

Specters of Babasaheb: Unleashing the Pluralities of Ambedkarite Discourse

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The title of the article has an obvious reference to Derrida's commentary on Marx. In Derrida's text, spectrality seems to signify the abundance of possibilities of presence. However, the plural form of the noun that Derrida insists upon is significant as this acknowledges the conscious and unconscious appropriation of Marxist thought after Marx. Such possibility confirms the fluid association of the spirit of Marx's text (as opposed to the Letter) and its spectral presence. A close and comparative reading of some of Ambedkar's texts also results in a characteristic ambivalence regarding Ambedkar's position vis-à-vis modernity, Western liberal tradition, nationhood, etc. We will explore these knots of ambivalence by exploring Ambedkar's discussion of these issues. We shall also see how such ambivalence could pave a clearer path for the resurgence of Ambedkar as a philosopher than as a jurist.

In his work, *Who Were the Shudras*, Ambedkar makes a direct reference to the flexibility in discriminatory social organizations in ancient Rome showing how the plebian could rise up to a certain standard, provided he was a citizen. He illustrates this in order to point out the exclusive rigidity and fixity of the divisive social paradigm in Hindu society. Ambedkar's methods of analysis of other issues related to Shudra identity in the text are rooted in positivism with frequent comparisons drawn from other differing and concurrent sources. We could, also, direct our attention to a certain section of the famous Mahad Satyagraha speech in order to validate Ambedkar's situation in a certain intellectual tradition that prioritizes the authenticity of documentation and record- an inevitable offshoot of liberal modernity. This section comes after the supposition that Hindus could abolish Untouchability following agitations. "Even supposing that the stigma of Untouchability is wiped out," Ambedkar argues, "what will be the status of the present

Untouchables? At the most they will be treated as 'Shudras'. And what are the rights of the Shudras? The 'Smrities' treat them as mere zealots and the 'Smrities' are the guides of the caste Hindus in matters of gradations of the caste system" ("Mahad Satyagraha," 23). It is noteworthy how the aforesaid lines lay emphasis on the text of the 'Smrities' (interestingly, the literal and historical meaning of which is rooted in the oral tradition) in order to envisage the future of a social community. Despite these aspects of Ambedkar's work, one would only rush to a hasty conclusion if one were to uncritically regard Ambedkar's position to be aligned with either Utilitarianism (with respect to the privileging of Western history) or the liberal tradition (through the deployment of positivism and the primacy of the written Word).

In fact, Ambedkar's knowledge of the history of the military service of the Mahads makes it possible for us to assume that he was quite aware of the political interfaces of rationality. V. Longer has noted how local testimonies before 1857 had established the truthfulness and credibility of the testimonies of Mahads, thereby justifying their loyalty as soldiers, in addition to their military service in the Maratha army. Historians, such as Eleanor Zelliot, have noted how military service had provided the Mahads with an avenue for escape from traditional jobs and their induction to Western modernity. The introduction of the martial races theory, therefore, proved to be a blow for Mahads. This, in fact, created a rationale for justifying the 'Kshatriya' roots of the Mahads in order to validate their reinstatement. In 1895, a petition was submitted by Gopal Baba Walangkar, a retired military officer, which, in order to justify the Kshatriya lineage, stated: "The high caste people of the South are a progeny of Australian Semitic Anaryas and African negroes while the high caste people of the north are mixture of several castes...Several castes of foreign origin became high caste by giving up beef-eating" (White).

This was obviously remarkable because it signaled the ability of the Mahads to mimic the deployment of reason to validate an objective as pursued by British officials. This mode of argument to claim the position of the Kshatriya was to be later deployed by activists like Panchanan Burma. In *Who were the Shudras* Ambedkar too establishes the Shudra identity as derived from the Kshatriya caste, although the differences between his standpoints and other anti-caste activists mentioned establish another feature of Ambedkarite discourse as

being rooted in the liberal tradition while simultaneously rectifying its gaps. As Joya Chatterji points out, Panchanan Barma's ambiguity with respect to the caste question could be traced in his remarks on untouchability despite his propagation of the kshatriya ancestry of the Rajbangshis. Like the 1895 petition, these strategies were attempts to garner the political objective of communitarian progress.

In Ambedkar's case, however, the objective of an unblemished social contract surpasses any immediate political objective. In spite of establishing the theory of the original three varnas, and elucidating the Kshatriya origin of Shudras (a broader category than 'Rajbangshis'), the association with Buddhism predominates any solution to the caste question. This move connotes self-determination because of its negation of a system whose textual authority (the power of the Word) is exclusive in nature. In fact, the fulfillment of a contract can only rely on the equal position of determinacy of both parties instead of on petitions for inclusion that outline the existing hierarchies—both between the framers of the ordeal (upper caste) and the Shudra, and between the framers of the Law (British) and the Mahad. Thus, while acknowledging the relevance of the textual document and the legitimacy of the terms of social contract, Ambedkar's discourse shows the inapplicable nature of the contract without the fulfillment of certain conditions peculiar and exclusive to the colony (or the post-colony). One could even claim that such a gesture spells out the true nature of *swaraj* in its applicability to the political position of a social group as a contracting party instead of an essentialist national metaphor.

However, this is not to suggest that the collective essence of the metaphor of the nation disappears altogether in Ambedkarite discourse. A large section of the text, *Who were the Shudras* is devoted to the negation of the foreign origin theory of the Aryans (contrasted even with the ideas put forth in the 1895 proposal)—an idea judiciously promoted by European anthropology and Sanskritology and uncritically advanced by thinkers such as V.D. Savarkar in *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*. By further suggesting that the denigration (and even emergence) of the 'Shudra' varna was the result of a strategic exclusion by the framers of the texts following the Shudra threat to the Kshatriya valor, Ambedkar's text attributes the division of an originary unity to the upper caste alone while justifying the rationale for the Mahad military service. Any attempt made to suggest the Gandhian insistence on national

unity citing his representative stance during the Round Table Conference as opposed to Ambedkar's as the leader of the depressed classes alone must take good note of this indication.

In his brilliantly argued piece on Ambedkar's intervention in Gandhian social philosophy ("Gandhism" as he calls it), Soumyabrata Chowdhury discerns Ambedkar's quarrel with the fact that Gandhian sense of social obligations to the lower caste is enshrined in the precept of a changeable norm (social action) in an unchangeable given (religion of which caste is an organ). As opposed to Gandhism's *anathema* (the inherent fissure in an otherwise impure totality like caste) Ambedkar insists on *anachronism* vis-à-vis caste, thus refuting the idea of a timeless totality but recognizing the historical possibility of changing the totality itself (and therefore *synchronizing* it with the historical present as reservations were meant to do). However, my observations here also point to another possibility in Ambedkar studies that will recognize a similar acknowledgement of a given transcendental value in Ambedkarite discourse (as in 'Gandhism')--namely, the social Will of the collective as an agency. It is transcendental because its manifestations and means of attainment can vary in accordance with the necessities of the contemporary circumstances, as we have seen earlier in the case of Ambedkar's own methodology. However, what remains at the root of such variations is the collective Will that fosters an authentic understanding of social contract in the Indian context.

Such a fluidity of connotation that characterizes Ambedkar's writings enables the perpetuity of further possibilities of research. This authenticates Ambedkar's emergence as a philosopher marked by a proliferation of interpretive possibility—some even intended to suture the ambivalence presented here if need be. It would neither be an exaggeration nor an appropriation to suggest that we need a 'Gandhian' Ambedkar, in the sense that the contemporary epistemic resurgence of Gandhi establishes the need for exploring the dynamism of signifiers such as *swaraj*, *satyagraha*, etc. The existence of such a possibility vis-à-vis Ambedkar is unfortunately blocked by the fixation on his legal, juridical or political identity ('leader of the Depressed Classes,' 'Father of the Indian Constitution', etc.) rather than the divergent dynamism that a reading of the philosopher Ambedkar offers.

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