

Dalit Curriculum

A. What is being a dalit?

The root **dal** means broken, burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn as under, destroyed, crushed.

It is reminder of how Dalits and Tribals were the original peoples of south asian and are survivors of the brutal Aryan conquerors

B. History of caste system:

1. Aryan invasion

- a. Dalits and tribal were indigenous to the subcontinent
- b. Aryan invaders came to the ancient Indus civilizations at Mohendavaro, and Harappa.
- c. After the defeat of Dalit and tribal forces they set up the system as we know it.

C. The Caste Hierarchy that was developed: The metaphor was that each caste represented a different part of Brahma's body.

1. **Brahmin** - This comprised of the priests and other religious needed for the 'sacrifices' which were pivotal to the warrior way of life. There were the highest caste. (head)
2. **Kshatriya** - This was the highest 'caste' to which all the tribal chiefs and warriors belonged. (arms)
3. **Vaishya** - the tradesmen who were needed to provide the various services. (torso)
4. **Sudra** - the servants (feet)

D. The establishment of the caste system is codified in three texts:

1. **Manusmriti**: (code of Manu) It sets up caste and varna with quotes like the Sudra, woman, and a drum should be beaten with great strength and frequency.
2. **Ramayana**: Where tribal kingdoms are seen as demons, and the "demon king" Ravana is seen as a demon.
3. **Mahabharata**: Where the famous tribal archer Eklavya is self-taught and challenges structures of caste learning..

E. How is caste carried on today?

1. Inequity
2. Violence
3. Negative images of dark actors in Bollywood

F. Famous Dalit Leaders:

1. **Dr. Ambedkar: Wrote the Indian Constitution, was key leader in Indian independence, and led a major movement of Dalit conversion to Buddhism.**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Bhimji Ramji Ambedkar was born on April 14th, 1891, in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh. His parents both were untouchables. His father was a retired army officer and headmaster in a military school, and his mother an illiterate woman.

Because he was born as a untouchable, he was made to sit in a corner of the class room, separated from other students. His teachers feared pollution, that is why they would not touch him. Despite all kinds of humiliations, he passed his high school in 1908. This was such an exceptional achievement for an untouchable, that he was felicitated in a public meeting.

After his graduation he went to the USA to study economics at the Columbia University. After his return to India he got a job as Military Secretary in Baroda Raja's office. Here he was ill-treated again by the upper caste employees. Even drinking water was not given to him and files were kept at a distance from him.

A great lawyer and Dalit leader

In 1920 he went to London where he got his Bar-at-Law at Gray's Inn for Law.

While coming back to India in 1923, Ambedkar again experienced humiliation. The upper caste lawyers would not even have tea at his desk. But his greatest consolation were his clients, whom he treated with a liberal mind. His reputation and fame among the Depressed Classes began to grow. He was one of the greatest thinkers that India has produced. He visualised and struggled for a casteless and equal India.

At this time he was fully convinced that nothing could emancipate the Dalits except through a complete destruction of the caste system. He asserted: 'I was born a Hindu, but never will die a Hindu. Hinduism should become a religion of social equality. What is required is to get rid of the doctrine of 'Chatuvarna'. That is the root cause of all inequality and is also the parent of the caste system and untouchability, which are merely other forms of inequality'.

Ambedkar's struggle for equality

In 1924 he started the organisation 'Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha', for the upliftment of the untouchables. Ambedkar adopted a two-pronged strategy:

- Eradication of illiteracy and economic uplift of the downtrodden. - Non-violent struggle against visible symbols of casteism, like denial of entry into temples and drawing water from public wells and tanks.

Ambedkar won two major victories when the High Court of Bombay gave a verdict in favour of the untouchables and made a successful non-violent march and entry into a temple. The two struggles shook the religious foundation on which the caste system is built.

He formed a political party 'Scheduled Castes Federation' in April 1942. Ambedkar was also advocate of women's rights. He struggled for women's liberalisation from the caste-entrenched patriarchal system. At the conference of the Depressed Classes Women in Nagpur in 1942, he stated: 'let every girl who marries stand by her husband, claim to be her husband's friend and equal, and refuse to be his slave'.

Architect of the Constitution

He was the prime architect of the Constitution of independent India. In August 1947 a drafting committee was appointed to prepare a Draft Constitution. Dr. Ambedkar was the chairman of this committee. The Draft was submitted to the Governor General of India on February 21, 1948. The Constitution was finalised in November 1949 and came into force on January 26th, 1950; the day that India became a Republic. In that same year he became Law Minister in the first cabinet after Independence, but he resigned from the ministry as Nehru's cabinet refused to pass the Women's Rights Bill.

Buddhism Ambedkar was justifiably bitter and disenchanted with Hinduism and thus he changed his religion. In October 1956 he, along with about two lakh Dalit men and women, converted to Buddhism in Nagpur. For Ambedkar Buddha was one of the main inspiring personalities in history who raised a strong voice of protest against inequality between people and between men and women.

On 6 December 1956 Dr. B. R. Ambedkar died. Dalits will always remember him as their Liberator and Champion of their rights. 'Rights are protected not by laws, but by the social and moral conscience of society', Ambedkar said.

For more of his sayings click this link. Ambedkar thus becomes one of the greater personalities, who worked towards human equalities and liberation.

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2.Phule: Another famous Dalit leader and revolutionary.

Selected writing of Jotirao Phule.JOTIRAO Phule can legitimately be called the father of the Dalit consciousness and upsurge in India. He is the worthy predecessor of Ramaswamy Naicker and Dr B.R. Ambedkar and a source of inspiration for Dalit intellectuals.

His writings have not been available to non-Marathi speakers. Left Word books has rendered a signal service by bringing out a selection of Phule's writings in English. This is the first selection of Phule's most important prose writings in English and hence a landmark in making the thunderous beginning of Dalit resurgence available to those who do not know Marathi. The selection carries a highly perceptive introduction by a well-known playwright and critic in Marathi.

Gulamgiri (Slavery) and Shetkaryacha Asud (Cultivator's Whipcord) constitute the centre of Phule's thought and both have been included in this section in their entirety. The selection also includes Phule's deposition before the Hunter Commission on Education, his radical views on "Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood", his valiant defence of Pandita Ramabai's conversion to Christianity and some other important writings.

Phule belonged to the mali (gardener) caste, one of the shudra castes in Maharashtra. He established the first school in India for shudra girls in 1848, followed by another school for girls of all castes in 1851. He was moved by the plight of babies discarded by the high caste widows and set up an orphanage for them. He was the first thinker and crusader to systematically raise the gender question and campaigned for widow remarriage. He stood for equal rights for women.

Phule was the first Dalit intellectual who stood for total rejection and destruction of Brahmanism. He rejects Brahmanical history and his approach has been fashioned as an alternate historiography to understand Indian history from the shudra angle by subsequent Dalit intellectuals.

In his seminal work Gulamgiri (Slavery), Phule describes Aryans as conquerors that subjugated the aborigines with force. Then the Brahmins perpetuated their hegemony by composing several texts, which they claimed to be ordained by the divine power. In this text and several others, Phule follows the Socratic method of dialogue. He rejects the origin of four varnas as depicted in the Rig Veda and the Manusmriti. He finds the

formulation totally unscientific, irrational and illogical. He finds Brahma extremely untrustworthy, obstinate, shrewd, audacious and ruthless. He characterises Parashuram, a cult figure in Brahmanical mythology, as a bully and a barbarous villain. He dismisses Shankaracharya, another idol in Brahmanical thought, as a treacherous scholar with a twisted and distorted intellect. Phule is an iconoclast par excellence. He describes the Brahmins as "pen-wielding butchers." In his Memorial addressed to the Hunter Education Commission, Phule pleaded for making primary education till the age of 12 compulsory for all. His suggestion was not accepted and he charged Hunter Commission with total ignorance of the state of shudras and atishudras.

Phule's text "Cultivator's Whipcord" is a powerful indictment of Brahmins for befooling and fleecing numerous castes engaged in farming. He is pained at the spectacle of government departments being dominated by Brahmins and White officers engrossed in luxury. Dalits suffer on account of their ignorance and Brahmins flourish because of their access to education. He finds Buddhism as the only religion that can liberate the abject farmer from the artificial religion of Arya Brahmins. Phule is convinced that the contradiction between the Dalits and the Brahmins can never be resolved and the only way to salvation for the oppressed lies in total rejection of the Brahmanical ideology. He is not against Brahmins per se and makes a distinction between Brahmins and Brahmanism.

Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Pustak (The Book of True Faith) is Phule's last testament. He expects people to treat religion as a thought process to argue in terms of right and wrong and places causality at the centre of man's actions. Man's predicament is to be understood in terms of cause and effect and here he comes very near to Buddhism. He attacks idol-worship and pleads for monotheism.

Jotirao Phule is one of the giants to attack the inhuman and irrational core of Brahmanical ideology. He is often acidic and acerbic in tone but his arguments are persuasive and rational. The humanist core of his personality and his worldview transcends all caste divisions. As a charismatic figure, he is a source of inspiration for all those who sympathise with the Dalit worldview. The selection under review is a must read for those who are interested in knowing the genesis and flowering of Dalit consciousness in India.

G. Exercises

- 1. Look at different Hindu Myths and retell them from a dalit perspective.**
 - a. Ramayanam from Ravana's perspective**
 - b. Mahabharata from Ekalavya's Perspective**

- 2. Read A Bollywood movie for caste:**
 - a. who are the hero and heroine: What are their features and coloring. What is their profession.**
 - b. Who is comic relief? What are their feature, coloring and profession?**
 - c. Who is the villain? What are their feature, coloring and profession?**

 - d. How does this differ from what your experience is?**