

The Exclusion of Bahujan Schoolchildren: An Anti-Caste Critique of the National Education Policy 2020, India

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Abstract

This article explores the link between education policy and the social reproduction of caste, with a special focus on the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). It traces the shape of exclusion that Bahujan schoolchildren experience in the Indian school system by attempting to analyse, and build a coherent understanding of, caste-based exclusion in the sphere of school education. The article is organised in two parts, both of which use the NEP 2020 as an anchor to study the nature of educational inequality. The first part maps the outer contours of educational inequality, engaging with the issue of unequal access to schooling. The inner contours of educational inequality, that is, the internal processes of schooling that engender exclusion, are examined subsequently. At the kernel of this study is the complex relationship between education and power. In essence, the present article delineates the myriad ways through which the NEP 2020 contributes to the processes of social reproduction, particularly the mechanisms through which it conduces to the hegemony of historically privileged caste groups in the society.

Keywords

Education, caste, NEP 2020, exclusion, Bahujan, educational inequality, caste and education, Ambedkar, Phule, schooling, school education, social reproduction

Introduction

In 1882, Jotirao Phule addressed the Hunter Commission (formally, the Indian Education Commission), airing the concern that the (British) government's education policies served the wellbeing of 'Brahmins and the higher classes only' and left 'the masses wallowing in ignorance and poverty' (Deshpande, 2002, p. 103). This article,

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focusing on the National Education Policy 2020 (henceforth NEP 2020),¹ argues that the situation today, after more than 140 years of Phule's submission, remains all but unchanged.

The 'masses' that Phule referred to were the Shudras and Ati-Shudras—the working, labour castes and ex-untouchables. Social scientist Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2019) uses the term 'Dalitbahujan' to represent the masses—the 'people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority.' For the purpose of this article, however, I'm using the term 'Bahujan' in lieu of 'Dalitbahujan' to denote the masses. More specifically, I'm using Bahujan as an umbrella term representing the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) cutting across religion, ethnicities and geographies, as well as Denotified Tribes (DNTs), Nomadic Tribes (NTs) and Seminomadic Tribes (SNTs).²

While a growing body of scholarship has accentuated higher education institutions as sites of exclusion for marginalised castes (see: Subramanian, 2019; Sukumar, 2023), there has been relatively less emphasis on school education. The focus of this article, therefore, is on examining the ways in which schools in India become spaces of social and educational exclusion for students belonging to historically marginalised castes. In and through this examination, the article also seeks to delineate the relationship between the NEP 2020 and the persistence of caste.

Why does school education in India continue to be plagued by caste-based inequality? This article, situated at the intersection of scholarship on sociology of education and anticaste theory, and drawing from a range of secondary data such as autobiographical narratives of Bahujan authors, quantitative data from multiple surveys, and findings from independent and institutional studies, aims to illuminate the continued exclusion of Bahujan children in the Indian school system.

The theoretical underpinning of this article is derived from an Ambedkarite framework, to which the philosophy and scholarship of B.R. Ambedkar are foundational. Further, the ideas of Antonio Gramsci on education, which strongly resonate with Ambedkar's views (Paik, 2014), form the theoretical bedrock of this article. Importantly, the ideas of Jotirao Phule on education also inform this article. Linking Phule, Ambedkar, and Gramsci is particularly relevant here because of their shared interest in the 'interlinkage between political hegemony and pedagogic practices' (Ibid., p. 77). Further, I use the Gramscian concept of hegemony within the broader Ambedkarite framework, as Ambedkar and Gramsci are both 'subversive,' and 'Ambedkar and his own caste background do not sabotage Gramscian categories.' (Guru, 2013, p. 90). I also bring theoretical insights from critical educational

¹For all references to the NEP 2020, see Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Government of India, https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

²The limitation of this article is that it doesn't address the graded inequality within Bahujans. I don't recognise Bahujan as a monolithic category in itself, as SCs and STs continue to face discrimination and violence at the hands of the dominant OBCs.

theorists, particularly Henry A. Giroux and Michael W. Apple, which are valuable in understanding the interconnections between education, hegemony, and resistance.

This article is structured in two parts. The first part examines the exteriority of educational inequality by exploring the surface of what constitutes educational exclusion. In other words, what impedes Bahujan children from getting an education in the first place? In this part, I present a panoramic view of exclusion by looking at the taxonomies of schools and uncovering what I call the ‘**Chaturvarna School System.**’ I use the term Chaturvarna School System to signify the existing school system wherein children from marginalised castes are accommodated in the bottom tiers of schooling. In the second part, the article shifts gear and studies the interiority of educational inequality, that is, the exclusion exercised through curricula, pedagogies, classroom processes and the quotidian life of the school. Drawing theoretical insights from Ambedkar, I conceptualise the ‘**Pedagogies of Brahminism,**’ which refers to the pedagogies that suppress Bahujan students.

An important dimension of this article is to examine the role of the state in the reproductive functions of education. The state in this article is not regarded as a fixed object or a thing. Rather, it is seen as a constantly evolving entity that is always in the process of formation, shaping and being shaped by multiple forces (Apple, 2003; Gramsci, 1971). It is helpful, amidst this constant movement, to use education policy as an anchor for understanding the role of state intervention in reproductive functions of education. The NEP 2020, therefore, emerges as an important apparatus in this article to see the relationship between the state and schooling. In both parts of the article, I critically decode the restructuring of the education landscape stipulated by the NEP 2020 to argue that it consolidates the existing systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable children. The article concludes by highlighting the urgent need of examining caste-based exclusions in schooling in order to devise effective anticaste interventions that can challenge upper-caste dominance. Through this work I hope to articulate the complex dynamic between education and power, add my voice to the Phule-Ambedkarite cause of de-brahminising education, and strive towards the aim of abolishing caste-based exclusion in schools.

The Exteriority of Educational Inequality

Schools in India are part of a complex, hierarchical and multi-layered school system. The structural hierarchy of the Indian school system has been accentuated by several scholars. In a broad classification, Mehendale & Mukopadhyay (2019) recognise six types of schools in India: (i) government-funded and government-managed ‘open to all’ schools, run by local authorities and funded by state government; (ii) government-funded and government-managed ‘specified schools,’ run by central state government for a certain target population; (iii) government-funded and privately-managed schools such as grant-in-aid schools, bridge schools, special schools; (iv) privately-funded and privately-managed ‘secular’ schools—a diverse set of schools, ranging from elite high-fee-paying schools to low-fee-paying schools; (v) privately-funded

and privately-managed ‘minority’ schools—religious and linguistic minority schools; (vi) privately-funded and privately-managed school for ‘specified’ groups—schools for children with disabilities, schools run by non-governmental organisations for disadvantaged children, etc.

Social anthropologist A.R. Vasavi identifies as many as nine layers of schools:

[T]here are in reality nine types of schools which vary by the cost of schooling, medium of instruction, type of board exams, and management structure. These include (i) Ashramshalas (for Adivasi/tribal regions); (ii) state-run government schools (including municipal, corporation and panchayat schools); (iii) state-aided but privately managed schools; (iv) centrally aided special schools such as the Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas and “Military Schools”; (v) low-fee paying, state-syllabus private schools; (vi) expensive private schools including the “Public School” chains; (vii) religious schools (Pathshalas and Madrassas run by religious institutions and trusts); (viii) alternative schools run by independent or non-profit organisations; and (ix) international schools (Vasavi, 2019, p. 2).

However, this official classification does not illuminate the ways that schools are class-and-caste stratified. Therefore, a much broader classification, but a more useful one for the purpose of this article, is done by Velaskar (1990) and Nawani (2018), in which they categorise schools into four echelons: (i) elite, unaided private schools, often having affiliation with international curriculum, populated by children coming from the affluent families; (ii) government central schools and the good quality private aided/unaided schools; (iii) private aided/unaided schools of average quality; (iv) regional government/local body schools and the low budget private schools, which cater to the poorer sections of the society.

In this classification, the resemblance between the school system and the *varna* system becomes discernible (Nawani, 2018). Just like thousands of castes and sub-castes fall into four varnas (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra), the schools in India can be seen to be falling into the aforementioned four echelons. In other words, schools in India can be seen as a part of a four-tiered school system, akin to the *chaturvarna* structure. These schools differ from each other on several parameters. In the upper echelons, schools are generally better equipped with resources to foster students’ learning. In effect, the quality of education one has access to is contingent on their milieu, that is, while the schoolchildren coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds receive poor quality education, their counterparts from privileged backgrounds get the best.

It is of important here to think about the intersection of class and caste, for caste ‘has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today’ (Omvedt, 1982, p. 14). In an analysis of ‘caste composition of classes,’ Madan observes that caste ‘clearly continues to have an impact upon who is the most wealthy and powerful in this country,’ and ‘seems to have

a substantial impact even upon who is at the bottom of the class structure' (2020, p. 42). That only 22.3 per cent of the country's 'high caste Hindus' own 41 per cent of the country's total wealth (Tagade et al., 2018) substantiates it. In this light, it would not be an overstatement to say that Bahujan children, by and large, populate the schools falling in the lower echelons, thereby receiving poor quality education.

This is what I refer to as the 'Chaturvarna School System'—a school system in which the students from marginalised castes are accommodated in the lower echelons of schools. Dalits,³ as avarna castes, are outside the chaturvarna structure, which means that Dalit children are, predominantly, either accommodated at the bottom of the chaturvarna school system or kept out of it altogether. This is corroborated by a survey conducted by Social & Rural Research Institute in 2014, which illuminates that nearly one-third (32.42 per cent) of the 6 million out-of-school children in India are Dalits (see Table 1). The chaturvarna school system, in and of itself, promotes children well-endowed with caste capital, 'favouring the most favoured and disfavouring the most disfavoured' (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 36). The upshot of this is that those students who are already at the margins are segregated even before they enter the school-gate. It is not surprising, then, that SC, ST and OBC children have the highest out-of-school percentage.

Table 1: Social group wise out-of-school-children in the age group 6-13

| Social Group | Total No. of Children (Age 6-13) | Out Of School Children | Percentage |
|---------------------|---|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| SC | 60772699 | 1966027 | 3.24 |
| ST | 23991282 | 1007562 | 4.2 |
| OBC | 71899270 | 2206001 | 3.07 |
| Others | 47424023 | 884639 | 1.87 |
| All | 204087274 | 6064229 | 2.97 |

Source: National Sample Survey of Estimation of Out-of-School Children in the Age 6-13 in India, Social and Rural Research Institute (2014)

Another aspect of the chaturvarna school system is that it reflects not only in the children that are out of the school system but also those who are pushed out of it. An analysis of U-DISE 2016-17 data done by RTE forum⁴ reveals that the dropout rates of SC, ST and OBC children are much higher compared to the 'general' category children in the primary and upper primary levels (see Figure 1). It is also important to note that Muslim students also have significantly high dropout rates of 7 per cent in the primary level and 10.11 per cent in the upper primary level. Azam (2020) has pointed

³The term 'Dalit' in this article has been used in line with its usage in the popular discourse, to refer to former 'untouchable' caste groups, which the Indian Constitution recognises as 'Scheduled Castes.'

⁴Right to Education Forum. (2018). Status of Implementation of The Right of Children to Free & Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (2017-18). Retrieved last on May 5, 2023, <https://www.careindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Status%20report18.pdf>

out that educational exclusion of Muslim students cannot be solely attributed to rising communalism, as caste also plays a critical role in it.

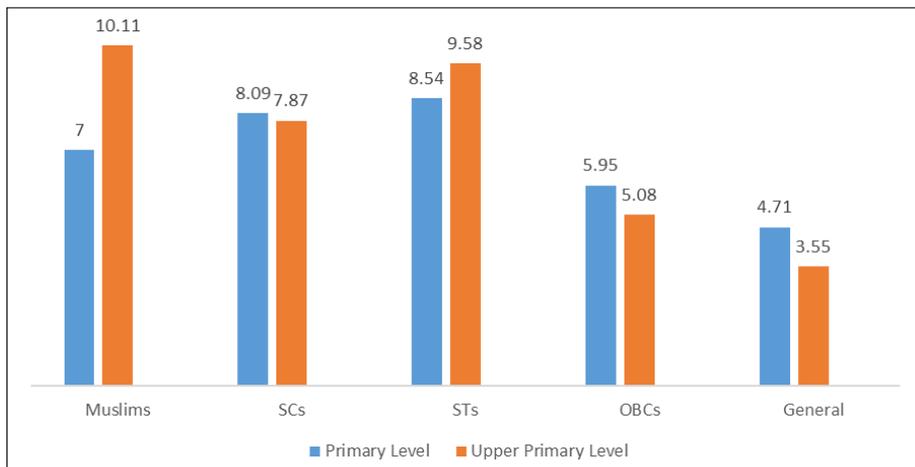


Figure 1: Average Annual Dropout Rate 2016-17

Source: Status of Implementation of The Right of Children to Free & Compulsory Education Act, 2009, Right to Education Forum (2018)

In the sections to follow, I will expound on how the NEP 2020 mandates the chaturvarna school system, as well as some other aspects of the policy that render the access to schooling unequal.

Disregarding the Common School System

One of the proposed solutions to the problem of unequal access is the Common School System (henceforth CSS). First conceptualised by American educator Horace Mann in 1830s, common schools were supposed to be tax-funded public schools, attended by all children in the neighbourhood regardless of their social backgrounds (Maniar, 2019). In India, it was under the Education Commission 1964–1966 (also: Kothari Commission) that the idea of establishing a CSS was formally proposed for the first time. The commission, taking note of the differentiation in the education system, observed that there is a ‘segregation in education itself – the minority of private, fee-charging, better schools meeting the needs of the upper classes and the vast bulk of free, publicly maintained, but poor schools being utilized by the rest’ (NCERT, 1970, p. 14). To address this problem, the commission envisaged common schools ‘which will be open to all children, irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic conditions or social status’ (Ibid., p. 15), with the aim of bringing ‘the different social classes and groups together and thus promote the emergence of an egalitarian and integrated society’ (Ibid., p. 14). As opposed to a uniform school system, the commission envisaged CSS as a system where every school is ‘intimately involved with its local community’ and ‘regarded as an individuality and given adequate freedom’ (Ibid., p. 463).

Subsequent to the Kothari Commission, both National Policy on Education 1968 and National Policy on Education 1986 upheld the idea of CSS. However, owing to various reasons, its implementation remained a failure. Now, coming after a gap of 34 years, the NEP 2020 has entirely abandoned the idea of CSS, exacerbating the differential arrangement of schooling. That schools are instrumental in structuring human societies is a long-standing idea in the field of sociology of education. They mould children, weave the fabric of future and shape the collective ethos of communities. A segregated school system, therefore, reproduces segregation in the society at large. It was for this precise reason that both Ambedkar and Gramsci, albeit in different social contexts, emphasised the significance of common schools for all students as a means of challenging social hierarchy (Paik, 2014). By eschewing the idea of CSS, then, the NEP 2020 sanctions the reproduction caste-based segregation, and caste, in the society.

Neoliberal Shifts against Constitutional Vision of Education

Jotirao Phule was a proponent of free public education. In the memorial addressed to the Hunter Commission, he mentioned that ‘the entire educational machinery’ must be handled by the government and that both ‘higher and primary education require all the fostering care and attention which Government can bestow on it’ (Deshpande, 2002, p. 110). Dr. Ambedkar, much like Phule, was in favour of state-funded education. Knowing that most children from historically disadvantaged castes wouldn’t have the means to study if education was not incentivised by the state, he resisted the commercialisation of education: ‘[t]he Education Department is not a department which can be treated on the basis of quid pro quo. Education ought to be cheapened in all possible ways and to the greatest possible extent’ (Ambedkar, 2019b, pp. 40–41). During the framing of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar played an instrumental role in the inclusion of Article 45, which directed the Indian state to provide free and compulsory education to all children until the age of 14 years.

Over the decades, however, India has seen the commercialisation of education that Ambedkar was wary of. It was the National Policy on Education 1986 that heralded a shift in favour of privatisation, reducing the role of state in the provision of public education. A more drastic change in the school-education landscape happened in 1991, when the economic reforms in conformity with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank ushered in the neoliberal restructuring of education. The state was obliged to begin structural adjustment programs (SAPs), reduce the expenditure on education, allowing the market a greater degree of freedom to intervene in the sector. Subsequently, World Bank-sponsored projects—beginning with District Primary Education Program (DPEP) in 1994 and followed by Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2000—dismantled the public education system. These reforms led to the state’s abdication of its constitutional responsibility of providing free education of equitable quality to all children, mushrooming of low-cost private schools across the country and further layering of the school system. Consequently, marginalised caste schoolchildren, largely dependent on state-funded schools, were excluded from

education. This neoliberal shift in education is mirrored in other sectors, such as housing and healthcare, where market-based approaches have heightened and capitalised upon Brahminical legacies to further exclude Bahujans from essential services.

From 2005 onwards, the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) began highlighting the poor literacy and numeracy skills of students, particularly in government schools, consolidating the dichotomy between public and private school performances and 'further supporting the political economy of privatisation' (Raina, 2020a, p. 3). Following this, the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–2012) proposed the engagement of the Indian state with the corporate sector for the delivery of social services, highlighting Public Private Partnership (henceforth PPP) as an important strategy for the development of education (Tilak, 2016). In 2009, enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act was met with contestations on several grounds, such as excluding children between the ages of 0-6 and 14-18 years from its ambit, weakening the civil society movement for a CSS and legitimising the existing multi-layered school system (see Sadgopal, 2010; Teltumbde, 2012). Since 2016, five major policy documents have come out, forming the base work of NEP 2020 (Raina, 2020b), namely (i) the Subramanian committee's report, NPE 2016; (ii) its companion text, Draft NEP 2016; (iii) NITI Aayog's 'Three Year Action Agenda,' 2017; (iv) the Kasturirangan Committee's report, Draft NEP 2019 and; (v) NITI Aayog's 'The Success of Schools: School Education Quality Index,' 2019. All these antecedents of the NEP 2020, Raina asserts, advocated the amplification of neoliberalisation of school education. In 2020, World Bank's 5718 crore project—Strengthening Teaching- Learning And Results for States (STARS) got the union government's approval. It is currently being implemented in six states across India under the Samagra Shiksha Scheme. The project, unsurprisingly, envisions a greater role of non-state private entities in the education sector.

It is in this context that the NEP 2020 has come out, bulldozing the ground to make way for private entities. Veiling the word 'private' under the guise of expressions 'public-spirited private' and 'philanthropic private,' the policy advocates the privatisation of school education. The first expression—'public-spirited private'—is baffling. It appears as though the policy is imagining a private enterprise that places public interests before its own—a highly unlikely scenario. The second expression—'philanthropic private'—has connotations of philanthrocapitalism. Thorup (2013) explains that one of the key tenets underpinning philanthrocapitalism is that there is no conflict between the market and the common good. He notes that philanthrocapitalism as a phenomenon expresses the idea that capitalism is the solution (read: not cause) to the existing problems and propounds that the market should be extended to the hitherto state-run services. This aligns with a neoliberal vision of education, that is, market should administer the provisioning of education (Tooley, 2000). It appears, then, that the policy's mandate that 'the private/philanthropic school sector must also be encouraged and enabled to play a significant and beneficial role' (NEP 2020, 8.4) and its call 'for the rejuvenation, active promotion, and support for private philanthropic activity in the education sector' (NEP 2020, 26.6) are in line with the

ethos of philanthrocapitalism. In a similar vein, the policy uses ‘Public Philanthropic Partnerships’ as a euphemism for PPP. This is to avoid the flak that PPP has received for being an incompatible partnership between the weak state and the powerful private sector, which ‘often end(s) in favour of privatisation of education’ (Tilak, 2016, p. 8). This policy-led, unprecedented espousal of privatisation of school education is antithetical to the Indian Constitution, which envisioned education as a public good as opposed to a private commodity.

Online Education and Unequal Access

The Covid-19 pandemic-induced proliferation of digital education has cast light on the massive existing digital divide between the haves and have-nots in India. Access to online education is a significant problem, especially for students from marginalised sections residing in rural parts of the country with limited or no access to internet. Several studies have shown that the access to digital infrastructure is inversely proportional to the socio-economic disadvantage. An analysis of NSSO data reveals that only 4 per cent of SC and ST students and 7 per cent OBC students have access to computer with internet (Reddy et al., 2020). The massive disparity in resources—electricity, internet, smartphones, computers, study-space, etc.—means that the virtual classrooms alienate Bahujan students from education. This has been substantiated by a survey-based report (Scholarz, 2021), which showed that SC and ST children were the most affected during the course of school closure owing to the pandemic. According to the report, only 4 per cent of rural SC/ST children were studying online regularly, as opposed to 15 per cent among other rural children. Notwithstanding, the NEP 2020 lays a great emphasis on the promotion of online education. Although it mentions that the digital divide must be addressed, it ‘appears to place the onus of ensuring digital access on the household rather than the state’ (Taneja, 2021).

The Interiority of Educational Inequality

So far, I’ve focused on exclusions that children face before entering the school. Here I want to shift the attention to the deeply violent spaces inside the school. Giroux (2016) refers to the ‘pedagogies of repression’ as pedagogies that obscure the role that education plays in distorting history, silencing the voices of the marginalised and thwarting the relationship between learning and social change. It is crucial to recalibrate our understanding of pedagogy as a repressive tool in the Indian context, where caste is omnipresent. Drawing on Giroux’s insights, and Ambedkar’s understanding of Brahminism, I use the term ‘Pedagogies of Brahminism’ (POB) to interpret the repressive functions of pedagogy in relation to the marginalised majority (Bahujans) in India. Ambedkar contended that Brahminism is a socio-political ideology that negates the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity.⁵ In this regard, caste is ‘nothing but Brahminism incarnate’ (Ambedkar, 2019a, p. 77). In a society where caste is the

⁵Presidential address by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar at the G.I.P Railways Depressed Caste Workers’ Conference, Nashik, 1938.

primary determinant of life and death, POB relates to the pedagogies that reinforce systems of domination, generate conditions of social reproduction of caste and caste-based inequalities and, ultimately, suppress Bahujan students. Accounts in Dalit literature have explicitly illuminated the overt discrimination (punitive measures, corporal punishment, verbal abuse, humiliation and segregation, etc.) that Dalit children are subject to in schools (see: Ambedkar, 2019c; Kamble 2018; Pawar, 2013; Pawar 2015; Valmiki, 2003). Several independent and institutional studies have also repeatedly highlighted the overt forms of discrimination against Bahujan children (see: Balagopalan and Subramanian, 2005; Centre for Equity Studies, 2014; Nambissan, 2009). This overt discrimination is the most visible part of the POB, forming up its surface. Here, I would attempt to cast light on the hidden, subterranean parts of the POB.

Phule reimagined education as a *Trutiya Ratna* (third eye or third jewel), which enables the oppressed to understand their oppression, critically engage with the world and strive for liberation. Phule's vision of education as an instrument of emancipation finds resonance throughout the twentieth century in the works of Ambedkar, Gramsci and Freire (Paik, 2014). Ambedkar, for instance, identified education as a liberating force that could stimulate the transformation within and empower the marginalised to fight against the pro-caste Brahmin orthodoxy. The sequence of words in his famous slogan 'Educate, Agitate, Organise' is indicative of the transformative character of education. For Gramsci, too, education was vital for subaltern groups to develop self-consciousness about their active role within the society.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was strongly influenced by Gramsci (Mayo, 2015; Paik, 2014). Despite having some contrasting views, Gramsci and Freire share important connections, as they 'both regarded education as political' (Mayo, 2015, p. 128), and maintained that it provides the oppressed the conditions for self-reflection, and overcoming their oppression. Freire's work has been influential in shaping critical pedagogy, which stresses upon the impossibility of a supposed 'neutrality' of education (Apple, 2012; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994). The notion that education is ideologically neutral not only allows the power to become invisible, thereby safeguarding the existing power dynamic, but also treats the viewpoint of the dominant as the unstated and undisputed normative centre. Critical pedagogy puts forth the idea that education doesn't exist in a vacuum, isolated from politics and power, that 'it is intimately connected to multiple relations of exploitation, domination, and subordination—and very importantly to struggles to deconstruct and reconstruct these relations' (Apple, 2013, p. 23). I want to use the inextricability of education and power as an entry point onto the terrain of the politics of knowledge. The examination of the politics of knowledge is a crucial way of understanding the relationship between education and power (Apple, 2003), for it offers us important questions—such as: 'Whose knowledge is of most worth?' (Ibid., p. 7)—that are closely connected with the exercise of hegemony by dominant groups.

Gramsci proposed a dialectical formulation of hegemony as a dynamic confluence of coercion and consent. He referred to hegemony as the ability of dominant groups

to establish the ‘common sense’ of society by gaining the consent of the weaker sections (Gramsci, 1971). To put it differently, hegemony, in Gramsci’s terms, means the diffusion throughout society of an entire consciousness that supports the interests of dominant classes, which, in a caste society, is Brahminical consciousness. The production of hegemony is not a natural occurrence; it requires deliberate efforts in specific sites such as the family, workplace, and the school (Apple, 2012, p. 16). Gramsci’s succinct insight that ‘[e]very relation of “hegemony” is necessarily an educational relationship,’ (1971, p. 350) suggests that education, in its broadest sense, is central to the functioning of hegemony. In the following sections, I will unpack the role of internal mechanisms of schooling in reproducing upper-caste hegemony in cultural and economic spheres. Here, too, I will look at the NEP 2020 to show how it reinforces the POB, and perpetuates the processes of cultural and economic reproduction.

Cultural Reproduction

The perspective that schools function as important social sites for the perpetuation of ideological hegemony of the powerful groups by validating and reproducing their culture and forms of knowledge emerges strongly from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1986) refers to ‘embodied cultural capital’ as those snowballed effects of family and class history that become an innate part of the person. In the Indian setting, caste becomes a significant contributor to the embodied cultural capital. Drawing from experience, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd elaborates on how schools play a particularly crucial role in transmitting the Brahminical culture: ‘[i]f our culture was Dalitbahujan, the culture of the school was Hindu’ (Shepherd, 2019, p. 14) and ‘[d]alitbahujan life figured nowhere in the curriculum. We had been excluded from history. In fact, it appeared that our history was no history at all’ (Shepherd, 2019, p. 54). He further notes that the language and morality of the school-textbooks have no connection with the lived reality of the marginalised majority.

There is a dearth of studies in India that have analysed the school curriculum with respect to caste. Pioneer work done in this direction was done by Kumar (1983), wherein he drew a similar conclusion, describing the school curriculum as ‘a means of subtle control’ (p. 1571), which serves to assist SC and ST children in internalising the symbols of ‘backwardness.’ More recently, in an analysis of Odia school textbooks, Nayak and Surendran (2021) identified seven types of caste bias, with ‘invisibility’ bias being the most prominent. They infer that ‘textbooks strengthen and reinforce the already existing caste-based prejudices’ and normalise the ‘upper-caste way of life as not only dominant but also desirable’ (p. 329).

The covert ways in which the POB operate is also reflected in the quotidian life of the school: the practice of Brahminical rituals during morning assembly (for example: *Saraswati Vandana*), or the denial of eggs in mid-day-meal, which is rooted in casteism (Karpagam & Joshi, 2022) and so on. Schools validate certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking and conducting oneself, values, dispositions, mannerisms and customs that are inherent in someone born and brought up in an upper-

caste household. The POB alienate Bahujan children from their cultures, invalidate the knowledge forms of their communities, and actively encourage a sense of inferiority in their psyche.

Economic Reproduction

In the 1970s, the idea that schools in a capitalist society function to reproduce the class structure came to be widely accepted (see: Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). Althusser (1970) contested that schools serve as important sites in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. According to him, schools, as ‘ideological state apparatuses,’ not only performed the reproduction of the skills and rules of labour power but also the reproduction of the relations of production. Bowles (1971) termed it ‘unequal education’—an education system that serves to reproduce the social division of labour. In the Indian context, Ambedkar’s insightful observation that caste system is not merely a ‘division of labour’ but also a ‘division of labourers’ (2019a, p. 47) tells us that a school system entrenched in the practice of caste would reproduce caste-ordained division of labour. The POB would instil in students the temperament that reproduces the class divide between dominant and marginalised castes. Moreover, schools in the upper echelons serve as avenues that lead to the best colleges and thereon to elite occupations (Velaskar, 1990). Students stuck at the bottom of the chaturvarna school system are not able to experience education as something that can lead them to well-paying jobs. Both exteriority and interiority of educational inequality (factors such as: unequal access, poor quality of public education, POB) coalesce to legitimise the restriction of Bahujan students to the lower rungs of economic ladder. In the next section, I further explore the ways in which the NEP 2020 sanctions cultural and economic reproduction.

NEP 2020 and Bahujan Exclusion

At its onset, the NEP 2020 states that ‘[t]he rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for this Policy’ (p. 4). This is a particularly anti-Bahujan credo, considering the fact that in the ancient India, Shudras and Ati-Shudras were forbidden from the pursuit of education. The injunctions of the ancient Hindu code Manusmriti (or The Laws of Manu) denied education and agency to women too, which brings us to the intersection of caste and patriarchy. In a Brahminical society, structures of caste and gender are intensely interlinked—those who are at the intersections of marginalised caste identities as well as marginalised gender identities face discrimination on both these accounts. A recent study conducted in four South Indian states showed that Dalit transgender persons are subject to most amount of violence in the schools (Centre for Law and Policy Research, 2019). Looking from the lens of intersectionality, therefore, the aforementioned credo of the policy appears particularly rooted in Brahminical patriarchy, therefore particularly discriminatory against Bahujan women, against, in fact, all identities at the intersection of marginalised castes and genders.

Absences

To understand how the NEP 2020, as a guiding document that determines the school curriculum, contributes to the processes of cultural reproduction, it is useful to study what is absent in the policy. To begin with, the word 'caste' does not find any space in the NEP 2020, apart from inevitable references to term 'Scheduled Castes.' Another troubling absence is of the word 'reservations' and/or 'affirmative action.' These absences reveal the deliberate attempt to present the education ecosystem in India as casteless, notwithstanding the fact that caste is a damaging condition and caste-based discrimination in schools and universities is an everyday reality for Bahujan students. To understand why caste as a damaging condition does not figure as a problem in the policy, Edelman's insights are imperative. He explains that the 'problems come into discourse and therefore into existence as a reinforcement of ideologies, not simply because they are there' (1988, p. 12). Such absences occur, in part, because powerful groups resist the 'consideration of practices from which those groups benefit' (Edelman, 1988, p. 13). These absences, or deliberate erasures, suggest that the policy devaluates the experiences of Bahujan students, thereby approving of the existing caste-based inequalities. In effect, it not only hinders any resistance to the caste system that may arise but also justifies its acceptance.

Another aspect is the absence of Bahujan lives and history in the school curriculum, which has been an unvarying characteristic of education in India (Nayak & Surendran, 2019; Shepherd, 2019; Valmiki, 2003; Xaxa, 2011). The NEP 2020 worsens this exclusion by erasing the contribution of Bahujan scholars:

The Indian education system produced great scholars such as Charaka, Susruta, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Bhaskaracharya, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Chakrapani Datta, Madhava, Panini, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Gautama, Pingala, Sankardev, Maitreyi, Gargi and Thiruvalluvar, among numerous others, who made seminal contributions to world knowledge in diverse fields such as mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, medical science and surgery, civil engineering, architecture, shipbuilding and navigation, yoga, fine arts, chess, and more (NEP 2020, p. 4).

All the aforementioned scholars are a part of the Brahminical tradition/knowledge structure. The contributions of anticaste reformers such as Savitribai and Jotirao Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy (to name a few) are ignored by the policy document (Sadgopal, 2020). Needless to say, these absences in the policy manifest in the school curriculum: most schools in India do not teach anticaste thinkers. Further, the epistemic contributions of tribal communities to agriculture, forestry, and natural resource management also remain unrecognised (Ibid). Menon (2020) points out that Gautama (Buddha) is mentioned as a scholar produced by the Indian education system, not as the pioneer of a religious movement that challenged the hierarchical, caste-ridden Hinduism.

Hidden Curriculum and the Reinforcement of Caste Laws

Another prominent absence in the policy is of hidden curriculum. The concept of hidden curriculum is not new. It refers to, ‘the norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively, taught in schools and that are not usually talked about in teachers’ statements of ends or goals’ (Apple, 2019, pp. 86-87). Hidden curriculum propounds a network of tacit rules that establishes what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. Children learn more from various social encounters in the classrooms than from the everyday formal teaching, and so more than official/formal curriculum it is the hidden curriculum that determines what students learn in schools (Giroux, 1978).

More often than not, the hidden curriculum operates in ways that reify the dominant culture. In the context of capitalist societies, for example, Bowles and Gintis (1976) propose that the norms, values and skills that get transmitted through hidden curriculum characterise the relations of class interaction under capitalism. The Indian society, on the other hand, is marked by the ubiquity of caste: ‘turn in any direction you like, Caste is the monster that crosses your path’ (Ambedkar, 2019a, p. 47). The social dynamics of the daily classroom interactions, then, is also underpinned by caste-laws. Consequently, hidden curriculum in the Indian classrooms plays a key part in reproduction of social relationships that are based on caste-laws, and, in turn, upholding the institution of caste.

The hidden curriculum is a function of the personal position of the teacher (Singh, 2021). Because the dominant culture in India is informed by the notions of Brahminism, teachers become the primary actors in reinforcing the Brahminical ideology in the classrooms through the hidden curriculum. Given this context, it is imperative that the teachers be sensitised on the subject of caste and asked to introspect their individual caste locations. At present, however, no anticaste teacher training program exists in India, and the NEP 2020 fails in acknowledging the presence of hidden curriculum, let alone proposing a caste sensitisation program for teachers.

The Legitimation of Caste-Based Vocation

To understand how the NEP 2020 contributes to the processes of economic reproduction, it is worthwhile to revisit the recent amendments in the child labour laws. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 (CLPRA Act) stipulates that a child is allowed to work if they are helping their family or family enterprise after school hours or during vacations. The Act defines *family* as the child’s ‘mother, father, brother, sister and father’s sister and brother and mother’s sister and brother,’ and *family enterprise* as ‘any work, profession, manufacture or business which is performed by the members of the family with the engagement of other persons’ (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2016). These definitions open up a slew of possibilities of child labour to flourish, allowing the child to work in settings that any of their family members own, or where any of their family members are employed (Ganotra, 2016). Given that children coming from socio-economically disadvantaged families (often trapped in

intergenerational debt bondage) work with the consent of family members, allowing children to work in ‘family enterprise’ is tantamount to legalising child labour.

It is also heavily linked with caste system and the perpetuation of caste system, for it forces upon oppressed caste children their traditional (read: caste-based) family occupations. Bahujan children, accounting for the largest section of child labourers in India, are the most affected by it, goaded into exploitative labour. The Act also allows adolescents (those between 15-18 years of age) to work in non-hazardous activities, and substantially reduces the occupations coming under the ambit of hazardous occupations (Ganorta, 2016; Mander, 2016). In consequence, it opens up a plethora of settings for adolescents to work, endangering their lives.

These amendments in child labour laws are compounded by the espousal of vocational education by the NEP 2020. Asserting that there is ‘no hard separation’ between academic and vocational education, the policy stipulates that the vocational training of students would begin from grade 6 onwards (NEP 2020, 4.26). This legitimisation of caste-based vocation would push Bahujan children into the spiral of labour, forcing traditional family occupations upon them, tethering them at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Additionally, the policy states that:

Schools/school complexes will be encouraged to hire local eminent persons or experts as ‘master instructors’ in various subjects, such as in traditional local arts, vocational crafts, entrepreneurship, agriculture, or any other subject where local expertise exists, to benefit students and help preserve and promote local knowledge and professions (NEP 2020, 5.6).

Across India, the parents of a large portion of Bahujan children are agricultural and/or daily wage labourers, employed in the farms of village landowners or the manufacturing units in the locality. The CLPRA Act, coupled with this clause, creates a loophole that allows children to work as ‘vocational trainees’ with their elder family members as labourers. Through these stipulations, the policy opens up the avenues for the perpetuation of caste-ordained occupations, mandating the renewal of the caste-based hegemony in the society.

That these reforms are Brahminical is underscored by the fact that they resonate with the position of Bal Gangadhar Tilak—‘the most celebrated icon of Brahmin nationalism’ (Dwivedi et al., 2021)—on the issue. Tilak was firm that the curriculum of peasants’ children should be separate from the curriculum of other children, that traditional occupations should be an essential part of the peasants’ children’s curriculum (Rao, 2008). The nexus of caste and patriarchy also becomes evident in Tilak’s stance, for he opposed the establishment of girls’ schools too, arguing that education will make women immoral (Ibid). Acutely aware of the caste-patriarchy nexus, Jotirao Phule, along with his wife Savitribai Phule, started the pioneering movement for the education of not only Shudras and Ati-Shudras, but also of girls/women.

Language Policy: Mandating Bahujan Subordination

The shifts in language policy in NEP 2020 contribute to reproduction in both cultural and economic domains. The NEP 2020 highlights the importance of promoting classical languages. However, it gives a privileged position to Sanskrit over other classical languages, mandating that the language will be offered ‘at all levels of school and higher education’ (NEP 2020, 4.17). It overlooks the fact that Sanskrit education has Brahminical roots—historically marginalised castes were denied it, forcing them into agrarian production and menial work.

The endorsement of Sanskrit is compounded by the promotion of regional languages over English: ‘Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language’ (NEP 2020, 4.11). The implementation of this policy-clause could lead to a situation where a large section of Bahujan children will be unable to access English education.

While this is being framed as a decolonisation effort (*Hindustan Times*, 2022), it is crucial to recognise that in the Indian context, true decolonialisation must also involve de-brahminisation. Historically, English education has overwhelmingly been available only to Brahminical classes in India. This is rooted not just in cultural systems, but structural and political-economic systems: as hoarders of landed wealth, Brahmins were able to channel agrarian accumulation into elite urban education and white-collar education, which has simply reproduced the privilege of English language skills. It has helped them to accumulate immense cultural, social and economic capital. The post-independence government policies, too, thwarted the entry of English education into Bahujan communities:

After 1947 in spite of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s insistence to recognize English as national language and must be taught in Government schools the Nehru Government relegated English teaching to private school education and the regional languages were adopted as teaching languages in the Government schools. This policy denied equal rights in the education system and language played a key role in that denial of ruling class language to the poor and lower castes (Shepherd, 2019).

In India today, English language holds the promise of upward socio-economic mobility. It is a crucial factor in obtaining a well-paying job in a competitive, globalised economy. Despite the absence of any scriptural injunctions against learning English, the Brahminical classes maintain a monopoly over its use (Anand, 1999, p. 2053). This perpetuates social hierarchy, with Bahujans remaining at the bottom stratum of the socio-economic structure, and subjected to continued subordination. For this reason, Shepherd (2011) has advocated for a two-language policy, which involves teaching the syllabus in both English and a regional language.

Unsurprisingly, Tilak was against the English education for the peasants' children. He believed that it would embolden them to break the boundaries set by caste, breaking, consequently, the caste system itself (Rao, 2008). The NEP 2020-ordained denial of English to the masses, then, is not only a violation of the Indian Constitution that gives all children the equality of opportunity, but also a way of maintaining intact a caste-based social order.

Conclusion

Using the NEP 2020 as an anchor, this article has delved into the ways in which schooling contributes to upper-caste hegemony. But hegemony is never in stasis: 'hegemonic power is constantly having to be built and rebuilt; it is contested and negotiated' (Apple, 2003, p. 6). The sense of flux and conflicts associated with hegemony suggests that there is always space for counterhegemonic projects. Phule and Ambedkar recognised education as a tool to create counterhegemonic solidarities against Brahminism. Any counterhegemonic project today must take into account the evolving nature of educational exclusion. To this end, this article has sought to map the inner and outer contours of caste-based educational exclusion in schools. One possible approach to address the unequal access to schooling, as presented in the article, is to promote a 'common school system' that can counter the existing 'chaturvarna school system.' Similarly, inside classrooms, anticaste pedagogies oriented towards cultivating critical consciousness in students could constitute a challenge to the POB. Rege (2010) suggests that 'Phule-Ambedkarite-Feminist' (PAF) pedagogies, as opposed to the POB, 'may be seen historically as constituting one school of critical pedagogy' (p. 92).

In the context of higher education, we are now witnessing the emergence of Bahujan scholars who are beginning to assert themselves, and envisioning equitable futures for educational systems and practices. The resistance in school education, however, still remains sporadic and limited. Situated as we are now amidst the double assault of right-wing Hindu nationalism as well as neoliberalism on education, it is of paramount importance to analyse the nature of exclusion that Bahujan schoolchildren are experiencing in order to reinvigorate the resistance to the Brahminical-neoliberal forces. Towards the end, then, I would like to call for more elaborate interrogations of how existing modes of schooling contribute to the persistence of caste. Such interrogations offer the possibility to expand our understanding of the forms, textures and shapes of caste-based educational exclusions, which is crucial in devising policies, structures, mechanisms and pedagogies grounded in anticaste epistemology and geared towards an inclusive praxis. To reiterate, the utopia of just and egalitarian schooling will continue to elude us until there is a rigorous reflection on the subtle and far-reaching ways in which education services the structures of power.

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