

Text I: Who were the Shudras?

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

About the author

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), popularly known as Babasaheb, was the founding father of the Republic of India and independent India's first law and justice minister. Considered the architect of the Constitution of India, Dr Ambedkar was involved in campaigning for India's independence and contributed significantly to the establishment of the state of India.

Born into a *Dalit* (untouchable) family, Babasaheb was a prolific scholar with two doctorates in economics, one each from Columbia University and the London School of Economics. He strongly advocated political rights and social freedom for *Dalits* and campaigned against social discrimination towards them. He inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement in India and converted to Buddhism in 1956, initiating mass conversions of *Dalits*.

Dr Ambedkar was posthumously conferred India's highest civilian award – the Bharat Ratna – in 1990. His legacy includes bringing about numerous changes in the lives of *Dalits* by increased education, literary awakening and political representation.

About the text

This text is an extract from the preface to the book *Who were the Shudras?*. In this text, Dr Ambedkar refers to his book as a challenge to orthodoxy and shares his thoughts on why he is certain that his book will offend a certain segment of the Hindu population while it will be welcomed by another. He writes about how it is the duty of a historian to put history in correct perspective without being biased, selfish or emotionally attached to it. He also reiterates that his book is an unbiased record of history and not a preface to non-Brahmin politics.

Who were the Shudras?

What the Orthodox Hindu will say about this book I can well imagine for I have been battling with him all these years. The only thing I did not know was how the meek and non-violent looking Hindu can be violent when anybody attacks his Sacred Books. I became aware of it as never before when last year I received a shower of letters from angry Hindus, who became quite unbalanced by my

speech on the subject delivered in Madras. The letters were full of filthy abuse, unmentionable and unprintable, and full of dire threats to my life. Last time they treated me as a first offender and let me off with mere threats. I don't know what they will do this time. For on reading the book they are sure to find more cause for anger at what in their eyes is a repetition of the offence in an aggravated form for having brought forth chapter and verse to show that what goes by the name of Sacred Books contains fabrications which are political in their motive, partisan in their composition and fraudulent in their purpose. I do not propose to take any notice of their vilifications or their threats. For I know very well that they are a base crew who, professing to defend their religion, have made religion a matter of trade. They are more selfish than any other set of beings in the world, and are prostituting their intelligence to support the vested interests of their class. It is a matter of no small surprise that when the mad dogs of orthodoxy are let loose against a person who has the courage to raise his voice against the so-called Sacred Books of the Hindus, eminent Hindus occupying lofty places, claiming themselves to be highly educated and who could be expected to have no interest and to have a free and open mind become partisans and join the outcry. Even Hindu Judges of High Courts and Hindu Prime Ministers of Indian States do not hesitate to join their kind. They go further. They not only lead the howl against him but even join in the hunt. What is outrageous is that they do so because they believe that their high stations in life would invest their words with an amount of terror which would be sufficient enough to cow down any and every opponent of orthodoxy. What I would like to tell these amiable gentlemen is that they will not be able to stop me by their imprecations. They do not seem to be aware of the profound and telling words of Dr. Johnson who when confronted with analogous situation said, 'I am not going to be deterred from catching a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian.' I do not wish to be rude to these high placed critics, much less do I want to say that they are playing the part of a ruffian interested in the escape of a cheat. But I do want to tell them two things: firstly that I propose, no matter what happens, to follow the determination of Dr. Johnson in the pursuit of historical truth by the exposure of the Sacred Books so that the Hindus may know that it is the doctrines contained in their Sacred Books which are responsible for the decline and fall of their country and their society; secondly, if the Hindus of this generation do not take notice of what I have to say I am sure the future generation will. I do not despair of success. For I take consolation in the words of the poet Bhavabhuti who said, "Time is infinite and earth is vast, someday there will be born a man who will appreciate what I have said." Whatever that be the book is a challenge to orthodoxy.

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 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.

It will be said that I have shown no respect for the sacred literature of the Hindus which every sacred literature deserves. If the charge be true, I can plead two circumstances in justification of

myself. Firstly I claim that in my research I have been guided by the best tradition of the historian who treats all literature as vulgar—I am using the word in its original sense of belonging to the people—to be examined and tested by accepted rules of evidence without recognizing any distinction between the sacred and the profane and with the sole object of finding the truth. If in following this tradition I am found wanting in respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus my duty as a scholar must serve as my excuse. Secondly, respect and reverence for the sacred literature cannot be made to order. They are the results of social factors which make such sentiments natural in one case and quite unnatural in another. Respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus is natural to a Brahmin scholar. But it is quite unnatural in a non-Brahmin scholar. The explanation of this difference is quite simple. That a Brahmin scholar should treat this sacred literature with uncritical reverence and forbear laying on it the heavy hands which the detachment of an intellectual as distinguished from the merely educated is what is to be expected. For what is this sacred literature? It is a literature which is almost entirely the creation of the Brahmins. Secondly, its whole object is to sustain the superiority and privileges of the Brahmins as against the non-Brahmins. Why should not the Brahmins uphold the sanctity of such a literature? The very reason that leads the Brahmin to uphold it makes the non-Brahmin hate it. Knowing that what is called the sacred literature contains an abominable social philosophy which is responsible for their social degradation, the non-Brahmin reacts to it in a manner quite opposite to that of the Brahmin. That I should be wanting in respect and reverence for the sacred literature of the Hindus should not surprise anyone if it is borne in mind that I am a non-Brahmin, not even a non-Brahmin but an Untouchable. My antipathy to the sacred literature could not naturally be less than that of the non-Brahmin. As Prof. Thorndyke says: that a man thinks is a biological fact what he thinks is a sociological fact.

I am aware that this difference in the attitude of a Brahmin scholar and a non-Brahmin scholar towards this sacred literature—literature which is the main source of the material for the study of the problems of the social history of the Hindus—the former with his attitude of uncritical commendation and the latter with his attitude of unsparing condemnation is most harmful to historical research. The mischief done by the Brahmin scholars to historical research is obvious. The Brahmin scholar has a two-fold interest in the maintenance of the sanctity of this literature. In the first place being the production of his fore-fathers his filial duty leads him to defend it even at the cost of truth. In the second place as it supports the privileges of the Brahmins, he is careful not to do anything which would undermine its authority. The necessity of upholding the system by which he knows he stands to profit, as well as of upholding the prestige of his forefathers as the founders of the system, acts as a silent immaculate premise which is ever present in the mind of the Brahmin scholar and prevents him from reaching or preaching the truth. That is why one finds so little that is original in the field of historical research by Brahmin scholars unless it be a matter of fixing dates or tracing genealogies. The non-Brahmin scholar has none of these limitations and is therefore free to engage himself in a relentless pursuit of truth. That such a difference exists between the two classes of students is not a mere matter of speculation. This very book is an illustration in point. It contains an exposure of the real character of the conspiracy against the *Shudras*, which no Brahmin scholar could have had the courage to present.

While it is true that a non-Brahmin scholar is free from the inhibitions of the Brahmin scholar he is likely to go to the other extreme and treat the whole literature as a collection of fables and fictions fit to be thrown on the dung heap not worthy of serious study. This is not the spirit of an historian. As

has been well said, an historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interest, 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 the 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 be spurious. The non-Brahmin scholar may find it difficult to remain true to this spirit of the historian. He is likely to import the spirit of non-Brahmin politics in the examination of the truth or falsity of the ancient literature which is not justifiable. I feel certain that in my research I have kept myself free from such prejudice. In writing about the Shudras I have had present in my mind no other consideration except that of pure history. It is well-known that there is a non-Brahmin movement in this country which is a political movement of the Shudras. It is also well-known that I have been connected with it. But I am sure that the reader will find that I have not made this book a preface to non-Brahmin politics.

I am sensible of the many faults in the presentation of the matter. The book is loaded with quotations, too long and too many. The book is not a work of art and it is possible that readers will find it tedious to go through it. But this fault is not altogether mine. Left to myself, I would have very willingly applied the pruning knife. But the book is written for the ignorant and the uninformed Shudras, who do not know how they came to be what they are. They do not care how artistically the theme is handled. All they desire is a full harvest of material—the bigger the better. Those of them to whom I have shown the manuscript have insisted upon retaining the quotations. Indeed, their avidity for such material was so great that some of them went to the length of insisting that besides giving translations in English in the body of the book I should also add the original Sanskrit texts in an Appendix. While I had to deny their request for the reproduction of the original Sanskrit texts, I could not deny their request for retaining the translations on the ground that the material is not readily available to them. When one remembers that it is the Shudras, who have largely been instrumental in sustaining the infamous system of Chaturvarnya, though it has been the primary cause of their degradation and that only the Shudras can destroy the Chaturvarnya, it would be easy to realize why I allowed the necessity of educating and thereby preparing the Shudra fully for such a sacred task to outweigh all other considerations which favoured the deletion or if not deletion the abridgement of the quotations.

Reading comprehension I

1. According to the author, why would his book offend the Hindu?
2. What does the author mean when he refers to Dr Johnson's words 'I am not going to be deterred from catching a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian'?
3. What reason does the author attribute to the decline and fall of the country and the society?
4. 'Small though they be, they are my mainstay and it is to them that I have addressed my argument.' Whom does 'them' refer to?