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Exploring the status of Ambedkar's 'New India': A perspective on female's education, child marriage and health based on NFHS data

Md Safikul Islam
Dr. Ambedkar International Centre, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, New Delhi, India | Department of Geography, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India
*Corresponding author email: safik.delhi@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000000282649203

Mohammad Afsar Alam
Department of Social Sciences, Fiji National University, Fiji

Shabnam
Department of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, India

Navneet Kaur
Department of Geography, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Abstract---Ambedkar was one of the pioneer reformists for women and had a vision of 'New India'. He articulated the women's rights to education, marriage, and health through the constitutional provisions. This study aims to revisit the notions of Babasaheb Ambedkar on women's empowerment focusing on education, child marriage, and health; and also, to examine the current status of women in present India concerning aforesaid aspects. For portraying the status of women, recent data from National Family Health Survey (NFHS) were analyzed. The results of the analysis reveal that despite the improvement in the status of women, there is still prevailing a significant share in child marriage, fertility rate, early pregnancy, spousal violence, and violence during pregnancy also which influences directly their health condition. The study evidently indicates a reminder for every individual in general and policy-makers in particular to reinforce the vision of Ambedkar for women. More importantly, the alarming health condition of rural women must be improved by increasing public healthcare facilities and awareness of health education for the sake of Sustainable Development.

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Introduction

Admiringly, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is known as Babasaheb who is among the pioneers of women's rights and empowerment in India. India's women have been struggling for ages for the state of equality in every sphere of life. The academic discussions regarding women's empowerment have been fueled since the Independence of the country. As a result, the country has witnessed that the principles of women empowerment and gender equality had taken place in the foundational vision of modern India and its constitution.

> Dr. Ambedkar pointed out "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved". Moreover, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar also stated "It is the education which is the right weapon to cut the social slavery and it is the education which will enlighten the downtrodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom". In the support of women, Diane Mariechild also outlined that "A woman is a full circle within her is the power to create, nurture and transform".

Babasaheb Ambedkar felt a strong relationship between education and marriage which are reciprocal to each other for the status of a society. He prioritized the education of both males and females to restrict child marriage and reinforced the right to equality of girls to their husbands despite being subordinate or slaves (Desai, 2019). During the Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1938, Ambedkar acknowledged that "If men had to bear the pangs which women have to undergo during childbirth none of them would even consent to bear more than a single child in his life" (Desai, 2019). In this statement, he restored the reverence and individuality for the childbearing women because they are the only source of childbirth and are the tolerators of such extreme pain during childbirth. Consequently, women come under the vulnerability of life risk if they bear children without having adequate healthcare. Ambedkar visualised a new India where women would be free of all the social obstacles and consume the constitutional rights especially regarding education, marriage, and health.

Therefore, this paper revisits the visionary trajectories of Ambedkar for Indian women and also scrutinizes the condition of women in present India. For that, recent data from National Family Health Survey (NFHS) have been taken into consideration to demonstrate the concerned facts. This study immensely contributes to the field of women's empowerment and health targeting the stakeholders mainly policymakers of India for re-evaluating the condition of half population of the country. The paper runs through a brief literature review, Ambedkar's opinions on women in female education and child marriage, the present condition of women comprising education, child marriage, and health, and conclusion.

An Evaluation of the relationship between Female Education and Child Marriage

Education, particularly for women, is critical for the process of human-centered development since it directly is linked to improved health and nutrition, better cleanliness, greater child survival rates, and lower fertility rates (Browne & Barrett, 1991). Fatima (2011) drew attention to the importance of female education and its value for national development by highlighting some of the obstacles, deterrents, and hindrances to female education, particularly the low level of investment in the field in Pakistan's rural areas. Some well-known researchers from throughout the world examined and published findings on female education and dropout rates (Akhtar, 1996; Berlin et al., 2020; Cardoso & Verner, 2007; Montmarquette et al., 2007; Yampolskaya et al., 2002) and child marriage, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, South West Asia and Southeast Asia (Delprato et al., 2015; Rumble et al., 2018; Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017; Wodon et al., 2016). In Indonesia, around 17 percent and 6 percent of people say they were married before they were 18 and 16 years old, respectively. In general, various initiatives have been done, such as increasing educational enrolment through Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Stipend Project to lower the prevalence of child marriage (Schurmann, 2009).

Females are thought to benefit from education to get free from the constraints imposed by low self-reliance and poor social and economic circumstances (Bhattacharya, 2006). Furthermore, women's education improves their earning potential and the living standards of their children because women are more likely to provide a larger portion of their money to the family than men (Saha & Halder, 2017). Nazmul Hussain, along with Siddiqui and Hannan (2011) and Bhat and Khurshid, was one of the prominent academics who successfully advanced research on education, particularly female education (2011). In this regard, Sharma, Sharma, and Nagar (2007) found that there is a substantial relationship between family type, income, and maternal education and the incidence of dropouts in Himachal Pradesh, a North Indian state. Several factors influence female educational advancement and the socio-demographic consequences of child marriage in different parts of the country (Borkotoky & Unisa, 2015; Lal B. Suresh, 2015; Raj et al., 2009; Shahidul & Karim, 2015). West Bengal, too, felt the impact (Ghosh & Kar, 2010; Hossain, 2013). Banerjee and Roy (2004) concluded from their research that West Bengal had made little effort to promote true gender equality or to remove barriers for women accessing government-provided public services. They also stated that such educational funding did not influence females' unique needs.

Child marriage violates girls' human rights since it stops them from getting an education, maintaining their health, forming relationships with people of their age, maturing, and ultimately getting to choose their life partners (Nour, 2009). It directly affects the health and education of girls due to the maximum load of work at home, hence school drop-out takes place at an early age (Irani & Roudsari, 2019; Mahato, 2016). Moreover, a study conducted by Allen and Adekola (2017) found that lack of educational attainment is one of the causes of child marriage leading to several health problems. Male and Wodon (2018) also supported the fact that early married girls or school dropped-out girls are prone to undergo poor

health, early pregnancy and more children, and lack of earning during adulthood. Ambedkar made an effort to provide a better social and health status to the women of the country through constitutional rights for making a complete 'New India'. Therefore, this study examines the present condition of women in his visualised India.

Ambedkar's Opinion on the Importance of Encouraging Female Education and Eliminating Child Marriage

Women's education is the most impressive instrument for uplifting their stature in their society. Education reduces social disparities and paves the way for the socio-economic advancement of women at the individual level and within the family as well. To encourage the enrolment of female candidates in all primary, secondary, and higher education, the establishment of girls' schools and women's colleges took place in different parts of the country. These moves eradicated bias regarding women's education and bridged the way for gender equality in the education sector. To penetrate educational roots in the lower economic strata of society, particularly for underprivileged people living below the poverty line (BPL), Government has been giving a bundle of economic benefits such as free stock of uniforms, books, boarding, and housing, mid-day meals, clothing for hostilities, mid-day meals, free by-cycles, scholarship, etc., (Kait, 2013).

Empowering women is a system wherein women acquire more noteworthy impact over substance, human and scholarly capital such as intelligence, expertise, thoughts, and monetary assets, for example, money and admittance to money and authority over decision-making at home, culture, end-nation society, and 'power' gain. Earlier, the women were subjugated by various social norms such as Sati Pratha, child marriage, social seclusion of the widows, widow remarriage prohibition, Devadasi system, etc. Thus, taking birth as a female child in this suppressed societal hierarchy seemed almost like a curse (Kakhandaki & Lokhande, 2016). This framework elaborates on women's social position and their inferiority complex that becomes a critical part of their personality and adversely impacts their socio-economic growth.

The factors related to gender equality are constrained by Babasaheb effectively, while the right to divorce for women is also managed by him. He can uncover this perspective about women's acute control through the child-marriage, restriction of the widow, *sati*, etc. It was Babasaheb who first made an effort to eradicate the restrictions on women's empowerment in India. He proclaimed that wholistic development, especially well-being, social education, and socio-cultural rights, ought to be delivered to women. He further asserted that education is the most important factor that will provide equality for both genders and henceforth, women should contend on getting equal education as compared to men. As per Kumari (2020), barbarism, inhumanity, child marriage, *'sati pratha'*, injustice, illiteracy among women, polygamy, and discrimination on sex, religion, and caste system can be accepted as moral behaviour to be recognized by society considering rampant for women. It tends to be implied to be reflected as the social revolution as indicated by the injustice behaviour to be served in case of women if they had to confront child marriage, polygamy, barbarism, lack of

education, sati pratha, they were vulnerable in case to such things (Dhavaleshwar & Banasode, 2017; Dubey, 2020).

Ambedkar upraised his voice against the social system of Hindu social order through his famous journal *Mook Nayak* in 1920 and *Bahiskrit Bharat* in 1927. Nearly through all issues, he talked about women's education, and gender equality and revealed the issues identified with women and other disadvantaged classes. Swami Vivekananda coined that "Women will work out their destinies much better than men can do for them". Raja Rammohan Roy buckled down for the eradication of *sati pratha.* Jyotiba Phule forfeited his life for the education of girls. Numerous social workers had forfeited and set out their lives for the rights of women. It is noteworthy that Ambedkar was not just the maker of the Indian constitution, he was a political leader, freedom fighter, philosopher, economist, thinker, editor, social reformer, revivalist of Buddhism, and mainly he was the 'mover and shaker' of the people of backward classes. He demanded that Indian women should be given equal share and equal opportunity in every aspect as their male counterparts (Das, 2015).

The work of Dr. Ambedkar presents him as a socio-political reformist whose work is relevant from both the perspective of gender and caste annihilation. Ambedkar was committed to insightful liberty, equal positioning of women in Indian society, and encouragement of women's education for restructuring of Indian Society. In the Indian vertical patriarchal social system, till the establishment of the Constitution of India, women in the Indian Society were considered commodities to be possessed but the man without their distinct status as human beings. Jyotiba Phule started a movement for upliftment and he extensively worked for their emancipation. He started an educational institute for raising the social status of women in the untouchable community. The period of Phule is considered the 'first wave feminism' in India. He advocated that women should enjoy the same educational and political rights as men. Ambedkar further developed Phule's feminist movement. Ambedkar appraised education as a means for the movement of self-respect and self-help. He said, "We shall see better days soon and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male, education is persuaded side by side with female education." Ambedkar found that women are victims of oppression, caste-based and stiff social hierarchy. In a letter written by Dr. Ambedkar from New York, in 1913 to a friend, he wrote; "……*we shall soon see better days and our progress will be greatly accelerated if male education is pursued side by side with female education".*

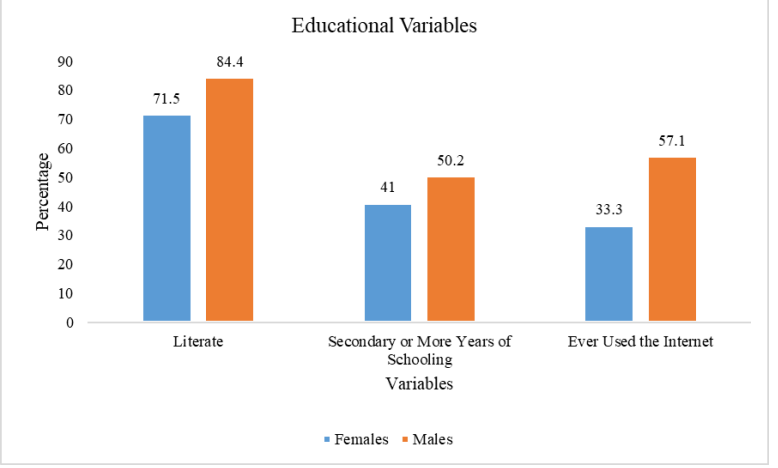
Ambedkar's Philosophy on Women's Education and Health Rights

Dr. Ambedkar completes a declaration of his philosophy on a screen on October 3rd, 1954 and he said, "……. My social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Let no one: however, say that I derived them from the teaching of Master the Buddha". According to Dr. Ambedkar, education will deliver equality, brotherhood, freedom, and fearless among the citizens of the nation. The most important parameter for judging the developmental level of society is the educational status of women. The education for women should be compulsory.

Ambedkar established the relationship between women's sexuality and maintained caste purity through distinguish his work like Caste and Gender, Rise and Fall of Hindu Women, Caste in Hindu, Annihilation of Caste, Caste in India, and the women and the counter-revolution. As Simone de Beauvoir insisted, "Women are made, they are not born". Ambedkar also argued that the lower status of women the society is the result of the patriarchal mentality of centuries in India. He found that Buddhist values respect women with love, equality, and compassion. Ambedkar during the post-independent period, architect the Indian Constitution. He gave women the basic rights to equality, justice, and security. The constitution of India for the very first time gave women the individual identity. He also made effort for the right to a sufficient standard of living including health which is mostly associated with maternal healthcare but unfortunately, most of the backward section of women are underprivileged in the present era (Mandal, 2011).

Female's Education, Child Marriage, and Health in 'New India'
Education

Gender disparity is evident in every dimension of society, and women are in a disadvantageous position, especially in developing countries, like India. Gender inequality can be seen in educational and healthcare indicators, labour force participation, decision-making power, or autonomy. The gender gaps are systematically more significant and more visible in poor and developing countries (Jayachandran, 2015). According to NFHS - 5, the male literacy rate is around 84.45% in India, whereas only 71.5% of females were literate (Figure 1). The gap is much wider in the case of rural India, where 81.5% of males and only 65.9% of females are literate. Further, data reveals that almost half of the male population has completed either secondary or more years of schooling whereas the proportion of females is much lower, i.e., 41%. The school dropout rate among girls is also higher than the dropout among boys. Girls in rural areas are also more likely to be admitted to school later and have a higher chance of dropping out.



Data Source: NFHS-5 (2019-21)
Figure 1. Educational Status of Women in India

Child Marriage and Health

Marriage or informal union between individuals before attaining a prescribed age by the constitution (18 years for girls and 21 years for boys; in the case of India) is considered child marriage. Child marriage has a widespread health and human rights issue that disproportionately affects girls or women. Child marriage disproportionately affects females and may lead to severe social and health outcomes such as compromised reproductive, sexual, and health outcomes, higher risk of depression, a decline in social as well as physical mobility, and also the power or autonomy of taking decisions (Clark, 2004; Nour, 2009; Raj et al., 2021). Various studies show that earlier marriage also resulted in compromise or decrease in girls' ability to attend school and ultimately increased the risk of education cessation among girls after marriage.

Each year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18 throughout the world, and by 2030, around 950 million females will have been married as minors (UNICEF, 2020). Further, India is the third-largest country in terms of the number of child brides, and the estimate suggests that every year around 1.5 million girls in India get married before the age of 18. However, as per India's nationally representative data such as NFHS, the prevalence of child marriage in India has declined from 26.8 (2015-2016) and 23.3% (2019-2021) but remains significantly high (Table 1). The data further reveals that around 6.8% of women aged 15-19 years were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the NFHS 5 survey, and this has only marginally declined from 7.9% (NFHS 4). Around 41% of women in West Bengal and Bihar were married before the age of 18. Whereas, states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Haryana experienced a decline in child marriage.

Table 1
Status of Female's Child Marriage and Health

Attributes	NFHS-4 (2015-16)	NFHS-5 (2019-2021)	Change
Women aged 20-24 years married before age 18 years (%)	26.8	23.3	-3.5
Total fertility rate (children per woman)	2.2	2	-0.2
The adolescent fertility rate for women aged 15-19 years (births per 1000 women)	51	43	-8
Women aged 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey (%)	7.9	6.8	-1.1
Ever-married women aged 18-49 years who have ever experienced spousal violence (%)	31.2	29.3	-1.9
Ever-married women aged 18-49 years who have experienced physical violence during any pregnancy (%)	3.9	3.1	-0.8

Source: NFHS-4 and NFHS-5

Multiple factors, including increasing maternal literacy, improved access to education for girls, improved legislation, and migration from rural to urban

regions, may be contributing to this drop in child marriage. However, child marriage in India has declined slowly but it remains significantly high and has not been eradicated despite all these efforts. Conducive and inclusive public policies such as higher government investments in schooling for adolescent girls, strong public messaging about the illegality of child marriage and its consequences on health and the growth of society can result in improving the rates of schooling among girls.

Conclusions

It is obvious that Ambedkar was the torch bearer for the development of society mainly the backward section among women who were disadvantaged due to the socio-economic structural hierarchy and patriarchy. His contribution to the upliftment of women is enormous during his time but his vision has been partially achieved so far. It will take so long to accomplish his vision in reality. This study has accommodated the fact that despite the improvement in the status of women especially in education, there is still prevailing a significant share in child marriage, fertility rate, early pregnancy, spousal violence, and violence during pregnancy which influences directly their health condition. Therefore, Ambedkar's fabled visions of 'New India' can be drawn by the policy-makers with provisions of gender equality in public benefits focusing on the overall development of women.

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Conflict of Interest

We, the authors of this manuscript, declare that there is no competition of interest with any individual, institutes and agencies.

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