his well-known words: "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved" (BAWS, 14 (2), p. 172). Ambedkar asserted that women, when fully trusted and mobilized, possessed the transformative capacity to challenge entrenched social inequalities and improve the conditions of marginalized communities. Sarkar (2022) pointed out that reducing him to just a 'Dalit reformer', is "curbing the potential to realise how his ideas can contribute to the contemporary landscape of feminism. Ambedkar's ideologies are imperative to intersectional feminism, according to her."

Invisibility and Scholarly Neglect of Dalit Women in the Diaspora

Scholarship on Dalit diasporic communities has developed since the late 1980s, with early studies by Jurgensmeyer (1982) on Dalit Sikhs (Ravidasias) establishing gurudwaras in the UK, Desai (1963) on Indian immigrants in Britain, and V. Kumar (2004, 2013, pp. 256–257) and S. Kumar (2023) providing comparative accounts of Dalit migration to the US, Canada, and the UK. While these works examine

migration patterns, education, and occupational stratification, they predominantly foreground male experiences. Vivek Kumar's pioneer work in Dalit Diaspora (2013) in Malaysia,[1] UK, Canada, and the United States, highlights the roles of Dalit Sikhs, Dalit Christians, and Dalit women in the U.S. as engineers, sales workers, and homemakers, while offering limited focus on their engagement in political activism or leadership. Adur & Narayan (2017) and Soundararajan (2022) highlights how caste oppression persists in the diaspora, where Dalit women continue to face hidden but real forms of discrimination shaped by both caste identity and patriarchal norms even outside South Asia. In their recent research on campus life, Zare & Pathania (2025) and Zare et al. (2025) document experiences of immigrant students studying in the US universities. Similarly, UK-focused scholarship, including Dhanda (2009, 2013, 2014, 2017), Ghuman (2011), Jaspal and Takhar (2016), Kalsi (1992), Singh and Tatla (2006), Sato (2012), Sanam (2023) and Pasha (2025) has largely centered on caste hierarchies, youth identity, and community formation, often leaving women's agency in organizing or theorizing Ambedkarite politics unexamined. Outside the UK, US and Canada, Tejaswini Niranjana (2006) in her study of Indo-Trinidadian communities, offers a nuanced engagement with questions of gender, diaspora, and cultural identity, particularly through the figure of the indentured woman. While her research provides valuable insights into these intersecting domains, it does not specifically focus on Dalit women. Similarly, Pande (2020) provides valuable perspectives on the experiences of indentured and post-indentured Indian women in the Caribbean, enhancing our understanding of migration and gender. Adur & Narayan (2017, p. 247) pointed out that little attention has been paid to the gendered nature of diasporic experiences. The "Dalits' lives are rarely at the center of discussions of South Asian diaspora, and the dearth of scholarship on Dalit lives and activism in the US is a testament to that marginalization" (2017, p. 244). They argue that Dalit women's experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the UK and US diaspora are shaped by Dalit immigrants' efforts to assimilate, yet these efforts are hindered by both racism in wider society and casteism within their own communities, effectively positioning Dalit women as a "diaspora within a diaspora". This gap reflects a broader absence in diaspora studies where Dalit women's leadership, resistance, and political praxis remain underexplored (Das Gupta 2006; Prashad 2000; Gould, Dass & Jaffrelot 2022; Jaoul 2021; Mehta 2021; Mishra 2016; Muman 2025; Nagpal 2025; Waughray 2018, 2022; Yengde 2025). Recent important works on caste discrimination and

[1]In his research on Dalit International Organization (DIO) Malaysia points out that Dalits especially from the then Madras presidency were brought here as indentured laborers some hundred years back by the colonial rulers. According to their information, Dalits here constitute sixty five percent of the ten percent of the total Indian population settled in Malaysia.

legal frameworks in Britain (Waughray & Dhanda 2016; Waughray 2022) analyse transnational identities but women's narrative remains overlooked in these studies.

This article addresses these gaps (the specific trajectories of Dalit women's activism within anti-caste movements and across the diaspora) through the broader project *The Emergence of Ambedkarism in the UK*, which draws on interviews with first-generation migrants who arrived during the 1950s and 1970s. During this diasporic movement, women were often secondary or delayed migrants, with mobility largely structured by marital and familial arrangements. In many cases, women migrated only after marriage, joining their husbands once they had become economically and socially established in the host country. This has been a general trend among Dalits diaspora.

In contrast, this article focuses on the story of a woman from Maharashtra who came from a relatively well-off family. We examine how, despite the constraints of her time and social context, her contrarian spirit reshaped her life trajectory, leading her to become a lifelong Ambedkarite activist and community organizer. By focusing on Maadhuri Hireker, one of the earliest educated Dalit women from Maharashtra to migrate, it illuminates how Dalit women actively shaped Ambedkarite politics abroad, foregrounding gendered diasporic subjectivity and transnational activism largely invisible in existing literature.

Methodology

Both authors conducted two in-person interviews with Maadhuri Hireker at her residence in London between May 2023 and December 2025 to document her life narrative. Following the initial data collection and archival review, a final interview was completed in December 2025. All interviews were guided by a structured protocol and video recorded with the participant's informed consent. Additionally, two in-depth follow-up meetings were held by Sat Pal Muman, and further clarifications were obtained through telephone communication. The information collected was systematically cross-verified at multiple stages to ensure accuracy and reliability. During the analysis and writing phase, Maadhuri suggested consulting a recently published family memoir on her cousin, N.G. Uke (written by Uke's daughter Nagpal 2025), an influential figure in her life. This memoir helped us verify and refine specific historical dates and details.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills reminds us that "no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey (Mills 1967, p. 6). The article employs a life-history interviewing method. Life history traces key events and transitions over time while incorporating subjective dimensions such as memory, relationships, and aspirations that shape individual trajectories, thereby offering deeper insight into how and why

individuals come to occupy their present positions. Moving between Maadhuri's remembered past and the analytical present, the study illustrates how Ambedkarism travelled with her, from a remote village where Dalit girls were not allowed to study, to London where she, as an activist, celebrates her first Ambedkar Jayanti (Ambedkar's birthday- April 14) along with migrant students and workers in 1961. Her life allows us to trace how Ambedkar's ideas were not only received and celebrated but enacted, translated, and institutionalised across borders. Methodologically, the article treats Maadhuri's narrative as an archive. Her quotations are retained to preserve cadence, idiom, and affect, resisting the tendency of academic writing to over-summarise subaltern speech. As she herself states, memory is not passive recollection but an active ethical stance: remembering is a way of refusing erasure. Situated within this methodological framework, the study engages with the role of narrative construction in diasporic settings. In such contexts, imagination and memory, often interwoven with elements of both myth and history, serve as critical resources through which marginalized communities sustain identity, dignity, and a sense of social presence. Accordingly, this article examines how caste-based identities are not merely preserved but are actively reconstituted and articulated as anti-caste ideologies within new diasporic contexts.

Maadhuri Hireker: Village, Caste, and the Making of Defiance

Maadhuri Hireker was a first-generation educated Dalit woman, hailing from the same linguistic region, Maharashtra, where Dr. Ambedkar comes from. She saw Dr. Ambedkar at the age of 13 when he visited a nearby village. What sets her apart is her distinctive spirit of resistance, which manifested in ways quite unlike others. In this article, we explore her life journey, her vision, and her contributions to Ambedkarite activism in the UK. Her narrative interlaces memories of village life in Maharashtra with family histories, the dislocations of migration to Britain, experiences of work and exclusion, sustained community engagement, and struggles over historical recognition. Through her leadership in founding and presiding over the Indian Buddhist Society (IBS) in London, she helped establish the material and moral foundations of the Ambedkarite movement in the UK, an early example of Dalit self-representation abroad.

Maadhuri Hireker was born in 1940 in Kurud village in the Chandrapur region of Maharashtra, a social world structured by caste hierarchy, agrarian labour, and rigid gender norms. This contradiction entered Maadhuri's consciousness early, often through her own questions. She recounts her experience as a young girl watching her mother ritually clean a seat before offering it to a high-caste woman who came to visit her house: "*I said to my mother, Why are you cleaning it. You are dirtying your sari.*

They can sit there with us… We are cleaner than them." This moment is significant not merely as childhood insolence but as an ethical refusal of internalised hierarchy. Ambedkar described caste as a system sustained through consent and habituation (Ambedkar 1936, p. 47); Maadhuri's question interrupts that habituation at a very young age. Her awareness of caste differences did not come through abstract teaching but through lived encounters and warnings issued by her own sisters: "*You shouldn't do that… you are from low caste (Mahar),*[2] *they will do something*." Maadhuri repeatedly narrates how such warnings failed to produce compliance. Instead, they sharpened her sense of injustice.

One formative incident occurred when she was six or seven years old, when cattle belonging to a higher-caste family destroyed her family's paddy crop. Her sister retaliated physically against the boy tending the cows. The village responded by convening a meeting, a familiar mechanism of caste authority. Maadhuri recalls standing up and speaking in Marathi before the elders: "*It's not my sister's fault… their (upper caste's) cows were eating our rice field. Whose fault was that?*" The significance of this scene lies not only in her courage but in the temporary suspension of caste power when confronted with factual injustice. "*They did not say anything*," she recalls. "*Because that was their fault.*"

Water, a central symbol in Ambedkarite politics, also figures prominently in her narrative. She describes segregated wells, built and maintained by Dalits for their own use, while being forbidden from approaching upper-caste wells. She recalls her mother saying, "*When high caste people come they could climb up to the well and could see but we could not climb up to their wells to see*." The asymmetry is stark: visibility without access, surveillance without reciprocity. Her mother's response '*Just fight*' reveals a survival ethic grounded in dignity rather than submission. Denial of access to water in public spaces has been a recurring theme in Maadhuri's narrative, as well as in the experiences of Dr. Ambedkar and the first generation of migrants to the UK.

Education enters Maadhuri's life not as a smooth progression, but as a hard-won achievement. The establishment of a school in her village was itself an act of defiance,

[2]The Mahars constitute one of the historically marginalized communities within the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar classifies communities such as the Mahars among the "Avarna," those placed outside the varna system and subjected to systematic untouchability and spatial segregation (Ambedkar, *BAWS*, Vol. 7, pp. 29, 65). Mahar figure is Chokhamela, a fourteenth-century poet-saint associated with the bhakti movement, which fostered devotional participation across caste boundaries despite prevailing exclusions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also belonged to the Mahar community. According to Gokhale-Turner (1980: 69) "It seems to be generally agreed that the formation of the Mahar community as an Untouchable *jati* goes back to the period of '*Aryanisation*' and reflects the confrontation between the original tribally-organised inhabitants and the Aryan settlers who invaded their land. "Their integration into the Brahmanical Order occurred with their being assigned a position as Untouchables" (ibid, 75).

made possible by her cousin N.G. Uke,[3] who, inspired by Ambedkar's emphasis on learning, wrote from England in 1946 and helped open a primary school for the community girls in the village. Maadhuri's father started the school at his own house, insisting, "*The school is not only for Mahar community. It is for the entire village community."* This insistence on universality echoes Ambedkar's own refusal to frame Dalit education as charity rather than right.

Maadhuri's upbringing was marked by an absence of the gendered restraint typically imposed on girls. She recalls driving bullock carts, accompanying her mother to local markets, and being described by villagers as "*not a girl; she is a boy*"—the comment revealed an impoverished imagination of gender rather than any confusion.[4] Maadhuri narrates the episode with laughter, signalling that such remarks failed to discipline her behaviour. Rather than resisting or internalising this characterisation as stigma, she recounted it with humour, indicating how early acts of gender transgression became a source of confidence rather than shame. When she travelled alone to collect a prize for securing the highest marks in her primary examination, an inspector from her caste awarded her five rupees at a community Bullock Races event in which her family was participating. She recalls the incident vividly: "*I snatched them and shouted, I won 5 rupees!*" The exhilaration of achievement and acknowledgment and a sense of self-assurance was further reinforced through moments of public recognition. These early experiences questioning ritual, speaking in assemblies, defending land, pursuing education form the ethical groundwork upon which Ambedkar's ideas would later resonate. By the time she encountered Ambedkar in person, she was already, in her own words, "*not timid*." Her village life, rather than serving as a pre-political backdrop, constituted the formative site in which her Ambedkarite self was shaped.

Encountering Ambedkar and His Political Pedagogy (1952–1956)

Education, the first pillar of Ambedkar's slogan (Educate, Agitate, Organize)[5] and a way of emancipation, appears in Maadhuri's narrative not as credentialism but

[3]"N.G. Uke was the first student from the District of Chanda, to have been selected and the icing on the cake was that he had won this scholarship on his own merit and was selected as a general candidate by the Government of British India" (Nagpal 2025, p. 69). He left from Wadsa station on September 28 and reached Bombay and boarded the ship "orion" on October 6 and had 14 days travel and finally reached Southampton, UK on October 21, 1945 (see detailed diary description in Nagpal 2025, Ch. 13, pp. 75-85).

[4]Within a patriarchal framework, masculinity functioned as the only available reference point for strength, mobility, or independence; thus, any deviation from normative femininity was understood by equating it with being a boy or a man.

[5]Ambedkar invoked this slogan in the All India Depressed Classes Conference held at Nagpur from 18th to 20th July 1942 and underscored the necessity of a mass movement to dismantle caste oppression. (BAWS, 17 (3): 274).

as ethical preparation. Her childhood was a harsh reminder of prohibitions. As she recalls, "*At that particular time, girls were not allowed to go to school. Not only were they not allowed to go to school, there was no school for boys or girls in the village.*" Her family's relative economic stability as farmers complicates a common assumption that caste oppression maps neatly onto poverty. "*My father, Ramnath Uke, was a farmer. We lived in a large haveli and owned cows, buffaloes, and bullocks. He had a big farm. Because we were farmers, we had plenty of food. I never felt that I needed food*." Chandrapur was part of Vidarbha region where few Mahar used to own land in villages.[6] Yet this material sufficiency did not dissolve caste stigma. Instead, it exposed the contradiction at the heart of caste society: even when Dalits possess land, food, and self-sufficiency, they remain symbolically degraded.

Maadhuri Hireker's first encounter with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did not occur in isolation from her educational trajectory; rather, it emerged directly from it. By the early 1950s, she had already crossed multiple social thresholds, travelling beyond her village for schooling, living away from home as a young girl, and entering institutional spaces historically closed to Dalit women. These movements were themselves political acts, made legible through Ambedkar's insistence that education was not a supplement to emancipation but its necessary foundation.

By 1951, she had moved to Brahmapuri (Chanda district, now known as Chandrapur district of Maharashtra) to continue her studies after excelling in primary school. This transition involved not only academic advancement but a radical reconfiguration of gendered mobility. "*How could a village girl travel*?" she asks rhetorically, before answering through action: she stayed with relatives, walked long distances, and navigated public transport alone. Such a movement, especially for a Dalit girl in early postcolonial India, constituted embodied dissent.

It was during the 1952 election campaign that Ambedkar's political presence became tangible in her life, no longer an abstract figure but an immediate reality. News spread that Ambedkar would be arriving in the nearby village of Wadsa for an election meeting, and a relative encouraged her to attend. She describes the moment simply: "*I became aware… There is a big meeting. Somebody's coming*." Without informing her parents as communication infrastructure was limited, and even though permission was not culturally assumed, she travelled alone by train in the late afternoon. "*I was so happy. I was going by train alone*." Dr. Ambedkar had argued that freedom must be exercised to be learned; Maadhuri's decision to go, unescorted and unapologetic, embodies this principle. When she arrived, the scale of the gathering overwhelmed her:

[6]According to Gokhale-Turner, between the 16th and 18th centuries, Mahars in some villages were granted small plots of land, which made them slightly better off economically compared to Mahars in other parts of Maharashtra. However, this land was usually not as fertile (for details, see ch. 11 of Gokhale-Turner, 1980)

"*By the time I reached there, there were so many people… more than a few hundred*." Ambedkar was already present.

Her description of Ambedkar is striking for its attention to dignity and presentation. "*He was wearing a black suit; jacket… he was well dressed.*" As a young girl, she understood Ambedkar's importance relationally before she grasped it ideologically. "*I was aware he helped my cousin, N. G. Uke to go to England… he is a big man; he helped my brother."*[7] This connection mattered deeply. Ambedkar was not a distant leader but someone whose decisions had materially altered the life chances of people within her kinship network. The possibility of study abroad, of intellectual mobility across borders, entered her imagination through this example. She remembers standing amid the crowd as people contributed small sums to support the movement and Ambedkar's election campaign. "*Everyone was collecting one rupee or two rupees, and I said I don't have rupees now. If my father were here, he could have given me 100 rupees*." The statement is revealing. It signals both pride in her family's self-sufficiency and an intuitive grasp of political contribution as collective investment rather than charity.

Maadhuri speaks at length about the marriage of her cousin N.G. Narayan Uke and Kamal Meshram, which took place in Delhi in 1949. Maadhuri's father, Ramnath

In the picture, Maadhuri stands in the last row, second from left (*Source*: Maadhuri Hireker)

[7]In fact, N.G.Uke was selected on his own merit for the foreign scholarships scheme for Scheduled Caste students was approved by the British Government due to Ambedkar's intervention and recommendation, as a member of the Viceroy's cabinet (Nagpal 2025).

Gomaji, attended the ceremony, and Dr. Amebdkar himself was present. The connection between the families came through G.T. Meshram;[8] however, it was her father who told Maadhuri about Dr. Ambedkar. With encouragement from Ambedkar's speeches, and her cousin N.G. Uke's motivation, Maadhuri continued her education four years later. At that time, Maadhuri was sixteen, pursuing secondary education in Nagpur and residing in the Depressed Classes Girls' Hostel while attending Lady Amritbai Daga College of Arts, Commerce, and Science for Women.

She describes the hostel as a mixed and negotiated space: although owned by a Brahmin family, it was rented and managed by Mr. Hirekhand, a cousin of Mr. V.T. Hireker (whom Maadhuri later married in 1961). Predominantly inhabited by students from Scheduled Castes, the hostel reflected the complex intersections of caste, education, and everyday institutional life. It was from this space that she and thirty other girls volunteered to assist at the mass conversion ceremony at Nagpur.

Hireker's description of the 1956 mass conversion to Buddhism (*Deeksha* ceremony) stands out as one of the most emotionally intense and evocative moments in her narrative. Preparation had been ongoing for weeks and was extensively covered in Marathi and national newspapers. On the day, 14 October, the scale was unprecedented: "*You could not find your way, there were so many people; you could not see from one side to the other*." Estimates would later range into the hundreds of thousands, but for Maadhuri, the experience exceeded quantification. As a volunteer, her role was practical and communal rather than ceremonial. "*Showing people around; diverting the crowd; helping those who lost their child in the crowd; we were helpers*." This labour, often feminised and rendered invisible, was nonetheless essential to the event's success.

Adopting Buddhism was a long process for Dr. Ambedkar. It took him 20 years to explore the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism after his declaration on October 13, 1935, at the Depressed Classes Conference, Yeola (district Nasik) that *"Unfortunately I was born as a Hindu Untouchable, but will not die as a person who calls himself a Hindu.*" (BAWS, 432). He said that it was within his power to refuse to live under ignoble and humiliating conditions. Ambedkar described caste as a system that survives by producing psychological injury.[9]

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[8]G.T. Meshram, who owned a very large house in Nagpur. Babasaheb frequently visited Nagpur and would go to Meshram's home, as they were originally friends, though not very close (from the interview of Mrs. Hireker on Friday, 19 December 2025).

[9]After his declaration, Dr. Ambedkar read extensively about every faith. He also met the Catholic Pope. Having heard from Dr. Ambedkar about the miseries of Indian outcastes, replied: "*My son, it may take three or four centuries to remedy these abuses, be patient."* This was published in the *TIME* magazine which wrote "Dr. Ambedkar is probably the only man alive who ever walked out in a huff from a private audience with the Pope of Rome, His Holiness Pius XI." (*Time Magazine*, March 16, 1936).

Maadhuri recalls the moment in Nagpur on October 14, 1956 when Ambedkar adopted Buddhism with more than 100,000 people,[10] announcing he would first take the twenty-two vows he had devised and then lead the assembled audience in taking those vows collectively. The ceremony was conducted in Marathi, ensuring accessibility and collective participation. "*From that day onwards, I was feeling spirited… I was changed at that moment.*" The language she uses- change, freedom, happiness—suggests an internal realignment rather than mere religious affiliation. When asked whether the event was transformational, her response was unequivocal: "*It was life-changing*." Pressed further, she elaborated: "*You feel like you are free; you can do whatever you like; nobody is going to interfere.*" Importantly, Maadhuri rejects the notion that she had been psychologically diminished before the conversion. Instead, she emphasises how caste society persistently attempted to diminish her. "*I didn't feel that way [inwardly], but still the caste people used to remind you… oh you low caste; you can't do[this and] that.*" Conversion functioned not as the origin of self-respect, but as a mechanism through which it was preserved and reinforced.

The Deeksha ceremony also consolidated her understanding of Ambedkar's critique of Hindu society and Hinduism. She recalls earlier incidents, being segregated at weddings, denied equal participation, expected to accept symbolic inferiority, that retrospectively clarified Ambedkar's decision to leave Hinduism. When attending a village wedding as a child, she recalls, "*This is a wedding, why are they asking us to sit on one side away from the guests?… I am not eating here; I am going home.*" Such refusals, enacted even in childhood, found philosophical vindication in Ambedkar's rejection of a religious order that sanctified inequality.

On December 6, 1956, news of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's sudden death spread rapidly, inducing a profound stillness across the Dalit heartland and transforming individual grief into a shared historical consciousness. In Nagpur's girls' hostels, the ordinary rhythms of student life gave way to disbelief and silence; for many, "Babasaheb" had seemed an almost immortal emancipatory force, rendering his death initially inconceivable. This disbelief yielded to the stark reality of 7 December, when a funeral procession of over half a million people filled the streets of Bombay, requiring five hours to traverse a five-mile route (Ankit 2023, p. 153).

As the enormity of the loss settled, a collective sense of rupture emerged. For individuals such as the sixteen-year-old Maadhuri Hireker, the event was viscerally felt yet not fully comprehended, even as it marked a decisive moment of historical responsibility from a singular leader to a broader generation. At this moment, Ambedkar's followers confronted the imperative to carry forward his emancipatory project. Ten days later, Nagpur again became a focal site of spiritual and political

[10]'Nagpur Homage', *TOI*, December 17, 1956.

reaffirmation, as thousands gathered at the location of where mass conversion to Buddhism took place. These commemorations, alongside parallel gatherings in Ambedkar Nagar, Nasik, where over 50,000 mourners paid homage, constituted not merely acts of mourning but deliberate assertions of continuity.[11] Through collective prayer and renewed conversion, followers transformed grief into a reaffirmation of Ambedkar's vision, enacting a form of temporal reclamation that sustained his project beyond his death.

In the years immediately following 1956, Ambedkar's death would transform his presence from living leader to moral authority. Yet for young Maadhuri, his influence remained active, shaping her decisions around marriage, education, and public life. On September 1, 1961, Maadhuri married according to Buddhist custom to an Ambedkarite Marathi man who was working in the UK. While formally arranged, the union was underpinned by a shared ideological commitment. Shortly thereafter, she migrated to the United Kingdom. Maadhuri's Ambedkarism was already fully formed: grounded in education, enacted through refusal of humiliation, and sustained by collective Buddhist practice. Her encounters with Ambedkar in 1952 and 1956 were not isolated memories but constitutive moments in a political life that would soon extend beyond national boundaries.

Post-Conversion, Gender, and Ethical Self-Fashioning

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar consistently warned against interpreting conversion to Buddhism as a merely symbolic or spiritual act. For him, conversion was an ethical rupture: a deliberate exit from a moral order that normalised humiliation and a conscious entry into a life organised around dignity, reason, and equality. Maadhuri Hireker's post-1956 life illustrates this rupture not as an abstract philosophical shift but as a set of everyday practices through which she re-fashioned herself as an Ambedkarite woman. She describes conversion as "*From that day onwards*, *I was feeling spirited; I was feeling so happy; laughing; helping people*. *You feel like you are free; you can do whatever you like; nobody is going to interfere; nobody is going to say anything.*" The repetition of feeling words—spirited and happy—signals an embodied transformation. Conversion did not impose restraint; it expanded capacity. This affective register is crucial, because Ambedkar insisted that liberation must be experienced in the body as well as understood in the mind.

This reinforcement found its clearest expression in Maadhuri's approach to gender and marriage. Ambedkar had argued that endogamy was the keystone of caste and that women were made its principal enforcers. For Dalit women, refusal of ritual hierarchy within marriage constituted a direct challenge to caste reproduction. Maadhuri's

[11] 'Nagpur Homage', *TOI*, December 17, 1956

decisions around her own wedding exemplify this challenge with striking clarity. She recalls that Brahmin families in her village proposed attending her wedding on the condition that they would cook the food themselves. Her response was immediate and categorical. "*I said, no. This is my wedding. If they want to come, whether Brahmin or whatever caste they are, they can eat food cooked by our cook, otherwise…*" The sentence trails off not because her resolve weakens, but because refusal required no elaboration.

Maadhuri's understanding of womanhood further diverges sharply from dominant norms. Throughout her narrative, she resists the expectation that women should be shy, dependent, or confined to private space. "*Before that, because of your background, you were not timid, like girls are [generally] timid, but we were all girls; we equally did the hard work like boys.*" This statement is not a claim to masculine equivalence but a rejection of gendered diminishment. Her childhood memories reinforce this stance.

Dhamma Deeksha (a mass conversion to Buddhism led by B.R. Ambedkar) deepened this gendered confidence by providing an ethical vocabulary that rejected hierarchy altogether. Buddhism, as articulated by Ambedkar, offered an alternative conception of moral worth grounded in conduct rather than birth. This allowed Maadhuri to evaluate social practices independently of caste sanction. Her choice to reject segregated seating of lower castes at weddings in India, "*Why are they asking us to sit on one side?"* resembles a Buddhist act of defiance, hinting at a future movement and representing an early inclination before she adopted Buddhism.

Equally significant is her rejection of ritual deference within everyday interactions. She recalls questioning her mother's habit of offering seats to high-caste visitors: "*When you go to their house, do they ask you...or give you anything?*" This insistence on reciprocity reflects Ambedkar's critique of Hindu ethics as asymmetrical and exploitative where dignity is not granted; it is practised. By the late 1950s, Maadhuri had fully integrated Ambedkar-inspired-Buddhism[12] into her sense of self. It shaped her decisions, her refusals, her understanding of gender, and her expectations of social life.

Maadhuri's ethical self-fashioning also involved redefining service and care. Her volunteer work at *Deeksha Bhoomi* of helping lost children, directing crowds and supporting pilgrims did not end with the ceremony. "*30 girls from my hostel went to the Dhamma Deeksha ceremony in Nagpur as volunteers, wearing white saris; white blouse; flowers in the hair*", she describes an enduring impulse "*as volunteers to do more; help more people in the event, we built the tent, the preparations of the event started weeks before and the news of this program was covered everyday in the local media*". She recalls being very close to the stage. From where she stood, she could clearly see all the Buddhist monks (*Bhikkhus*) and Babasheb Ambedkar

[12]It is a socially engaged school of Buddhism, also called Navayana Buddhism, which Dr. Ambedkar adopted for half a million people; it is also known as Ambedkarite Buddhism.

arrived with his wife Savita Ambedkar. Maadhuri remembers that Babasaheb first formally took the Buddhist vows himself and then administered the same vows to the gathered crowd, initiating them into Buddhism. After the Deeksha ceremony, Maadhuri expressed that "*it felt like gaining something higher and deeply meaningful- almost like a moment of awakening. It was a new way of thinking that many had never experienced before. There was a strong sense of a community and feeling that something had changed outside and within- I felt freer, more independent, and less bound by social restrictions. It gave the feeling that one could live with dignity, make personal choices, and no longer be controlled or judged by others."* This orientation aligns closely with Ambedkar's vision of Buddhism as a social religion, one that binds individuals into a moral community rather than isolating them in private salvation. In an unfamiliar social landscape marked by racialisation, class stratification, and migrant precarity, Ambedkarite Buddhism offered her both a moral compass and a political language and ethical grounding when she migrated to the U.K. in 1961.

Migration to the United Kingdom and Education

Maadhuri Hireker's migration to the United Kingdom did not represent a departure from Ambedkarism but its extension into a new social field. By the time she left India, her political and ethical commitments were already settled. Migration, therefore, functioned not as reinvention but as translation: the task of making Ambedkarite principles legible and liveable within the racialised hierarchies of post-war Britain. Her arrival in Britain coincided with a period in which South Asian migrants were both needed as labour and subjected to social suspicion (Desai 1963). Maadhuri recalls encountering a society structured less overtly by caste but no less rigid in its stratifications. "*Here it was not caste they were asking*," she notes, "*but they were looking at color; accent; whether you belong or not*." The shift from caste stigma to racialisation did not erase hierarchy; it altered its grammar.

For Maadhuri, this recognition did not produce disorientation. Having already learned to name and resist graded inequality, she approached British society with a comparative sensibility. She carefully observed differences but did not internalise inferiority. "*I was never scared from anyone*," she insists. "*Because I knew who I was*." This assertion of self-definition echoes Ambedkar's insistence that dignity must be claimed to enable social recognition. Equally important were the social worlds she encountered beyond work. London provided spaces where Indian students, workers, and political activists gathered. These spaces became laboratories for the reconstitution of Ambedkarite networks. Maadhuri recalls meeting people "*from different parts of India, Punjabi and Marathi*" who shared a commitment to Ambedkar's ideas, even if their regional or linguistic backgrounds differed. Maadhuri's pursuit of education in

Britain must also be understood in gendered terms. As a migrant woman, she negotiated expectations that women should prioritise domestic stability over intellectual growth. She rejected this hierarchy. Just as she had travelled alone as a schoolgirl in Maharashtra, she navigated British institutions in London with confidence. "*Why should I stop learning?*" she asks rhetorically. The question signals refusal of gendered limitation.

Her move to a new country did not diminish her intellectual enthusiasm. "*My brain was very active that time,*" she asserts. She enrolled in evening classes at the "*North London Polytechnic in Camden*" and set an ambitious goal: "*And I wanted to do it at the London School of Economics, actually, where Babasaheb Ambedkar went*." Her ambition was consciously linked to the path of the Dalit icon who had shaped her community's aspirations. To qualify, she tackled British A-levels with remarkable speed, taking "*actually 5 A-levels*" in subjects like Economics, Economic History, Constitutional Law, and Marathi, passing them in just "*three months*." Maadhuri's academic momentum was deliberately paused for family before she launched her public sector career. She did so with competence and authority, joining the **"***Greater London Council… in the finance***"** department. Her role involved significant responsibility: "*Actually, I was managing a huge budget because we used to look after all the playing fields, all the people.*" She notes with quiet pride the institution's stature: "*Greater London Council had great power*." She worked there for seven years until its abolition in 1986. Afterward, she worked part-time with the University of London, assisting in the evaluation of examination papers, including A-level scripts, often at Senate House. She continued this work for one to two years but declined full-time employment offers because she prioritized caring for her children and supporting their education.

The Emergence of Ambedkarism in the UK

Maadhuri's engagement with Ambedkarite groups in Britain soon moved beyond discussion into organisation. Celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti, study circles, and commemorative meetings became regular features of migrant life. These gatherings served multiple functions: they affirmed identity, transmitted political memory to younger generations, and countered the erasure of caste within dominant narratives of the Indian diaspora.

Maadhuri emphasises that such work requires persistence. British society did not readily recognise caste discrimination, and sections of the Indian diaspora actively denied its relevance. "*They say, there is no caste here*," she recalls, "*but we know it is there; it is just hidden*." Her insistence on naming caste in diaspora reflects Ambedkar's warning that caste adapts rather than disappears when confronted with new social environments. Education, for Maadhuri, thus became inseparable from

political responsibility. To study was to equip oneself for argument; to understand British institutions was to intervene within them. She viewed learning not as private enrichment but as preparation for public engagement. This orientation would later shape her involvement in formal Ambedkarite organisations and campaigns in Britain.

Migration also sharpened her appreciation of Ambedkar's internationalism. Ambedkar's own education abroad and his engagement with global ideas provided a model for thinking beyond national boundaries. For Maadhuri, living in Britain made this dimension of Ambedkarism tangible. "*Ambedkar did not think only about India*," she reflects. "*He was thinking about the entire humanity*." By the time she was established in the UK, Maadhuri Hireker had successfully translated her Ambedkarite ethics into migrant life. Education, work, organisation, and refusal of humiliation remained central. The following section examines how these commitments crystallised into institution-building, as Maadhuri and her contemporaries worked to secure a lasting Ambedkarite presence in Britain.

Importantly, Maadhuri does not romanticise unity within Ambedkarite circles, nor does she deny the internal tensions that shaped the movement. She openly acknowledges disagreements, personal ambitions, and conflicts, particularly among male leaders, while carefully distinguishing these dynamics from the ethical clarity that Buddhism afforded her at a personal level. Reflecting on a male-dominated discussion in 1962 concerning the political direction of the Ambedkarite movement in the UK, she remarks with gentle irony, "These men want to be like that… me, me, me, it's all about them." She spoke publicly, organised actively, and intervened in debates. Her pointed question, "*Why should only men speak?*", extended Ambedkar's critique of patriarchy into the diasporic public sphere, asserting women's political voice within anti-caste movements abroad. Although women were often relegated to organisational and reproductive labour—cooking, arranging venues, and managing logistics Maadhuri refused to remain in the background. She identified status-driven leadership, and her own political practice remained rooted in collective responsibility rather than individual recognition.

Building Ambedkarite Institutions in Britain

For Maadhuri Hireker, the work of sustaining Ambedkarism in Britain was neither episodic nor symbolic; it involved creating organisational forms capable of carrying memory, political commitment, and ethical discipline across generations. These institutions emerged not from state patronage but from collective labour undertaken by migrants who refused political invisibility. Maadhuri contextualizes the early Ambedkarite movement in Britain within modest material conditions. Meetings were held in private homes, community halls, and borrowed spaces. Resources were limited,

but conviction was not. "*We didn't have money*," she recalls, "*but we had belief and we had our Babasaheb.*" This formulation echoes Ambedkar's own emphasis on moral capital over material abundance.

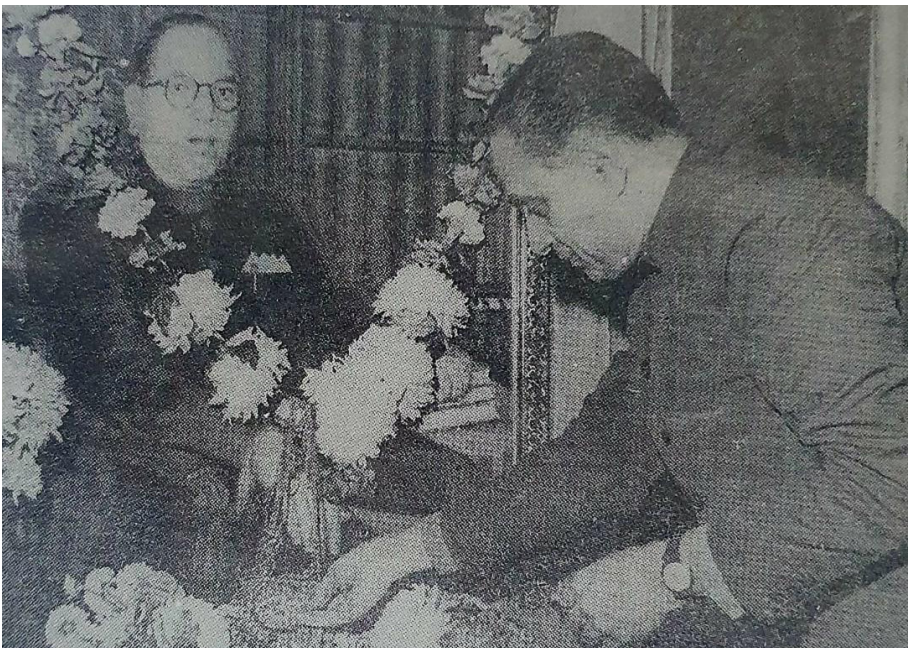
Central among these efforts was the strengthening of the Indian Buddhist Society (IBS) founded in 1962 in the United Kingdom. For Maadhuri and her peers, the IBS was not merely a religious association but a political and educational platform. It provided a structured space for study, commemoration, and mutual support. "*We used to meet, discuss Ambedkar, discuss Buddhism,*" she explains. At that time, Dhananjay Keer's *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* was a popular book to read among the circle. Such discussions functioned as continuing political education, ensuring that Ambedkar's ideas were not reduced to slogans.

The annual event of Ambedkar Jayanti (the birthday of Ambedkar) emerged as a key site of institutional consolidation. In Britain, where Ambedkar was largely absent from public discourse, these celebrations served as acts of assertion. Maadhuri recalls the deliberate care taken for these events: arranging speakers, preparing readings, and ensuring inclusivity across regional and linguistic lines. "*Ambedkar Jayanti was not just a celebration*," she insists. "*It was education*." These gatherings also countered the erasure of caste within dominant narratives of the Indian diaspora, which often portrayed Indian culture as homogeneous and harmonious. Maadhuri was explicit about the political stakes of visibility. "*If we don't speak, nobody will know our history*", she argues. This insistence aligns with Ambedkar's warning that silence is itself a form of consent to oppression.

One of the most symbolically charged moments in the British Ambedkarite movement was the installation of Dr. Ambedkar's portrait at London's India House, a student residence that became a hub of Indian nationalist activity. Maadhuri's husband worked at the Indian High Commission. One day, when Maadhuri went to meet her husband at work, she recalls: "*I saw Nehru's sister's picture there, and I saw some other people's pictures there, then I said to Mr. Hireker… What about Babasaheb? He wrote the constitution of India; and there was no memory of him; we needed to do something about it; and he said it's a good idea."*

Her initiative was born from a sense of historical justice and symbolic erasure. Recognizing that the visual landscape of India House told a partial story of the nation's founding, she demanded the inclusion of the Dalit architect of the Constitution. She took direct action: "*on behalf of Indian Buddhist Society (IBS), I wrote a letter to Indian High Commission… The first letter was informal. I personally visited the Indian High Commission.*" She made a principled, irrefutable case: "*Dr Ambedkar deserves a better place there."* The painted portrait of Ambedkar by M.G. Ghate

was later installed at the India House by the IBS in 1970, inaugurated by the High Commissioner of India.[13]



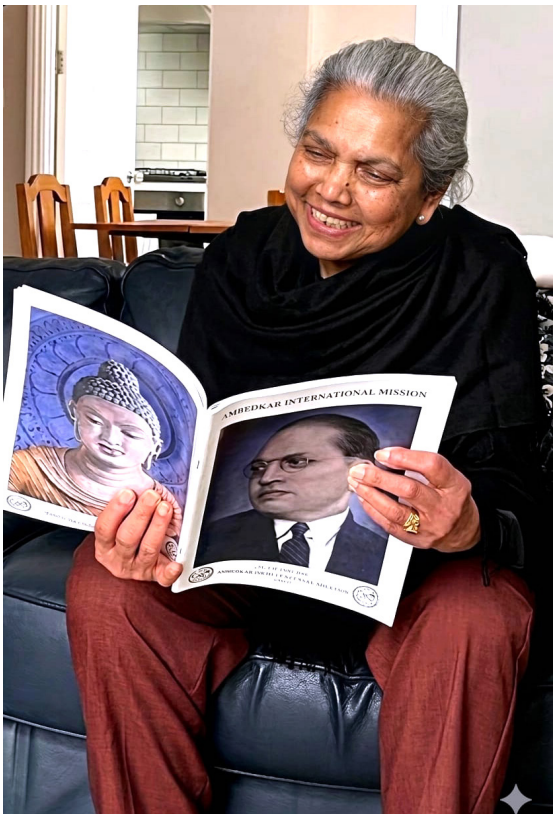
H. E. Appa B. Pant, High Commissioner for India, unveiling the portrait of Dr. Ambedkar at India House, London, on December 6, 1970. (*Credit:* Sat Pal Muman Archive)

For Maadhuri, this was not a decorative gesture but a political victory. India House, as a representation of the Indian state abroad, had long marginalized Ambedkar's legacy. At the time, installing Ambedkar's portrait was far from straightforward, as Ambedkar and his contribution were not highlighted by the Indian government until the 1980s. Although the portrait was initially installed at India House (High Commission), it was later moved to a back room of the British Commission, away from public view. This action reflects the Indian authorities' anti-Ambedkar stance and prompted opposition from UK-based Ambedkarites. In response, K.C. Leal, president of the Indian Buddhist Society, formally urged India House to display the portrait permanently in a public space. Securing his presence there marked a recognition wrested through persistence rather than granted through goodwill.

Maadhuri recalls the negotiations surrounding this achievement with characteristic clarity. Resistance was subtle rather than explicit delays, deflections, procedural obstacles. Yet the campaign succeeded. "*That portrait is there because people fought for it*," she states. The word "*fought*" is used deliberately, underscoring that institutional recognition required struggle even in diaspora.

[13]The first portrait was created by a man named Nagdeve, according to Maadhuri Hireker. IBS finally selected Mr. Ghate's painted portrait.

Maadhuri speaks candidly about disagreements within Ambedkarite organisations, particularly around leadership and recognition. "*Some people want names, positions*," she observes. Her critique is not based on petty personality objections but based on an ethics of care. Drawing on Ambedkar's emphasis on collective responsibility, she distinguishes between ambition that serves the movement and ambition that undermines it.



Ambedkarite activism reveals how homeland inequalities persist in the diaspora, shaping identity and belonging, while Ambedkar's legacy endures through committed activists like Maadhuri Hireker. As a woman activist, Maadhuri's role in these institutions was both central and contested. Through these institutional efforts, Maadhuri Hireker helped establish an Ambedkarite public presence in Britain that was at once political, educational, and ethical. These institutions did not seek assimilation into dominant narratives but asserted a counter-history rooted in struggle, dignity, and collective self-definition.

Analysis: Embodied Ambedkarism

Maadhuri Hireker's life, as narrated through her own words, demands to be read not simply as a biography but as a political archive. Across village, nation, and diaspora, her experiences reveal how Ambedkarism is not transmitted as doctrine alone but cultivated through practice—through refusals, assertions, and sustained ethical labour. Her story demonstrates that the annihilation of caste, as Ambedkar envisioned it, is neither instantaneous nor abstract; it unfolds through everyday decisions taken under conditions of constraint.

This article traces Maadhuri Hireker's trajectory from a Mahar farming household in rural Maharashtra to the institutional spaces of migrant Britain, showing how caste and gender consistently structured opportunity and expectation. Yet she appears not as a passive subject but as an active agent who questions, intervenes, and makes deliberate

choices- first through acts of childhood defiance, later through educational aspiration, and ultimately through institutional leadership, thereby embodying Ambedkar's vision of the political agency of the oppressed. Her narrative indicates that education becomes genuinely emancipatory only when it cultivates political consciousness; the two are mutually constitutive. It further suggests that conversion, as a political strategy, intensifies rather than dissolves struggle, while migration serves as a site where Ambedkarism is both tested and rearticulated.

Gender occupies a central place in this account. Ambedkar identified women as both victims of caste oppression and potential agents of its disruption, and Maadhuri's life stands as a testament to this. Her rejection of ritual segregation, compromised forms of hospitality, and intellectual confinement illustrates how Ambedkarite ethics actively reshape the meaning of womanhood. Rather than seeking equality by conforming to dominant norms, she asserts dignity by redefining the terms of participation. Her narrative highlights a key limitation of the Ambedkarite movement: the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions.

In her narrative, institution-building emerges as the bridge between individual ethics and collective politics. Through the *Indian Buddhist Society*, Ambedkar Jayanti commemorations, and campaigns for public recognition, Maadhuri and her contemporaries transformed memory into infrastructure. These institutions did not merely preserve Ambedkar's legacy; they produced new political subjects capable of sustaining it. In this sense, Maadhuri's contribution lies as much in what she helped build as in what she personally endured.

Scholars of education (Ilaiah 1996; Kale & Acharya 2022; Kumar 2016; Paik 2014; Pathania 2018, 2020; Paraskeva 2023; Rathod 2023; Rege 2006; Sukumar 2020; Thorat 2025) have long emphasized that Ambedkarite pedagogy—*Educate-Agitate-Unite*—aims to forge critical, self-determining subjects rather than obedient laborers. Maadhuri Hireker's life brings this vision vividly to life. Her biography does more than reflect Ambedkar's thought; it extends it, negotiating caste, gender, religion, and geography to demonstrate how Ambedkarism is enacted in everyday choices, ethical refusals, educational pursuits, and institution-building across unfamiliar terrains. By centering her narrative, this article treats lived experience not as data but as theory-revealing how power, dignity, and resistance are produced in practice. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Dr. Ambedkar argues that caste oppression is perpetuated through the control and regulation of women's bodies, thereby rendering women's educational empowerment a crucial strategy for dismantling entrenched systems of social injustice. Maadhuri's journey affirms that Ambedkarite movement is not confined to history or geography; it endures wherever individuals challenge hierarchy and assert their right to self-definition. In this ongoing struggle, education and activism are not merely instruments

but lifelines of emancipation for Dalit women across the diaspora. Maadhuri's life story invites us to understand the Dalit diaspora not as a passive extension of struggles rooted in the homeland, but as a living, evolving archive of Ambedkar's unfinished project of human liberation, one that continues to be reimagined and realized through Ambedkarism.

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Archival Resource

Personal Archive of Sat Pal Muman, UK.