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Educational Consciousness and Social Equity among Dalit and Backward Communities during the Indian National Movement: A Study of North Bihar (1917–1947)

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Abstract

Education emerged as one of the most significant instruments of social transformation during the Indian National Movement, particularly for Dalit and backward communities who had long experienced systemic exclusion from formal learning and public life. This study examines the growth of educational consciousness and its relationship with the pursuit of social equity among these marginalized communities in North Bihar between 1917 and 1947. The selection of 1917 as the starting point corresponds with the Champaran Satyagraha, which not only marked a new phase in India's freedom struggle but also initiated constructive programmes emphasizing literacy, basic education, and social reform. The study explores how nationalist initiatives, social reform movements, local leadership, and community participation collectively contributed to expanding educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups.

Adopting the historical research method, the study relies on archival records, census reports, government educational documents, district gazetteers, newspapers, and relevant secondary literature to analyze patterns of educational access and social change. It argues that educational awareness gradually evolved into a powerful means of challenging caste-based discrimination, promoting social mobility, and strengthening political participation among Dalit and backward communities. Although colonial educational policies remained limited in addressing structural inequalities, the combined efforts of nationalist leaders, local reformers, voluntary organizations, and community institutions created new opportunities for learning and public engagement. Educational initiatives encouraged greater participation in civic life and fostered aspirations for equality, dignity, and self-representation (Ambedkar, 1936, pp. 41–45).

The study further contends that educational consciousness was not merely an outcome of political mobilization but also a catalyst for broader social transformation in North Bihar. By connecting educational development with struggles for social justice during the national movement, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical roots of inclusive education and democratic

citizenship in modern India. The findings highlight that the quest for education among marginalized communities laid an important foundation for post-independence policies aimed at equality, social justice, and educational inclusion (Jha, 1977, pp. 212–218).

Keywords: Educational Consciousness, Social Equity, Dalit Communities, Backward Communities, North Bihar, Indian National Movement, Colonial Education.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Education played a transformative role in reshaping Indian society during the struggle for independence. In colonial North Bihar, however, access to education remained deeply unequal, particularly for Dalit and backward communities who were marginalized by the rigid caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, and discriminatory educational policies. Formal schooling was largely confined to socially privileged groups, leaving a significant portion of the rural population without opportunities for literacy or intellectual advancement. The period between 1917 and 1947 witnessed important social and political developments that gradually challenged these inequalities. The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 marked not only the beginning of mass Gandhian politics but also emphasized constructive programmes such as basic education, rural upliftment, and social reform. These initiatives inspired local communities to view education as a means of achieving dignity, self-respect, and social participation (Kumar, 1991, pp. 45–49).

As the national movement expanded, educational awareness became closely linked with the demand for social justice. Reformers, nationalist leaders, voluntary organizations, and community-based initiatives encouraged marginalized groups to pursue education despite persistent structural barriers. The growth of educational consciousness contributed to increased political participation and strengthened aspirations for equality among Dalit and backward communities. Examining this historical process provides valuable insights into the relationship between education,

nationalism, and social transformation in colonial North Bihar (Béteille, 1991, pp. 72–76).

Objectives

- To examine the development of educational consciousness among Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar during 1917–1947.
- To analyze the role of the Indian National Movement in promoting educational opportunities and social equity.
- To evaluate the contribution of education to social mobility, political participation, and the pursuit of equality among marginalized communities.

Research Questions

1. How did educational consciousness emerge among Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar during the Indian National Movement?
2. What role did nationalist movements and social reform initiatives play in expanding educational access?
3. In what ways did education contribute to social equity and the empowerment of marginalized communities between 1917 and 1947?

Review of Literature

The relationship between education, caste, and social transformation has attracted considerable scholarly attention in studies of modern Indian history. Existing literature demonstrates that education was not merely a means of acquiring literacy but also a powerful instrument for challenging social exclusion and promoting political awareness among marginalized communities. Nevertheless, studies focusing specifically on the educational consciousness of Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar during the Indian National Movement remain limited.

Early scholarship on colonial education emphasizes that the British educational system was primarily designed to meet administrative requirements rather than to ensure universal access to education. Educational institutions were concentrated in urban areas, while rural regions, particularly those inhabited by socially disadvantaged communities, received limited state support. As a result, Dalit and backward communities continued to experience low literacy rates and restricted educational opportunities. Scholars argue that colonial educational policies unintentionally reinforced existing social inequalities by failing to address structural barriers such as caste discrimination and economic deprivation (Desai, 1948, pp. 118–123).

Research on caste and social inequality further highlights that education gradually became an important medium for social mobility during the late colonial period. The expansion of nationalist politics encouraged marginalized communities to recognize education as a pathway to dignity, representation, and participation in public life. Social reform movements, voluntary organizations, and local leaders promoted literacy, established schools, and encouraged community participation in educational activities. These developments contributed to the emergence of educational consciousness that extended beyond formal schooling and became closely associated with aspirations for equality and citizenship.

Studies on the Indian National Movement also underline the significance of Gandhian constructive programmes,

especially basic education and rural development, in creating educational opportunities for disadvantaged sections of society. Simultaneously, Dalit leaders emphasized education as a foundation for self-respect, social justice, and democratic participation. Although these studies acknowledge the broader connection between education and social reform, they often examine India at the national level without providing detailed regional analyses of North Bihar.

Regional historical works on Bihar primarily focus on agrarian movements, peasant politics, and the freedom struggle, while the educational experiences of Dalit and backward communities receive comparatively little attention. Existing studies seldom integrate educational history with caste relations and nationalist mobilization within the socio-economic context of North Bihar. Consequently, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how educational consciousness evolved at the local level and how it contributed to the pursuit of social equity during the period between 1917 and 1947.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining educational awareness within its regional historical setting. It argues that educational consciousness was shaped through the interaction of nationalist movements, community initiatives, social reform efforts, and local leadership. By connecting educational development with the broader struggle for social justice, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of education in transforming marginalized communities during the final decades of colonial rule (Desai, 1948, pp. 118–123; O'Malley, 1914, pp. 156–162).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design to examine the development of educational consciousness and the pursuit of social equity among Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar during the Indian National Movement (1917–1947). The historical method has been employed to reconstruct educational developments within their broader political, social, and economic context. The selected period begins with the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917, which marked a turning point in mass political mobilization and educational reform, and concludes with India's independence in 1947.

The research is primarily based on the analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include Census of India reports, provincial educational reports, Bihar and Orissa administrative records, district gazetteers, proceedings of the Legislative Council, and contemporary newspapers that document educational initiatives and social conditions. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and historical studies related to colonial education, caste, nationalism, and social reform. These sources have been critically examined to ensure historical reliability and to compare different scholarly interpretations.

The collected data have been analyzed through descriptive and interpretative methods. Particular attention has been given to identifying the relationship between educational access, caste-based inequalities, and nationalist activities in North Bihar. A comparative reading of official records and historical writings has enabled the study to assess how educational opportunities contributed to social awareness and community empowerment. This methodological

approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the historical processes that connected education with social justice and democratic participation among marginalized communities during the late colonial period (Carr, 1961, pp. 23–28; Gottschalk, 1950, pp. 48–55).

Colonial Education and Social Inequality in North Bihar

During the colonial period, the educational system in North Bihar reflected the broader social and economic inequalities that characterized Indian society. Although the British administration introduced modern educational institutions after the nineteenth century, the benefits of these reforms were distributed unevenly. Access to schools remained largely confined to upper-caste and economically privileged groups, while Dalit and backward communities continued to face significant barriers. In districts such as Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Saran, and Purnea, educational facilities were limited, particularly in rural areas where the majority of marginalized communities resided. The absence of adequate schools, trained teachers, and financial support reinforced educational disparities and prevented large sections of the population from acquiring formal education (Government of India, 1913, pp. 8–12).

The social structure of North Bihar further intensified educational exclusion. Caste-based discrimination discouraged Dalit children from attending schools, and in many villages they encountered practices of segregation both inside and outside educational institutions. Economic hardship also compelled children from backward and marginalized families to participate in agricultural labour and household occupations instead of pursuing education. Consequently, literacy rates among these communities remained considerably lower than those of socially dominant groups throughout the colonial period.

British educational policy was primarily concerned with producing a limited number of educated individuals for subordinate administrative positions rather than promoting universal education. Financial investment in primary education remained inadequate, especially in rural regions. As a result, schools were unevenly distributed, and educational opportunities rarely reached the poorest sections of society. Female education among Dalit and backward communities was even more neglected because social customs, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure combined to restrict girls' access to formal schooling.

Despite these challenges, the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the gradual emergence of educational awareness among marginalized communities. Social reform movements, missionary institutions, local philanthropic initiatives, and nationalist organizations began encouraging literacy and basic education in rural North Bihar. Although their efforts did not eliminate structural inequalities, they challenged long-standing social prejudices and inspired many families to view education as a means of improving their social and economic conditions. The increasing participation of marginalized communities in educational activities also contributed to their growing awareness of civil rights and political representation.

Thus, colonial education in North Bihar presents a paradoxical historical experience. While the British educational system failed to establish equitable access to learning, the limited educational opportunities that did emerge became important instruments for questioning

caste hierarchy and promoting aspirations for equality. These developments laid the intellectual foundation for the educational and social reforms that gained greater momentum during the Indian National Movement and eventually influenced post-independence policies of educational inclusion and social justice (Government of India, 1913, pp. 8–12; Sharp & Sharp, 1920, pp. 164–170).

Educational Awakening during the National Movement (1917–1947)

The period between 1917 and 1947 marked a significant phase in the educational awakening of Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar. The beginning of the Champaran Satyagraha in 1917 transformed the character of the Indian National Movement by linking political freedom with social reform and education. Mahatma Gandhi viewed education as an essential means of empowering rural society and encouraging self-reliance. During his work in Champaran, voluntary schools were established in several villages, where emphasis was placed on literacy, hygiene, vocational skills, and moral education. These initiatives encouraged marginalized communities to recognize education as a pathway to dignity and social participation rather than merely a source of employment (Gandhi, 1927/1958, pp. 312–318).

As the national movement expanded through the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement, educational awareness became increasingly connected with the ideals of equality and national reconstruction. National schools and indigenous educational institutions emerged as alternatives to colonial educational establishments. These institutions aimed to cultivate patriotism while also extending educational opportunities to communities that had traditionally remained outside the formal system. Local Congress committees, social reform organizations, teachers, and volunteers organized literacy campaigns, village schools, and public lectures to promote educational participation among socially disadvantaged groups.

The spread of educational consciousness was further strengthened by the growing involvement of Dalit and backward communities in nationalist activities. Participation in political meetings, constructive programmes, and rural development campaigns exposed these communities to new ideas about citizenship, social justice, and democratic rights. Education gradually came to be viewed as a tool for overcoming caste discrimination and securing greater representation in public life. Although access to schooling remained unequal, increasing awareness encouraged many families to prioritize the education of their children despite economic hardships.

Women's education also gained greater attention during this period. Nationalist leaders and local reformers advocated the education of girls as an important step toward social progress. While female literacy among marginalized communities remained relatively low, the establishment of community schools and voluntary educational programmes created new opportunities for girls to receive elementary education. These efforts contributed to gradual changes in social attitudes regarding the role of women within the family and society.

Despite limited financial resources and persistent caste-based discrimination, the educational initiatives undertaken during the national movement laid a strong

foundation for inclusive education in independent India. They fostered self-confidence, political awareness, and collective action among Dalit and backward communities, thereby strengthening their demand for equality and social justice. The educational awakening of this period therefore represented not only an intellectual transformation but also an important dimension of India's broader struggle for freedom and democratic nation-building (Gandhi, 1927/1958, pp. 312–318; Naik, 1975, pp. 187–194).

Role of Dalit and Backward Community Leaders in Educational Reform

The educational awakening of Dalit and backward communities during the Indian National Movement was significantly influenced by leaders who viewed education as the foundation of social equality and political empowerment. These leaders challenged the traditional caste-based restrictions on learning and encouraged marginalized communities to regard education as a means of achieving dignity, self-respect, and equal citizenship. Their efforts extended beyond political activism and included campaigns for literacy, access to schools, educational scholarships, and public awareness regarding the importance of education.

Among the most influential figures, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar consistently emphasized that education was the first step toward social emancipation. His famous appeal to “educate, organize, and agitate” inspired generations of Dalits to pursue knowledge as a tool for challenging social discrimination. Ambedkar argued that political rights could not be effectively exercised without educational advancement, and he advocated state intervention to ensure equal educational opportunities for historically disadvantaged communities. His writings and public speeches encouraged Dalit youth to seek higher education and participate actively in public life, thereby linking education with democratic participation and social justice (Keer, 1954, pp. 228–235).

Another prominent leader was Jagjivan Ram, whose political career began during the final decades of colonial rule. Coming from Bihar, he recognized the severe educational disadvantages faced by Dalit and backward communities in rural areas. Through his public engagement and organizational activities, he promoted educational awareness, encouraged school enrollment, and supported initiatives aimed at reducing caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. Jagjivan Ram believed that educational progress was essential for economic advancement and equal participation in the emerging democratic order. His efforts helped inspire young people from marginalized communities to pursue formal education despite social and economic obstacles.

In addition to nationally recognized leaders, numerous local reformers, teachers, community organizations, and voluntary associations in North Bihar played a crucial role in expanding educational opportunities. They established village schools, organized literacy campaigns, raised financial support for poor students, and motivated parents to educate both boys and girls. These grassroots initiatives gradually weakened traditional social barriers and encouraged greater participation of Dalit and backward communities in educational and public institutions.

The collective efforts of these leaders transformed education into a powerful instrument of social reform

rather than merely an avenue for employment. Their vision connected educational advancement with equality, constitutional rights, and democratic citizenship. Although structural inequalities persisted throughout the colonial period, the leadership of Dalit and backward community reformers laid the intellectual and social foundations for the educational policies and affirmative measures adopted in independent India. Their contribution remains an important chapter in the history of educational reform and social justice in modern India (Keer, 1954, pp. 228–235; Omvedt, 1994, pp. 96–103).

Education and Social Equity: Impact and Challenges

Education played a crucial role in promoting social equity among Dalit and backward communities during the Indian National Movement. Although access to education remained limited under colonial rule, the gradual spread of literacy and educational awareness created opportunities for historically marginalized groups to challenge social discrimination and participate more actively in public life. In North Bihar, educational initiatives undertaken by reformers, nationalist organizations, missionary institutions, and local communities encouraged individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to seek knowledge as a means of achieving equality, self-respect, and economic mobility.

One of the most significant impacts of education was the development of social consciousness among marginalized communities. Literacy enabled individuals to understand their legal rights, engage with nationalist ideas, and participate in political movements demanding justice and representation. Educational opportunities also encouraged the emergence of a new generation of educated Dalit and backward-class leaders who questioned caste-based exclusion and advocated equal access to public institutions. As education expanded, it gradually weakened the traditional belief that social status should determine access to knowledge and opportunities. This transformation contributed to the growth of democratic values and collective aspirations for an inclusive society (Srinivas, 1966, pp. 108–114).

Education also influenced economic advancement by improving access to government employment, professional occupations, and administrative services. Even though only a small section of marginalized communities benefited directly from formal education during the colonial period, these achievements inspired wider social change. Families increasingly recognized schooling as an investment in future social mobility, leading to greater emphasis on educating children despite financial hardships. Educational progress also encouraged women from disadvantaged communities to participate more actively in family decision-making and community life, thereby contributing to gradual improvements in gender equality.

Despite these positive developments, numerous challenges continued to hinder educational equity. Caste-based discrimination remained deeply rooted in rural society, where Dalit students frequently encountered social exclusion within educational institutions. Poverty, inadequate infrastructure, limited government investment, and the shortage of schools in remote villages further restricted educational access. Female education faced additional barriers because of traditional social norms, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, educational progress remained uneven, and

significant disparities persisted between socially privileged and marginalized communities.

Nevertheless, the educational awakening of the national movement established an important foundation for post-independence policies promoting equality and social justice. The recognition of education as a fundamental instrument of empowerment influenced later constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies designed to reduce historical inequalities. Thus, education became not only a means of acquiring knowledge but also a powerful force for social transformation, democratic participation, and the pursuit of equal opportunities in modern India (Srinivas, 1966, pp. 108–114; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967, pp. 214–220).

Conclusion

The history of educational consciousness among Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar between 1917 and 1947 reflects the broader struggle for equality that accompanied India's national movement. The study demonstrates that education gradually evolved from being a limited colonial privilege into a powerful instrument of social transformation. While colonial educational policies failed to ensure equal access to learning, the efforts of nationalist leaders, social reformers, community organizations, and local educators expanded educational awareness among historically marginalized groups.

The findings suggest that educational advancement was closely linked with the pursuit of social equity. Increased access to literacy enabled Dalit and backward communities to develop political awareness, question caste-based discrimination, and participate more actively in public affairs. Educational initiatives introduced during the national movement encouraged self-confidence, collective identity, and aspirations for equal citizenship. These developments contributed not only to individual empowerment but also to the broader democratization of society in North Bihar.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges persisted throughout the colonial period. Poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, gender disparities, and entrenched caste prejudices continued to limit educational opportunities for many marginalized families. These obstacles indicate that educational reform was a gradual process requiring sustained social and political commitment. Nevertheless, the educational awakening of this era laid the intellectual foundation for the constitutional commitment to equality, social justice, and universal education after India's independence.

The study highlights that the relationship between education and social justice remains historically significant. The experiences of Dalit and backward communities in North Bihar demonstrate that meaningful educational reform requires not only institutional expansion but also the removal of social barriers that restrict equal participation. Understanding this historical process contributes to a deeper appreciation of the role of education in promoting inclusive development and democratic citizenship. Future research may further explore district-level educational experiences and compare regional variations to enrich the understanding of marginalized communities' educational history in modern India (Chandra, Mukherjee, Mukherjee, Panikkar, & Mahajan, 1989, pp. 561–567; Hasan, 2006, pp. 178–184).

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