

# Vedas, Smritis and Ambedkar

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**Ambedkar rejected the Aryan race/ invasion theory. He admired the Vedic civilization, and saw the implementation of the Manu Smriti as the beginning of the degeneration of Hindu society, from casteism to the treatment of women. Part Seven of our History of Hindutva.**

Dr Bhimrao Raamji Ambedkar was an ethical pragmatist and a practical patriot. He realized that if Hindus remain disunited, the future of nation was doomed. Hindus need to be united, not momentarily in flashes of emotion or hours of crisis, but in a sustained manner. His solution to achieve a sustained Hindu unity, both cultural and political, was to abolish the caste system completely. though he wanted to protect Hindu society, he had been one of the harshest critics of Hinduism itself (see Hindutva and Dr Ambedkar, Swarajya, September 2015).

## **“THE HINDUS” AND “THE HINDUS”**

The public psyche has been fed to saturation with his quotes sneering at Hinduism and his statements denouncing Hinduism in no uncertain terms. “I was born a Hindu but will not die one” is a statement that has been made widely popular by a section of his followers. However, going through the

writings of Dr Ambedkar, one finds that he has used the word “Hindu” in two ways. At one level of association, the term refers to what he would call the “Brahminical” or smriti-based religious system that consistently endorses birth-based discriminations. Unfortunately, even today most of the traditional “Hindus” fall in this category.

But in other places, he uses the term “Hindu” in a different sense—to embrace all indigenous spiritual traditions of India. A good instance is where he discusses the linguistic states problem. Dr Ambedkar was happy that not only had India obtained freedom it was also free from the internal threat of a sizeable Islamist presence. But he was extremely worried that they might lose it in linguistic feuds:

“I was glad that India was separated from Pakistan. I was the philosopher, so to say, of Pakistan. I advocated partition because I felt that it was only by partition that Hindus would not only be independent but free. If India and Pakistan had remained united in one state, Hindus, though independent, would have been at the mercy of the Muslims. A merely Independent India would not have been a free India from the point of view of the Hindus. It would have been a government of one country by two nations and of these two, the Muslims without question would have been the ruling race, notwithstanding Hindu Mahasabha and Jana Sangh. When the partition took place, I felt that god was willing to lift his curse and let India be one, great and prosperous.” (Thoughts On Linguistic States, 1955) This was written only a year before he converted to Buddhism.

It may seem like a paradox that the author of Riddles of Hinduism should be euphoric about Hindus becoming free of the Islamist threat. A holistic reading of the writings of Dr Ambedkar provides an answer.

## **VEDAS KNOW NO RACISM**

Dr Ambedkar had visualized the Vedic community as an egalitarian one. His own study of Vedic literature led him to reject the Aryan Race Theory concocted by the British. He came to an entirely different conclusion regarding the nature of that class of people called the Shudras. Till then, most scholars had meekly accepted the British theory of Aryan invasion and Shudras were considered as the subdued and enslaved natives.

In the preface to his monumental book *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) Dr Ambedkar expressed his thankfulness: "...to the writer of Adhyaya LX of the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata. Whether it is Vyasa, Vaiashampayana, Suta, Lomaharshana or Bhrigu, it is difficult to say. But whoever he was, he has rendered great service by giving a full description of Paijavana. If he had not described Paijavana as a Shudra, the clue to the origin of the Shudra would have been completely lost."

In a crucial passage, he further noted whom the book would actually appeal to. They were neither those who took a literal meaning of the scriptures nor the anti-hindus: "The only class of hindus who are likely to welcome the book are those who believe in the necessity and urgency of social reform. The fact that it is a problem which will certainly take a long time to solve and will call for the efforts of many generations to come, is in their opinion, no justification for postponing the study of that problem. Even an ardent Hindu politician, if he is honest, will admit that the problems arising out of the malignant form of communalism, which is inherent in the Hindu social organization and which the politically minded Hindus desire to ignore or postpone, invariably return to plague those very politicians at every turn. These problems are not the difficulties of the moment. They are our permanent difficulties, that is to say, difficulties of every moment. I am glad to know that such a class of Hindus exists. Small though they be, they are my mainstay and it is to them that I have addressed my argument."

Thus his historic analysis was aimed at "politically minded Hindus" and he cautions them not to "ignore or postpone" the problem that plagues Hindu political and social unity. The whole discourse of Dr Ambedkar was aimed at the proponents of Hindutva. He was offering them a clear and holistic road map to realize the elusive goal of Hindu Sanghatan. Sure enough, *Who Were the Shudras?* is today one of the most cited books by the Hindutvaites than by any other political group in India. Most political groups have consistently employed the Aryan Invasion Theory as part of their critique against Hindutva ("Hindus too are outsiders"). Further movements like Dravidian racism has advocated a vision of India through the prism of Aryan-Dravidian racial conflicts. In such an ideological alignment, the rejection of the Aryan theory by Dr Ambedkar becomes crucial in creating a scholarly and socially relevant discourse by Hindutvaites while rejecting the race-based interpretations.

Though Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo had expressed their scepticism and even rejection of Aryan race/invasion theory, the credit goes to Dr Ambedkar for systematically questioning the basis of the theory and make Indians aware of the colonial myth that was being posited on them as their history. In Who Were The Shudras? he writes:

“That the theory of the Aryan race set up by Western writers falls to the ground at every point goes without saying. This is somewhat surprising since Western scholarship is usually associated with thorough research and careful analysis. Why has the theory failed?...anyone who cares to scrutinize the theory will find that it suffers from a double infection. In the first place, the theory is based on nothing but pleasing assumptions and inferences based on such assumptions. In the second place, the theory is a perversion of scientific investigation. It is not allowed to evolve out of facts. On the contrary, the theory is preconceived and facts are selected to prove it. The theory of the Aryan race is just an assumption and no more.”

“...the assertion that the Aryans came from outside and invaded India is not proved and the premise that the Dasas and Dasyus are aboriginal tribes of India is demonstrably false. Again, to say that the institution of Chaturvarna is a reflection of the innate colour prejudice of the Aryans is really to assert too much.”

“...the conclusions that follow from the examination of the Western theory may now be summarised. They are:

1. the Vedas do not know any such race as the Aryan race.
2. there is no evidence in the Vedas of any invasion of India by the Aryan race and its having conquered the Dasas and Dasyus, supposed to be natives of india.
3. there is no evidence to show that the distinction between aryanas, Dasas and Dasyus was a racial distinction.
4. the Vedas do not support the contention that the aryanas were different in colour from the Dasas and Dasyus.”

**VEDIC SOCIETY PROVIDED “A VERY HIGH POSITION FOR WOMEN”**

In Annihilation of Caste (1944), he had visualized Vedic society as one in which the varna system was not birth-based but based on merit. But Dr Ambedkar found even this varna system absolutely outdated in the current social context, as this cannot be imposed on society in any practical or meaningful way: “a close examination of this ideal has convinced me that as a system of social organization, Chaturvarna is impracticable, harmful and has turned out to be a miserable failure. From a practical point of view, the system of Chaturvarna raises several difficulties which its protagonists do not seem to have taken into account.”

The social historian in him saw a dynamic evolution of this system over time and then a degeneration setting in. An elaborate view of his perception of this historical process needs to be presented here:

“According to ancient tradition as embodied in the Puranas, the period for which the varna of a person was fixed by Manu and Saptarshi was a period of four years and was called Yug. At the end of the period of four years, there occurred the Manwantar, whereby every fourth year the list was revised. Under the revision, some changed their old varna, some retained it, some lost it and some gained it. The original system seems to have in contemplation the determination of the varna of adults. It was not based on prior training or close scrutiny of bias and aptitude. Manu and Saptarshi were a sort of a Board of interview which determined the varna of a person from how he struck them at the interview. The determination of the varna was done in a rough and tumble manner.”

“This system seems to have gone into abeyance. A new system grew up in its place. It was known as the Gurukul system. The Gurukul was a school maintained by a Guru (teacher), also called Acharya (learned man). All children went to this Gurukul for their education. The period of education extended for twelve years. The child, while at the Gurukul, was known as Brahmhachari. After the period of education was over, there was the Upanayan ceremony performed at the Gurukul by the Acharya. The Upanayan ceremony was the most important ceremony. It was a ceremony at which the Acharya determined the varna of the student and sent him out in the world to perform the duties of that varna. Upanayan by the Acharyas was the new method of determining varna which came into vogue in place of method of de- termination by Manu and Saptarshi. The new method was

undoubtedly superior to the old method. It retained the true feature of the old method, namely that the varna should be determined by a disinterested and independent body. But it added a new feature, namely training as a prerequisite for assignment of varna. On the ground that training alone develops the individual in the makeup of a person and the only safe way to determine the varna of a person is to know his individuality, the addition of this new feature was undoubtedly a great improvement." (Writings and Speeches, Vol 3)

Dr Ambedkar, in his argument with Mahatma Gandhi (Annihilation of Caste), points out that the varna system is not only different from caste system but is inherently opposed to it:

"The principle underlying caste is fundamentally different from the principle underlying varna. Not only are they fundamentally different but they are also fundamentally opposed. (Chaturvarna) is based on worth. How are you going to compel people who have acquired a higher status based on birth without reference to their worth to vacate that status? How are you going to compel people to recognize the status due to a man in accordance with his worth, who is occupying a lower status based on his birth? For this you must first break up the caste system, in order to be able to establish the varna system."



“...While I reject the Vedic Varnavyavastha for reasons given in the speech, I must admit that the Vedic theory of varna as interpreted by Swami Dayanand and some others is a sensible and an inoffensive thing. It did not admit birth as a determining factor in fixing the place of an individual in society. It only recognized worth. The Mahatma’s view of varna not only makes nonsense of the Vedic varna but it makes it an abominable thing. Varna and caste are two very different concepts. Varna is based on the principle of each according to his worth, while caste is based on the principle of each according to his birth. The two are as distinct as chalk is from cheese. In fact there is an antithesis between the two.”

But he was also careful enough to reject any revival of the traditional varna system as attempted by the Arya Samajists. However, in doing that, it was not the principle of categorization based on worth that forms the basis of Varna system which Dr Ambedkar rejected. He explained:

“To me, this Chaturvarna with its old labels is utterly repellent and my whole being rebels against it....if new notions are to be inculcated in the minds of people, it is necessary to give them new names. To continue the old name is to make the reform futile. To allow this Chaturvarna, based on worth, to be designated by such stinking labels of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, indicative of social divisions based on birth, is a snare.” (Annihilation of Caste)

As a seasoned historiographer, Dr Ambedkar sees throughout Indian history two fundamental movements: one of social emancipation and another of social stagnation. He sees the roots of both in the larger Hindu culture itself and aligns himself with the movement for social emancipation.

He sees Buddhism as the culmination of this emancipation movement. Social emancipation was not something new which Buddhism brought to the Vedic civilization. Rather, Dr Ambedkar sees the Vedic period and its continuation as one in which women enjoyed rights equal to men:

“That a woman was entitled to Upanayan is clear from the Atharva Veda where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished her Brahmacharya. From the Shrauta Sutras, it is clear that women could repeat the mantras of the Vedas and that women were taught to read the Vedas. Panini’s Ashtaadhyai bears testimony to the fact that women attended Gurukul and studied the various shakhas of the Vedas and became expert in Mimansa. Patanjali’s Maha Bhashya shows that women were teachers and taught the Vedas to girl students. The stories of women entering into public discussions with men on the most abstruse subjects of religion, philosophy and metaphysics are by no means few.

The story of public disputation between Janaka and Sulbha, between Yajnavalkya and gargi, between Yajnavalkya and Maitrei, and between Shankaracharya and Vidyadhari shows that Indian women in pre-Manu’s time could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education.” (Writings and Speeches, Vol 3)

He further explains: “That at one time women were highly respected cannot be disputed. Among the Ratnis who played so prominent a part in coronation of the King in ancient India was the Queen and the King made her an offering as he did to the others. Not only the King elect did homage to the Queen, he



worshipped his other wives of lower castes. In the same way, the King offers salutation after the coronation ceremony to the ladies of the chiefs of the srenies (guilds). This is a very high position for women in any part of the World."

He sets the implementation of the Manu Smriti as the benchmark for the fall of Hindu women. To him, this was the triumph of the counter-revolution in India. Interestingly, modern genetic studies seem to vindicate his stand—not only his rejection of the Aryan race/ invasion theory but also his view of a liberal egalitarian Vedic past and a more rigid smriti-based society—if we take the gene admixture of different ethnic groups as the basis. Today we know that both ancient North Indian (ANI) and ancient South Indian (ASI) types originated in India 60,000 years ago, and then between 4,200 years and 1,900 years ago—roughly coinciding with the Vedic civilization, the groups mixed freely. It was only after that, that endogamy seems to have been institutionally emphasized, again roughly coinciding with the rise of the smriti tradition.

A recent report in the prestigious science journal Nature reveals: "For all 73 groups, the date of mixture was found between 1,900 and 4,200 years before present. Even remote and isolated tribal groups such as Bhil, Chamar and Kallar did not escape this mixing. The scientists say that the mixing was so 'pervasive' that nearly every group in India was affected by it. After nearly 2,000 years of mixing freely, parochialism seems to have set in. Since that time, endogamy has been a prominent feature of the society in India." (Indians had a "caste no Bar" Past, Nature, 29 August 2013)

But his rhetorical and a very necessary rejection of Manu Smriti did not cloud Dr Ambedkar's reasoning or the use of the positive aspects of the smriti tradition in his formulation of Indic-rooted social reform structure. The burning of the Manu Smriti was only a symbolic protest and cremation of the socially stagnant attitude. He had stated: "It is not that Manu was an idiot and knew nothing about society. But such a drastic action was necessary to draw the attention of Hindus."

He also demonstrated that the smriti tradition, with the diverse streams it contained, can be distilled to create a Hindu law that is just and democratic. The Hindu Code Bill, he believed, would be instrumental in moulding Hindus

into a unitary society based on the principles of liberty and equality. Talking about the Hindu code Bill in 1950, he declared: "The present Bill is progressive. This is an effort to try to have one civil law for all the citizens under the constitution of india. The law is based on the religious scriptures of the Hindus."

Thus we see Dr Ambedkar advocating the formation of a Hindu society which has learnt its lessons from its past follies and tragedies, a Hindu society which is inclusive and universal and ready to assert itself in the new global context of the battle of civilizations.



He opted for Buddhism out of bitterness, as Hindu society stubbornly and foolishly refused to come out of the clutches of casteist vested interests donning the garbs of religious authority. It was actually the failure of Hindu society and its leadership to realize the dangers it was facing and adapt itself to the new challenges.

Yet all these factors could never diminish the love Dr Ambedkar had for the nation. As we will see next, he constantly worried about national security and made the interests of India the primary factor in all his equations.