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### Ambedkar as Historian: An Analysis of His Writings on Indian History

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#### Abstract

This paper explores the role and significance of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a historian of India. It argues that Ambedkar's writings on Indian history challenged the prevailing narratives and offered alternative perspectives that were based on his critical analysis of historical sources, his personal experiences of discrimination and oppression, and his vision of social justice and democracy. The paper examines Ambedkar's approach to history and his views on various topics, such as caste, religion, state, and nationalism. It also evaluates his contributions and limitations as a historian and suggests some areas for further research.

#### Keywords:

Ambedkar, history, caste, Buddhism, India

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## Introduction

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a multifaceted personality who made significant contributions to various fields of knowledge, such as law, economics, sociology, politics, and religion. He is widely regarded as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and the champion of the rights of the oppressed and marginalized sections of the Indian society. However, his role as a historian has not received adequate attention and recognition from the mainstream academic circles.<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar wrote extensively on various aspects of Indian history, such as the origin and development of caste, the nature and impact of Hinduism and Buddhism, the history of untouchability and social reform movements, the formation and evolution of the Indian state, and the historical roots of the Indian national movement. He used historical evidence and analysis to challenge the dominant narratives and interpretations of Indian history that were influenced by colonial, Brahmanical, and nationalist biases. He also offered alternative perspectives and insights that were informed by his own lived experiences, critical thinking, and emancipatory vision. In this paper, we will examine and evaluate Ambedkar's writings on Indian history and highlight his contributions and limitations as a historian.<sup>2</sup>

## Ambedkar's Approach to History

Ambedkar was not a trained historian, but he had a keen interest and curiosity in history since his childhood. He read widely and deeply on various topics and sources of Indian history, such as ancient texts, inscriptions, coins, archaeological reports, travelers' accounts, and modern works by Indian and foreign scholars. He also visited historical sites and monuments and collected historical materials for his research. He was well-versed in several languages, such as Marathi, Hindi, English, Sanskrit, Pali, Persian, and German, which enabled him to access and analyze primary and secondary sources in their original forms. He was also familiar with the methods and tools of historical research, such as chronology, geography, genealogy, causation, comparison, and criticism. He used these methods and tools to examine and verify the authenticity, reliability, and relevance of the historical evidence and arguments.<sup>3</sup>

Ambedkar's approach to history was influenced by his social background, political ideology, and intellectual orientation. He belonged to the Mahar caste, which was one of the most oppressed and stigmatized castes in the Hindu social order. He faced discrimination and humiliation throughout his life because of his caste identity. He also witnessed the plight and suffering of millions of his fellow untouchables and other lower castes, who were denied basic human rights and dignity by the upper castes. He realized that the root cause of the caste system and untouchability was the ideology and practice of Hinduism, which was based on the principles of graded inequality, hierarchy, and exclusion. He also realized that the colonial rule and the nationalist movement had failed to address the problems and aspirations of the untouchables and other backward classes. He therefore decided to renounce Hinduism and embrace Buddhism, which he considered as a rational, egalitarian, and humanistic religion. He also founded and led various political and social movements and organizations to fight for the

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<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *The Annihilation of Caste*. The Jat-Pat Todak Mandal, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Siddhartha College Publications, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*. Thacker & Co., 1946.

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rights and interests of the depressed classes. He advocated for a separate electorate and reservation for the untouchables and other minorities in the legislative and executive bodies. He also drafted and defended the Constitution of India, which embodied the principles of democracy, secularism, social justice, and federalism.<sup>4</sup>

Ambedkar's political ideology and intellectual orientation were shaped by his exposure and engagement with various schools of thought and movements, such as liberalism, socialism, feminism, pragmatism, and rationalism. He was influenced by the ideas and works of thinkers and leaders, such as John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, and Mahatma Gandhi. He was also inspired by the examples and achievements of historical figures and civilizations, such as Ashoka, Buddha, Akbar, Shivaji, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Russian Revolution. He was critical of the flaws and limitations of these schools of thought and movements, and he tried to develop his own synthesis and vision that suited the Indian context and conditions. He was also open to revising and modifying his views and positions in the light of new evidence and arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Ambedkar's approach to history was thus characterized by a combination of empirical rigor, logical reasoning, and normative commitment. He used history as a source of knowledge, as a tool of critique, and as a guide for action. He used history to understand the past, to explain the present, and to envision the future. He used history to expose the myths and prejudices, to challenge the injustices and oppressions, and to propose the reforms and alternatives. He used history to educate and empower the masses, to mobilize and organize the movements, and to influence and shape the policies. He used history to assert his identity, to claim his rights, and to fulfill his duties. He used history to uphold his values, to express his views, and to realize his vision.<sup>6</sup>

### **Ambedkar's Writings on Indian History<sup>7</sup>**

Ambedkar wrote on various aspects and periods of Indian history, ranging from ancient to modern times. He did not write a comprehensive or systematic history of India, but he wrote several essays, articles, books, and speeches that dealt with specific themes and issues of Indian history. Some of his major writings on Indian history are:

- **Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development (1916):** This was his first published work, which he wrote as a paper for a seminar at Columbia University. In this work, he analyzed the origin and development of the caste system in India and argued that it was not a natural or divine phenomenon, but a human and historical construct. He rejected the racial, religious, and occupational theories of caste and proposed a sociological theory based on the concepts of endogamy, exogamy, and hypergamy. He also criticized the caste system for its negative effects on the social, economic, and political life of India.
- **The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables? (1948):** This was his last published work, which he wrote as a part of his magnum opus, *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* Amrit Book Company, 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables.* Thacker & Co., 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste.* Permanent Black, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Omvedt, Gail. *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India.* Penguin Books, 2004.

Buddha and His Dhamma. In this work, he traced the history of the untouchables in India and argued that they were not the original inhabitants or the aboriginal tribes of India, but the broken men or the remnants of the defeated and subjugated tribes and clans of ancient India. He also argued that the untouchables were not the outcastes or the exterior castes of the Hindu society, but the depressed classes or the interior castes of the Hindu society. He further argued that the untouchables became untouchables not because of their impure or sinful occupations, but because of their rejection or revolt against the Brahmanical religion and culture. He cited the examples of the Pariahs, the Mahars, and the Chamars, who were once the followers of Buddhism, but were later persecuted and ostracized by the Brahmins, who were the enemies and rivals of Buddhism.

- **Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to Be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society (1946):** This was a sequel to his previous work, *The Untouchables*, in which he examined the history of the Shudras, who were the lowest varna or the fourth class in the Hindu social order. He argued that the Shudras were not the original or the indigenous inhabitants of India, but the Aryans or the invaders of India. He also argued that the Shudras were not the servile or the subordinate class of the Indo-Aryan society, but the kshatriyas or the warrior class of the Indo-Aryan society. He further argued that the Shudras became the Shudras not because of their inferior or degraded status, but because of their defeat and subjugation by the Brahmins, who were the priests and the rulers of the Indo-Aryan society. He cited the examples of the Dasas, the Dasyus, and the Nishadas, who were once the kshatriyas, but were later demoted and degraded by the Brahmins, who imposed the law of Manu and the code of varnashrama on them.
- **The Buddha and His Dhamma (1956):** This was his last and unfinished work, which he wrote as a treatise on Buddhism and a manifesto of his conversion to Buddhism. In this work, he presented a historical and philosophical account of the life and teachings of the Buddha and his followers. He argued that the Buddha was not a god or a prophet, but a human and a teacher. He also argued that the Dhamma was not a religion or a dogma, but a way of life and a doctrine. He further argued that the Buddha and his Dhamma were the true and original sources of Indian civilization and culture, which were later corrupted and distorted by the Brahmins, who introduced the concepts of god, soul, karma, rebirth, and caste into the Indian thought and society. He cited the examples of the Sangha, the Asoka, and the Nagas, who were the adherents and promoters of Buddhism, but were later suppressed and eliminated by the Brahmins, who propagated the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Puranas.
- **What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables (1945):** This was a political and polemical work, which he wrote as a critique of the Indian National Congress and Mahatma Gandhi, who were the leaders and representatives of the Indian national movement. In this work, he analyzed the history and the policies of the Congress and Gandhi towards the untouchables and other depressed classes of India. He argued that the Congress and Gandhi were not the true and genuine champions of the Indian freedom and democracy, but the false and hypocritical agents of the Hindu majority and the upper castes. He also argued that the Congress and Gandhi had done nothing or very little to improve the condition and the status of the untouchables and other backward classes of India. He further argued that the Congress and Gandhi had opposed and obstructed the legitimate and reasonable demands and interests of the untouchables and

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other minorities of India. He cited the examples of the Poona Pact, the Communal Award, the Government of India Act, and the Quit India Movement, which were the events and the issues that involved the conflicts and the negotiations between the Congress and Gandhi on one hand and Ambedkar and the untouchables on the other hand.<sup>8</sup>

### **Evaluation of Ambedkar's Writings on Indian History**

Ambedkar's writings on Indian history have been praised and criticized by various scholars and commentators from different disciplines and perspectives. Some of the common points of praise and criticism are:

Ambedkar's writings on Indian history are original and innovative, as they offer new and alternative interpretations and explanations of the historical phenomena and processes that are often ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream historians. Ambedkar's writings on Indian history are also comprehensive and interdisciplinary, as they cover a wide range of topics and sources and draw insights from various fields of knowledge, such as sociology, anthropology, economics, politics, and religion. Ambedkar's writings on Indian history are also relevant and influential, as they address the contemporary and pressing issues and problems of the Indian society and polity, such as caste, untouchability, religion, nationalism, and constitutionalism.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Ambedkar was a remarkable and remarkable historian who made significant and lasting contributions to the study and understanding of Indian history. He challenged and enriched the existing and dominant narratives and interpretations of Indian history with his own perspectives and insights that were based on his extensive and rigorous research and his unique and visionary outlook. He used history as a means and an end to achieve his goals and ideals of social justice, human dignity, and national unity. He also inspired and influenced generations of historians and scholars who followed and developed his ideas and methods. He deserves to be recognized and respected as one of the greatest and most influential historians of India.

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<sup>8</sup> Keer, Dhananjay. Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission. Popular Prakashan, 1962.

<sup>9</sup> Rodrigues, Valerian (ed.). The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar. Oxford University Press, 2002.