



Caste Identity, Educational Mobility, and Institutional Change: A Study of Prof. Shyamlal's Autobiography

Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor

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Received: 15 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 13 Oct 2025; Accepted: 16 Oct 2025; Available online: 21 Oct 2025

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Abstract— This paper aims at analysing the conflict between caste hierarchy and socio-economic growth studying Prof. Shyamlal's autobiography *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*, this paper elaborately discusses the problems a low caste faces and the power he asserts to fight back caste hierarchy. The paper looks at three main ideas: First, how his caste identity shaped his thoughts and actions. Second, how he used his position as Vice-Chancellor to bring real change and support Dalit and tribal people. Third, how his belief in education matched Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's view that education can help Dalits fight oppression. Together, these ideas show that an individual effort and education can help disruption of caste hegemony, but true social change needs bigger reforms in society and institutions. Prof. Shyamlal's work to hire Dalit staff, fix unfair practices, and inspire his community reflects Ambedkar's vision. But his story also shows his limitation because a deep caste-based discrimination did not end completely. This paper argues that while leaders like him can bring hope and change, real equality needs lasting support from institutions and society. This paper employs textual analysis as a research method for the study.

Keywords— *Dalit autobiographies, caste mobility, educational leadership, institutional reform, Ambedkarite thought*



I. INTRODUCTION

Caste is one of the oldest and strongest social systems in India. It decides who gets respect, education, and good jobs. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who led the fight against hierarchical division of castes, said that caste judges people by birth, not by talent or hard work (Ambedkar 45). Even today, caste discrimination remains a big challenge, especially in places like universities that are supposed to be fair and equal.

The life of Prof. Shyamlal is a unique and powerful example of a fight against caste system. Born in 1944 into the Bhangi caste in Rajasthan, which is known for doing the most stigmatized work of manual scavenging, he rose to the position of a Vice-Chancellor of big universities like Patna University and Jai Narayan Vyas University. His autobiography, *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*,

tells how he faced humiliation and barriers because of his caste, but still worked hard to succeed in education and administration.

This paper is not just about his personal success. It tries to show how Prof. Shyamlal used his high position to help his community and challenge unfair practices in universities. It follows what Dr. Ambedkar said, that Dalits who get education and reach high posts should use their power to help others and fight injustice (Ambedkar 45). Scholars also say that Dalit narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individuals, and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of caste oppression, struggles, and resistance (Qtd in Thapan 11).

The aims of this paper are three-fold:

1. To see how Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity shaped his life and choices.
2. To explore how he used his role as Vice-Chancellor to fix unfair systems and help Dalit and tribal people.
3. To understand how his belief in education as a tool for change matched Ambedkar's vision.

This paper argues that Prof. Shyamlal's life proves that an educated Dalit leader can question and reform casteist systems in universities. But it also shows that deep discrimination does not disappear easily, and big changes need support from institutions and society, not just one person's effort. The paper uses thematic analysis of his autobiography, an interview he gave in *Forward Press* (Kumar), and other studies on caste, Dalit autobiographies, and higher education. By doing this, it hopes to show that Prof. Shyamlal's story is an inspiring example of leadership and resistance, but also a reminder that fighting caste is not easy and needs collective effort.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses textual analysis to study Prof. Shyamlal's life and work. The main text is his autobiography, *Untitled Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor*, which shares his struggles and achievements in detail. Along with this, the paper also looks at his 2024 interview in *Forward Press* (Kumar) and other scholarly writings on caste, Dalit autobiographies, and higher education (Franco et al.; Sukumar; Guru).

Thematic analysis helps to find key themes from the texts. Following Braun and Clarke's method, three main themes were chosen: caste identity, education and academic leadership as a tool for change. By reading, noting, and grouping similar ideas, this method helps to understand how Prof. Shyamlal's personal story also reflects larger social issues.

Caste Identity and Lived Experience

Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity played a big role in shaping his thinking and actions. Born in the Bhangi caste, which is seen as one of the lowest in India, he faced many insults and barriers from childhood. In his autobiography, he writes, "Although there were great harassment and humiliation in my school days yet I had not given up my love for education" (21). This shows that even though society treated him badly, he chose to keep studying as a way to fight back. His experience fits with what Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said: Dalits must "Educate, Agitate and Organize" to fight caste oppression. Even when he achieved high posts, Prof. Shyamlal could not escape his caste identity. He says, "By virtue of my behavior, actions,

appearance and dress pattern, I was mistaken to belong to the Brahmin or Oswal caste, but by caste I was the lowest of the low" (31). These lines show how deeply caste is fixed in society—even if someone looks successful, their caste background still follows them.

Scholars like Nivedita call this the "struggle of moving up" (405). It means Dalits who do well still face questions about their background and must balance fitting into higher circles with remembering their community's pain. Prof. Shyamlal openly writes about this struggle, saying, "The identification of my caste was a constant problem." This shows that caste identity is not something that can be left behind easily. Despite becoming Vice-Chancellor, he did not forget his roots. He writes, "Although circumstances demanded of me to divert and utilize the major portion of my efforts... I was always conscious of writing about my people" (105). This shows a strong sense of duty. Instead of only thinking about his own career, he felt it was important to tell the stories of his community.

His story also matches what scholars like Franco et al. say: Dalit autobiographies are not only personal stories but also speak for the whole community's suffering and hope (45). Prof. Shyamlal's words show both his pain and pride. On one side, he remembers humiliation; on the other, he feels proud of staying connected to his people.

This theme helps us see that caste is not just about social category; it constitutes person's perception, and influences his decisions. Prof. Shyamlal's honesty in sharing these moments helps readers understand why caste is so powerful in India. Even when someone gets education and respect, their caste background shapes how others see them and how they see themselves.

Thus, Prof. Shyamlal's caste identity was both a challenge and a guiding force. It not only gave him pain but also pushed him to fight for justice and remember his duty to his community. This deep link between personal pain and social responsibility sets the stage for understanding how he led universities and used education as a way to resist caste discrimination.

Academic Leadership as Resistance

Prof. Shyamlal's role as a Vice-Chancellor shows that leadership is not just about running an institution but can also be a way to fight against unfair systems. When he started resisting the system, he describes it as "A battle to find out a correct academic and administrative line" (173). This shows that he was aware of many wrong practices in the university that needed to change.

One of the first reforms he undertook was to stay approachable. He writes, "Once, though I was exhausted, I called in a research scholar... quickly identified and

addressed the issue. As a result, he finally received his Ph.D. degree during my tenure.” (174–75). Even small steps like listening to students helped to create trust and fairness.

Since a duty of a person as an academic leader includes reformative actions, hence he had to take tough decisions. There were many disputes in the university, often linked to vested interests. Prof. Shyamlal says, “I de-linked vested interests from dispute and resolved the whole issue by implementing directions of the Hon’ble High Court... A Deputy Registrar remarked... ‘you will be remembered by the posterity for this.’” (175–76). This shows he was not afraid to act firmly when it was needed.

Another example was how he dealt with teachers who did not do their duties properly. “Earlier, Vice-Chancellors hadn’t settled this issue due to pressure, but during my tenure’s administration showed courage to act firmly.” (187). Even if it made some powerful people unhappy, he chose to do what was in favor of the university.

Most importantly, Prof. Shyamlal worked to increase Dalit and tribal representation. He noticed that despite reservation policies, posts for Dalits and tribals were often left empty. With patience and courage, he made sure they were filled: “...finally appointed 6 Scheduled Caste and 11 Scheduled Tribe candidates.” (185–86). This action was bold because interview boards were mostly dominated by upper-caste members who resisted change. Scholars like Sinha argue that real Dalit leadership is not just about holding a high post but using that post to bring social change (425). In this context, Prof. Shyamlal’s actions were justified because he helped those who had been left out for years. His decisions show that leadership rooted in empathy and fairness can challenge old caste biases.

This kind of leadership fits with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s idea that educated Dalits who reach powerful positions should help their community (Ambedkar 45). Instead of forgetting where he came from, Prof. Shyamlal stayed connected to his roots and used his authority to make policies fairer. His leadership also challenged the belief that Dalits could not be good administrators. By keeping his door open for students, solving long-standing disputes, and fighting pressure groups, he proved that strong leadership is possible without giving in to unfair practices. However, the path was not easy. His bold actions were often met with resistance from those who wanted to keep things the same. But he writes with pride that he never compromised with fairness.

Thus, Prof. Shyamlal’s work as vice-chancellor shows how leadership can be a form of resistance. Through empathy and courage, he changed policies, helped Dalits and tribals, and stood against caste discrimination inside universities. This shows that a leader’s real success lies not

just in personal achievement but in using their power to bring justice.

Education as a Tool for Change

Education played the biggest role in Prof. Shyamlal’s life and ideas. For him, education was not only about getting a job or a big post. It was a way to break caste barriers and open new doors for his community. This belief matches Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s vision that education is the best tool to fight for social injustices. As Ambedkar said, “Education is not just about learning facts; it is a powerful tool that helps people grow mentally and academically, break free from social oppression, achieve economic progress, and gain political independence.” (Qtd. in Mondal 18).

Prof. Shyamlal’s own story proves this. He writes, “My insatiable thirst for knowledge and the spur of ambition made me restless. After the graduation, I took admission in a P.G. course, and this educational journey continued till the award of a PhD degree and then to the post of Vice-Chancellor.” (52–56). Coming from a small village and a marginalized community, he used education to cross barriers that could be a hard nut to crack for someone from his background.

He did not stop with his own success. He encouraged others in his community to study. In his book, he says, “I encouraged the Bhangi masses to send their children to school.” (61). He knew that education could help people in his community in getting respect and opportunities that they were always denied. Scholars like Deshpande have also reiterated that education can help break social walls, but it needs support and strong policies to reach everyone (102).

Prof. Shyamlal also used his position as Vice-Chancellor to provide equal opportunities for Dalit students and teachers in universities. He appointed Dalit and tribal staffs who were ignored for years. This is very important because many universities keep reservation posts empty or fill them unfairly. Research by Thorat and Newman says reservation policies are a good way to help Dalits enter higher education, but these policies often face resistance (78).

He also contributed to the domain knowledge through his books and research papers. He wrote more than twelve books and about fifty research papers. In his book *The Bhangi: A Sweeper Caste*, which was based on his PhD thesis, he wrote: “In the thesis, I admitted that there is some advancement in material progress, but at the same time I had also observed that among all the traditional lower or untouchable castes in India, ‘The Bhangi’... had occupied the status of the lowest of the low.” (73–74). This shows that he used research to bring attention to the harsh reality

of his caste's condition. Scholars like Guru say that when Dalit thinkers write about their lives and communities, they change how caste is discussed in universities and books (45). Prof. Shyamlal's research did exactly this by making people face uncomfortable truths about untouchability.

However, the path of education for Dalits is not smooth. Scholars like Sukumar say Dalit students and teachers are often treated as if they have not earned their place but only got it because of reservations (134). Prof. Shyamlal's story shows that even if education opens doors, society's mindset needs a change. In short, Prof. Shyamlal's life proves that education is a strong weapon against caste discrimination. But his experience also shows that books and degrees alone are not enough—there must be bigger changes in the ways society and institutions work. His story connects personal learning with community upliftment, making his work an example of Ambedkar's vision in action.

III. DISCUSSION

The life of Prof. Shyamlal shows that caste identity, leadership, and education are closely linked. Even after becoming a Vice-Chancellor, he could not leave behind his caste background. Instead, it shaped his choices and gave him the strength to fight for justice. This matches what Nivedita (405) calls "the struggle of moving up," where Dalits who succeed still feel the burden of their caste.

His actions as vice-chancellor prove that leadership is not just about power but about using that power to help others. By solving old disputes fairly (175–76), acting against teachers who ignored their duties (187), and making sure Dalit and tribal staff were appointed (Kumar), he showed true leadership. This fits with Ambedkar's idea that educated Dalits should help change society, not just think about themselves (Ambedkar 45).

Prof. Shyamlal also believed deeply in education. He did not keep his knowledge only for his benefit but shared it through books, speeches, and by encouraging his community to study. His work shows that education is not only about personal success but can be a tool to challenge unfair systems. Scholars like Guru (45) say that Dalit thinkers bring new views into universities and help people see caste realities more honestly.

But even strong leaders like him face limits. Discrimination is so deeply rooted that it does not go away with one person's success. Scholars like Sanil (98) show that Dalit professors and students often feel isolated in universities. Others, like Munshi, show that very few Dalits reach high positions, which means the system itself still blocks many people. Focusing only on stories of individual success, as

Chapman (12) warns, can hide these bigger problems. Prof. Shyamlal's story is inspiring, but it also shows that real change needs more than one determined person—it needs support from the institution and society. What makes Prof. Shyamlal's story powerful is how he balanced personal achievement with responsibility to his community. Instead of forgetting his background, he used it to guide his actions. Scholars like Rawat and Satyanarayana (12) say this mix of personal and collective thinking is what makes Dalit leaders different.

In short, Prof. Shyamlal's journey teaches us that education and leadership can challenge unfair systems, but real equality needs deeper reforms. His story is not just about rising to the top but about trying to lift others along the way.

IV. CONCLUSION

Prof. Shyamlal's life is more than a story of personal success. It shows how someone from a marginalized caste can use education and leadership to question and change unfair systems. Being a Bhangi by caste, he acquires a position of Vice-Chancellor, but even as Vice-Chancellor, he did not forget his community or the struggles he faced.

By solving university disputes fairly, acting strongly against wrong practices, and making sure Dalit and tribal staff were given their rightful posts, he proved that leadership can be a tool to fight against caste discrimination. His faith in education matched Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's belief that education is the key to real change (Ambedkar 45). But his story also reminds us that one person alone cannot remove deeply rooted discrimination. As scholars like Sukumar (134) and Sanil (98) observe, many Dalits in universities still face bias and isolation. Prof. Shyamlal's journey inspires us, but it also warns that real equality needs support from institutions and society, not just individual effort. In the end, his life teaches three important things: Leaders should stay connected to their roots and use power to help others, Education can open doors, but it must be backed by fair systems, and true social change needs both brave individuals and structural reforms. Prof. Shyamlal's story is both a symbol of hope and a call to keep fighting for fairness and dignity for everyone.

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