

REVISITINGS 'WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS?': MARGINALISING AMBEDKAR'S SCHOLARSHIP IN HISTORY WRITING.

Sanoj Kumar, Assistant Professor
Department of History
Shyam Lal College (Morning), Shahdara, Delhi 110032
sanojk@gmail.com

Abstract

Ambedkar was a prolific writer who extensively wrote on a variety of subjects including social issues such as class, caste, Shudras, untouchables, untouchability, depressed class, and minorities. In 1946, he published the first monograph on *shudra* titled '*Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the fourth varna in the Indo-Aryan society*'. Despite the breakthrough, the mainstream historians not only excluded him intentionally but also marginalized his scholarship in history categorically.

Key Words

Ambedkar, Shudra, Annihilation of caste, Mahatma Phule, Shudras, Aryan, Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas, Varna, Dalit, Marxist, Dasa, Dasyu, Hindu Code Bill

Introduction

Ambedkar was a prolific writer who wrote on almost every aspect of human life. He wrote on political issues such as democracy, franchise, representation and the Hindu Code Bill, but his most important intellectual contribution was his extensive writings on social issues such as class, caste, Shudras, untouchables, untouchability, depressed class, and minorities; on religious issues such as dharma, Krishna, Geeta, Buddha, and conversion; on economics such as provincial finance, silver standard, circulation of money etc.; on personalities like Gandhi, Buddha, Karl Marx Ranade, and Jinnah; and even on Pakistan. He could not be confined to one discipline, either politics or history or economics or theology. But being born into a family of an untouchable Mahar caste, the issues of caste and untouchability were close to his heart. He had an emotional engagement with them, not merely an academic one. However, just because his writings on caste and untouchability were shaped by his personal experiences, it does not mean that they lacked academic rigour. Rather, they offered incisive, insightful analyses, which were addressed to a wider audience and not merely to an academic one. From this vantage point, Ambedkar appeared as a great public intellectual of his times.

From the beginning, he was deeply interested in the study of caste. His writing on caste began in the year 1916 at the University of Columbia where he wrote ‘*Castes in India, their Origin, Mechanism and Development*’ for a seminar on anthropology organized by Dr. A.A. Goldenweisser. It was published in the very next year in one of the most reputed journals of India, ‘*Indian Antiquity*’. His next writing on caste came in 1936 when a Lahore-based social reform organization known as Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal invited him to address its annual conference. For this purpose, he wrote ‘*Annihilation of Caste*’. He was asked to submit the essay before its delivery. Organizers found that his draft had some objectionable content and demanded its deletion since it conveyed his rejection of *shastras*, Brahmanical normative texts that justified the caste system. He cancelled the event and published the essay independently. Gandhi who was watching Ambedkar closely since the round table conference days and more precisely since the Poona Pact, came across the essay on the ‘*Annihilation of Caste*’ and wrote a review in the ‘*Harijan*’ dated 11 July 1936. Ambedkar also wrote a reply to Gandhi’s review.

In 1946, he published a complete monograph on *shudra* titled ‘*Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the fourth varna in the Indo-Aryan society*’. He dedicated the book to Mahatma Jotiba Phule whom he held in high esteem ‘as a greatest Shudra of modern India who made lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that in India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule’. Ambedkar’s ‘*Who Were the Shudras*’ was the first monograph on Shudras and with it, the writing of the social history of Shudra began. Despite being first, the mainstream historians and historiography ignored him and his book as the breakthrough writing on social history.

It was Phule who took the initiative to challenge the prevailing historical bias toward Shudras. Phule wrote:

*‘True history will unravel the trickery of Brahmin caste and will lead the downtrodden castes to resist it. If downtrodden castes recovered their history of glorious struggle against oppressive, unjust caste system, they would revolt against it. They would demolish Brahmanical hegemony and caste system’.*¹

Phule was not convinced by the casteist ideology which oppressed and suppressed the Shudras. Ambedkar was second in command in Phule's legacy. Owing to his American and

¹Umesh Bagade; *Ambedkar's Historical Method: A Non-Brahmanical critique of Positivist History*, paper presented in the 9th Dr Ambedkar Memorial Lecture, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, JNU, New Delhi, 28th march 2012, p.4.

European exposures, he transformed as a well-trained scholar and well-versed with positivist methods of history writing, argued Umesh Bagade². However, he reinvented the existing positivist methods with his innovations and made them more scientific from his vantage point. Despite his continuous engagement with history writings, he received capital exclusion by historians. The prime objective of this paper is to revisit Ambedkar's 'Who Were the sudras?' and how Ambedkar was excluded and marginalized categorically from history writings in India.

Ambedkar cleared his prime objectives in the preface of his book to enquire about the Aryan question of Shudras. According to Ambedkar, 'the word Shudra lost its original connotation of being the name of a particular community and became a general name for low caste people without civilization, without culture, without respect and position'. And all that happened because of Brahmanical servility. He was very much aware of the questioning of his competence in handling the theme. Despite being warned not to speak on religion and religious history, he dared to write 'Who were the Shudra?' and challenged the lower origin of Shudras from the same source materials.

He raised many questions in his book and tried to find their answers. Who were the Sudras? and 2. How did they come to be the fourth varna of the Aryan society? "He reached on following conclusions.

1. The Shudras were one of the Aryan communities of the solar race.
2. There was a time when Aryan society recognized only three varnas, namely, Brahmins, Kṣatriyas and Vaishyas. The Sudhras were not a Separate Verna but a part of the Kshatriya Verna.
3. The Shudras did not form a separate varna. They ranked as part of Kṣatriyas varna in the Indo-Aryan society.
4. There was a continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins in which Brahmins were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities.
5. As a result of hatred toward the Shudras generated by their tyrannies and oppressions, the Brahmins refused to perform the upanayana of the Shudras.
6. Owing to the denial of upanayana, the Shudras who were Kṣatriyas, became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaisyas and thus came to form the fourth varna."³

² Ibid.p.04.

³ Ambedkar, B.R; Who Were Shudras, in *Vasant Moon's B. R. Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, vol 7, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1990, p.204.

Ambedkar discussed the Aryan theory at great length without giving a separate title to it. Keer says that it is a matter of great surprise that title attention was paid to Ambedkar's erudite views⁴. Ambedkar anticipated new questions in his book. However, his viewpoints or Dalit perspectives were completely ignored by Indian mainstream historiography. Phule to whom he had dedicated the book, was in support of the Trans-Indo origin of Aryans. Ambedkar went against his social teacher's perception of Aryan theory. Despite being anticipated half a century before Romila Thapar⁵ that Aryan was not a race but Indo-Aryan speaking people but his viewpoints were not considered fit to figure in the Aryan debate. Arvind Sharm thinks that Ambedkar is vindicated but by whom he is silent⁶. I think he is vindicated by all mainstream historians of social history for propagating the Dalit perspective of history. Ambedkar was very scientific and critical of historian's craft. In the introduction of his book 'who were the Shudras', he states,

*'An historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interests, fear, resentment or affection and faithful to the truth, which is the mother of history, the preserver of great actions, the enemy of oblivion, the witness of the past, the director of future. In short, he must have an open mind, though it may not be an empty mind, and readiness to examine all evidence even though it is spurious.'*⁷

Ambedkar refuted both points that the Aryans were non-natives and that they invaded India. He says Rigveda's evidence did not support any kind of invasion of India from outside by the Aryan race. He builds up this conclusion based on the arguments of two scholars- P.T.SrinivasIyanger⁸ and D.S.Trivedi⁹. He also argued that Dasas and Dasyus were not non-Vedic people and the difference between them was not racial but cultic. The Dasa and Dasyus, after being conquered, were enslaved and were recognized as Sudras.

⁴Dhananjay Keer; *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1971, p. 386.

⁵ Romila Thapar a Marxist historian who along with others produced several volumes on the Aryan Debate. She wrote a chapter on the historiography of the concept of Aryan in her book 'The Aryan Recasting Constructs', published by Three Essays Collective, New Delhi, 2008. In her chapter, she discussed some Indian views of the theory and included Mahatma Phule, B G Tilak, Dayanand Sarasvati, Madam Blavatsky Col Olcott, etc. However, she negated Dr Ambedkar's views and writings on Aryan theory intentionally.

⁶Arvind Sharma, Dr B.R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and Emergence of the Caste System in India, in the journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol 73, No. 3. (Sep. 2005). Oxford University Press, P.894.

⁷B R Ambedkar, Who Were Shudras, in *Vasant Moon's B. R. Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches*, vol 7, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1990, p. 17.

⁸P.T. SrinivasIyanger was a great historian, linguist and educationalist of the 20th century who wrote many books such as History of Indian People, Life in Ancient India in the Age of Mantras, The Stone Age in India, Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture, First Steps in Tamil, a Short History of India, etc.

⁹ According to D.S. Trivedi, the initial home of Aryans was in the region around Multan and Devika region.

Ambedkar was waiting for the verdicts of scholars on his conclusions. And one of the verdicts came after twelve years later when Marxist historian Ram Sharan Sharma published his book “Sudras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order down to circa A.D 600.” In the first chapter on historiography and approach, Sharma figured Ambedkar’s name in the footnotes of the text. He writes

“The only monograph on sudras (1946) was published by a well-known Indian politician, who confined himself to the question of their origin. The author was entirely depended for his source material on translations, and, what is worse he seems to have worked with the fixed purpose of proving the high origin of sudras, a tendency which have been very much in evidence among the educated section of the lower caste people in recent time. A single passage of shanti parvan, which states that the sudraPaijavana performed sacrifice, is sufficient to establish that the thesis that sudras were originally kshatriyas. The author did not bother himself about the complex of various circumstances which led to the formation of the laboring class known as sudras.”¹⁰

Ambedkar was expecting the same from his critics as he got from R.S.Sharma. If Ambedkar had been alive in 1958, Sharma, like Gandhi, would perhaps have got a fitting reply from him. Sharma’s reading and assessment of Ambedkar’s work on *Sudra* were weak. Ambedkar did not only quote from *Shanti-Parvan* of *Mahābhārata* but also from Chandogya Upanishad, BhārdwajaSrauta Sutra, KatayanaShrauta Sutra, Mimamsa Sutra, Manusmṛti and Arthaśāstra to show that Shudras were given right to study Veda, participated in Vedic rituals, and were called Aryas if not Kshatriya. But R.S.Sharma could not see all those references cited by Ambedkar and accused him of working with a fixed purpose to establish the high origin of the Shudras. He criticizes Ambedkar for calling Dharmaśāstras and other treaties books written by enemies of Shudras¹¹. He also disqualified him altogether for not reading Sanskrit texts and primarily relying on translated English texts. However, Ambedkar had already admitted honestly about his deficiency in reading Sanskrit texts. The text was the product of his endurance of fifteen long years of reading English texts. Was not knowing Sanskrit a bar on the handing the issue or was it a hegemonic problem from which linguists or historians usually suffer?

In 2009, R S Sharma republished his ‘historiography and approach’ in the name of ‘*Writings on Sudras*’ in the book titled ‘*Rethinking India’s Past*’. He continued his position

¹⁰R. S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order down to circa A.D 600*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1980.p.5.

¹¹R. S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order down to circa A.D 600*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1980.p.7

on Ambedkar but interestingly he added an anecdote from his life. This anecdote was written to prove that the studies in rituals cannot be discarded by social historians. It reads as

*“I would like to refer to a ritual related to my sacred thread ceremony formed 77 years ago in my village barooni. In that ceremony as a Babhan or brahamana I enjoyed eating in the house of several sudra families including those of potter, carpenter and hair cutter. But once I was invested with sacred thread (upanayana) this practice was stopped forever.”*¹²

Marxist historians followed the footsteps of R.S.Sharma and went ahead in marginalizing Ambedkar’s scholarship of history. Suvira Jaiswal who also wrote a monograph on the origin of caste could not dare to quote Ambedkar more than once for his view on the origin of untouchability. Most surprisingly Ambedkar could not find a place in the Aryan debate despite his original contribution. Ambedkar brought evidence from Avesta and gave a different meaning of Varna that was not color or complexion but class. According to Arvind Sharma, the inclusion of Avestan evidence in the discussion by Ambedkar is innovation both in terms of methods and results¹³.

Ambedkar was also very critical of self-satisfied Brahmin scholars. He argued that the Brahmins being devoid of the critical approach always took pride in his decadent tradition. Ambedkar advocated an imperial and unbiased history. He argued that the non-Brahmin or untouchable subjectivity possesses more critical potential than any Brahmin historian in seeking historical truth from the textual analysis of scriptures. Non-Brahmin scholars do not have the limitations which Brahmin scholars suffer from. Why did Ambedkar write who were the Sudras and publish it just one year before independence? I think he wanted to reform the upper caste Hindus and convince them that Sudras are not different people so that they could be treated equally in independent India not like Sharma’s Shudra after 62 years of independence. When Nehru's cabinet withdrew its support from the Hindu Code Bill in 1951, he wrote that the majority had lost the will to reform itself. Ambedkar was right there and he is right today as well.

Conclusion

Ambedkar’s views on Shudras that "they were Kshatriyas” and his rejection of Aryan invasion theories are far from being accepted in the academic circle but his insighton

¹²R S Sharma, *Rethinking India’s Past*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.2009, p.90.

¹³Arvind Sharma, *Dr B.R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and Emergence of the Caste System in India*, in the journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol 73, No. 3. (Sep. 2005). Oxford University Press, P.861.

Aryans that it was not race and non-racial origin of untouchability is widely accepted. By refuting the Aryan invasion theory Ambedkar served his ideological opponents who were still looking forward to proving that India is the homeland of the Aryans. The present-day implications of his theories are very wide. Nowadays, no one self-evidently claims that Dalits or Sudras are racially different folk. If I am not wrong this type of preposition will serve Hindu nationalism at the end. just like Dasa and Dasyus disappeared in the Aryan group, Sudras(that is today's other backward classes) and Dalits are also disappearing into the crowd 'Hindu'. The issue of exclusion and marginalization of Ambedkar's scholarship is not complex, but a matter of mentality. With the acceptability of untouchables and Shudras in mainstream society, Ambedkar's scholarships are gradually coming to the mainstream. In the last two decades, the organizations of professional historians have started incorporating Ambedkar scholarships by organizing special sessions on Ambedkar or related themes. In 2010, the 70th session of the Indian National Congress organized a panel discussion on ' History and Historiography of Dalits and in 75th session of IHC, the Aligarh historians organized a special session on 'Forms of inequality in India: past and present'. The new band of historians are nowadays not hesitate to invoke Ambedkar and his scholarships. Biswamoy Pati's editorial, 'Invoking Ambedkar: contributions, Receptions, Legacies (Primus Books, Delhi: 2014) could be considered a welcome move by professional Historians.

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