

## **Ambedkar and the Literature of Brahminism: Understanding the Historicity of Sacred Texts**

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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar wrote and published several works in his lifetime. However, many of his important writings remained unpublished. Ambedkar died in 1956 and soon after all his papers were turned to the custodian of the Delhi High Court. It is noteworthy that these papers also included his unpublished writings. Later on, they were transferred to the Administrative General of the Government of Maharashtra and had remained in his custody for a prolonged period. It was after J. B. Bansod, an advocate from Nagpur, had filed a suit against the Government and requested to publish the unpublished writings of Dr. Ambedkar, that a Committee was formed to fulfill this noble purpose. This Committee was named Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee. Mr. V. W. Moon was appointed as Officer on Special Duty in 1978. With the cooperation of Dr. Ambedkar's heirs, Mr. Bansod, the Advocate, and the Administrative General, all the boxes containing Ambedkar's papers were transferred to the Committee on behalf of the Government of Maharashtra.

Ambedkar's works had to be read, interpreted, compiled and thoroughly identified before they could be presented to the world. In this regard many of his works which were scattered and incomplete were retrieved and arranged in order after hours of painful research by Mr. Moon. In 1979, the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra began publishing a twenty-two-volume series titled *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. In the papers scrutinized by the Editorial Board, 51 titles of Ambedkar's unpublished writings were discovered. Mr. S. S. Rege contributed an additional 14 unpublished essays of Dr. Ambedkar. Many of these essays were incomplete and were being worked upon. These essays have been spread across three volumes namely Volume 3,

Volume 4 and Volume 5. The third volume consisting of the essay “Literature of Brahminism” was first published by the State’s Education Department in 1987.

“Literature of Brahminism” is one among the nineteen essays of Dr. Ambedkar in Volume 3 that had remained unpublished for a long time. This essay, like many of his other essays, is incomplete and has been recovered in fragments. Scattered pages of this essay numbering from 6 to 14 and 17 to 39 have been found. Because Ambedkar designed blueprints of many books and kept working on them, it may be assumed that he took great pain in researching and advancing with his writing. “Literature of Brahminism” seems to be one such essay that was being worked upon in continuation of the issue dealt with in another essay titled “The Decline and Fall of Buddhism.”

In “Literature of Brahminism,” Ambedkar categorizes the Brahminical literature into six groups, i.e., the *Manusmriti*, the *Bhagwat Gita*, the *Vedanta Sutras*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas*. He elucidates them to investigate the reasons for the decline of Buddhism in his subsequent essays and argues that the Sacred Literature of the Hindus came into existence after the political triumph of Pushyamitra. He contends that these bodies of literature are not evaluated objectively in terms of their historical framework and are rather perceived as mere objects of faith composed in antiquity. With coherent logic and evidence, he establishes the fact that these bodies of literature have transformed and evolved over time in the hands of multiple editors. Ambedkar shares with us the commentaries of renowned scholars, compares their differing viewpoints regarding the composition and historicity of these texts and presents us with an all-encompassing objective view of these sacred texts.

### *Manusmriti*

*Manusmriti* is a text Ambedkar repeatedly refers to in his works. In “Literature of Brahminism” he discusses the text in detail but with the specific perspective of its historicity and authorship. To put it in a nutshell, Ambedkar, through an elaborate analysis, concludes that the *Manusmriti* was composed after 185 BC, i.e., in the time of the anti-Buddhist and Brahminical Revolution that happened during the reign of Pushyamitra. Ambedkar rejects the notion that Manu is the author of *Manusmriti* as he observes: “There can, however, be no doubt that the claim made in the *Manusmriti* regarding its authorship is an utter fraud and

the beliefs arising out of this false claim are quite untenable” (270). Instead, Ambedkar ascribes the authorship to a certain Sumati Bhargava. “Manu,” Ambedkar notes, “is the assumed name of Sumati Bhargava who is the real author of *Manusmriti*” (271).

### *Bhagwat Gita*

To historicize the *Bhagwat Gita*, Ambedkar alludes to the findings of Richard Garbe and D. D. Kosambi. Garbe claims that the *Gita* must have been composed somewhere between 200 and 400 AD (Ambedkar 244). D. D. Kosambi insists that the *Gita* had been composed in the reign of Gupta King Baladitya (Ambedkar 244). Ambedkar substantiates Kosambi’s argument by stating that the *Gita* had remained an unknown composition before the advent of Shankaracharya. In fact, the *Brahma-Shudra-Bhasya* criticizes *Vijnan Vad* of Vasubandhu and the *Gita* contains a reference to *Brahma-Shudra-Bhasya*. Thus, the *Gita* must have been written after the times of Vasubandhu who was the preceptor of Baladitya. Hence, Ambedkar says that the *Gita* had either been composed or a new portion had been added to the original edition in about 467 AD. Ambedkar agrees with the fact that the *Gita* had undergone many changes and have been thoroughly transformed over time. It becomes clear that the *Gita* was not produced by any single literary genius and had rather been enlarged and altered by many editors who were not equally accomplished. According to Garbe, “The play of inspiration is indeed oftentimes perceptible; not seldom, however, there are merely high sounding, empty words with which an idea that has been already quite often explained, is repeated and occasionally the literary expression is faulty” (qtd. in Ambedkar 245). Ambedkar highlights the fact that the scholars find it difficult to agree on what parts of the *Gita* are original. He states that the *Gita*, although considered as an autonomous work, has no author attributed to it. However, since Vyasa had asked Sanjaya to acquaint Dhritarashtra about the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna, it can be said, following Ambedkar, that Vyasa is one of the authors of the *Gita*.

### *Mahabharata*

Ambedkar claims that it is almost impossible to determine the date of composition of the *Mahabharata*. However, it is known that the *Mahabharata* has undergone three editions. It

was known as *Jaya* or *Triumph* in its original edition and was composed by Vyasa. The second edition was remoulded and composed by Vaishampayana and was known as *Bharata*. Vyas's four other pupils including Jaimini, Paila and Shuka had produced their own edition. The third editor was Sauti who again remoulded Vaishampayana's version of *Bharata*. Sauti's version came to be known as the *Mahabharata*. Ambedkar consciously points out that the simple story composed by Vyasa about the war between Kauravas and Pandavas was transformed into a bigger work. This gradually evolved to become a didactic literary creation which aimed to preach the right code of conduct. This was further accelerated by Sauti, the last editor, who inculcated various floating tales and legends into his work and turned *Bharata* into a repository of various branches of knowledge. Sauti's repetitive tendency contributed to transforming *Bharata* into a larger creation named *Mahabharata*.

However, Ambedkar is careful in making sense of the events mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and the timeline of its composition. He claims that it is difficult to provide specific dates to the various editions of the *Mahabharata*. Hopkins states that the time-line of the whole *Mahabharata* can be placed between 200 AD and 400 AD. But this does not take into account the later editions of the *Mahabharata* which developed either in written or in verbal form (389). Ambedkar provides us with ample evidence to prove that the *Mahabharata* was composed at a later period of time. The *Mahabharata* contains references to the Huns and the Hun invasions which continued till 528 AD. Therefore, it becomes obvious that the text was either written during this period or later on. Ambedkar also points out that there is a mention of the Mlechhas in the *Mahabharata* with a prediction that their arrival would bring doom upon the Hindus. He highlights the fact that both *Vrashalas* and *Yedukas*, who are condemned as uncultured, in fact, refer to the Muslim Invaders. Although some had considered *Yeduka* as Buddhist *Chaitya* it was proven wrong by D. D. Kosambi. Ambedkar is in agreement with Kosambi who claims that *Yeduka* must mean *Idgaha* of the Muslims (252). Therefore, according to Ambedkar, part of the *Mahabharata* was written after the Muslim Invasions. Mohammad Ghori was the first Muslim invader to cause massive rampage upon the Hindu Temples, and Ambedkar infers that the writing of the *Mahabharata* had continued till 1200 A.D.

### *Ramayana*

According to Ambedkar, the *Ramayana* had gone through three editions. He claims that, in the *Mahabharata*, there are two types of references to the *Ramayana*. One reference is to the *Ramayana* of Valmiki and the other reference is to the *Ramayana* without any indication of the author. Ambedkar draws upon the words of C. V. Vaidya who comments “That the present *Ramayana*, even as it is approved and adopted by the searching and all-respected commentator Kataka, is not the *Ramayana* originally written by Valmiki, not even the most orthodox thinker will be disposed to doubt” (qtd. in Ambedkar 243). In its third edition, the *Ramayana* had accumulated many side stories and sermons and in the course of time turned into a didactic piece of work like the *Mahabharata*. Ambedkar establishes that although portions of the *Ramayana* may be older than the *Mahabharata*, a substantial portion of *Ramayana* had been written after the composition of the *Mahabharata*.

### *Vedanta Sutras*

Vedic Literature falls into two categories. The first category deals with religious ceremonies and rituals and is known as *Karmakanda* and the second one deals with the knowledge of God or Brahmana and is known as *Jnanakanda*. Eventually, two schools of thought had developed. Jaimini’s sutras revolve around *Karmakanda* whereas Badarayana’s sutras deal with *Jnanakanda*. Now, the “Vedanta” means “the end of the Veda.” This comprises the Upanishads which derive from the *Jnanakanada*. Thus, Badarayana’s works came to be known as the *Vedanta Sutras*. Ambedkar points out the uncertainty regarding the true identity of Badarayana. He raises a question about the Brahmin’s attempt to remould the *Jnanakanda* as it is only the *Karmakanda* that used to be associated with their occupation. Ambedkar highlights the difference in the treatment of the *Vedanta Sutras* by the five Acharyas. Shankara states that the *Vedanta Sutras* teach absolute Monism whereas Ramanuja claims that it teaches qualified Monism. Nimbarka propagates Monodualism, Madhava preaches Dualism while Vallabha advocates for pure Monism. Ambedkar inquires about the plurality of thoughts derived from a single text. He also comments that despite the distinctions in philosophical approach among the five Acharyas, the real difference arises only between the Philosophy of Shankaracharya and that of the other four. Ambedkar claims

that the *Vedanta Sutras* have gone through many revisions and nothing can be assured of its date of composition. Nevertheless, he pinpoints that the *Sutras* do mention about Buddhism. Thus, Ambedkar aims to establish that the *Vedanta Sutras* were composed after Buddhism had emerged.

### *Puranas*

Ambedkar comments that initially there was only one Purana. The *Bramhanda Purana* claims itself to be older than the Vedas. The second edition of the Purana was composed by Vyasa who derived eighteen Puranas out of one single Purana. The third edition was composed by Vyasa's disciple Romaharashana who came up with his own version of the Puranas. Again, the disciples of Romaharashana developed the fourth edition of the Puranas. Thus, the Puranas had evolved in the hands of many editors. Initially, it was concerned with five subjects which included Sarga, Prati-Sarga, Vamsha, Manvantar and Vamshacharitra. However, Ambedkar emphasizes that the scope and content of the Puranas have been drastically altered and new matters are being dealt within it. These new subjects deal with sectarian worship and advocate the celebration of a particular deity. The Puranas have also come to deal with the Avatars of God. Ambedkar performs a crucial role in pointing at the alteration in the authorship of the Puranas. The *Sutas*, who were specialized in handling the Puranas, were entirely pulled out of their occupation and replaced by the Brahmins. Ambedkar states that the Puranas were remoulded at the hands of the Brahmins who created space for the inclusion of these new subjects. He also admits that the date of the composition of the Puranas remains much of an enigma as the dates related to the composition of the Puranas have not been extensively researched on. He ends the discussion by stating that all the facts suggest that this literature is post-Buddhist in terms of its age.

The essay "Literature of Brahminism" is immensely significant since it outlines the textual-historical problems of the Brahminical literatures and the philosophy associated with them. Ambedkar's critical approach brings out the historical origin of these sacred texts which had hitherto been only revered out of devotion and faith. The essay highlights the plural versions of each of the texts which had accumulated a lot from various sources over the course of time. Ambedkar logically tracks down the development of each of them and has

provided us with numerous evidence to infer that most of these texts belong to the post-Buddhist era. Given the fact that Ambedkar uses scholarly evidence and coherent logic in digging up raw information about the hitherto unexplored areas of these texts, this essay convincingly calls for an alternative approach to the so-called sacred texts by placing their authorship and historicity in context and thereby revealing the deeper political nuances of the Brahminical supremacy in the history of India.

### **Works Cited**

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