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## Ambedkar's Ideology as a Source for the Study of Dalits

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### Abstract:

*In modern times, history in order to be understood as a science was perceived to be based on facts. Facts were to be found in the documents. Therefore, Langlois and Seignobos had come to the conclusion that documents were the be all and end all of history. However, historians have realized that this statement of history has grave limitation as it documents only the elites. To overcome the limitation imposed by the documents historians today have resorted to alternative sources which are based on traditions, folklore, ballads, which give a contrary picture to that of official one.*

*In this context since the history related to the dalits was rarely recorded, writing their history proved to be a challenge. Today, in the writing of dalit history there are alternative sources that are available for the historian. Dr. B.R Ambedkar has provided many leads to the issue and the statistics that he has generated over the course of his study has rendered any research on dalits a starting point in the understanding of their history.*

**Key words:** Ambedkar ideology, Dalit history, caste system, Brahmanical texts, Division of labour

### Introduction:

A century ago in 1898, Langlois and Seignobos in their very beginning of their work "Introduction to the Study of History"

refer to “No Document No History”<sup>1</sup>. The meaning of this statement was that documents were the be all and end all of history. However today history as a discipline has made great strides from what it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Langlois and Seignobos wrote. Still more when we are in an era of subaltern studies. It is more so relevant when it comes to the study of Dalit history, as documents record only aspects of elite history. History related to the subaltern is rarely recorded.

When we start to write the history of the Dalits the immediate thing is that, there is a big void as the recorded history has very little to offer. Why is it so difficult to find sources related to dalits? Do the dalits have no history? These are the questions one encounters upon while searching for evidence related to dalit history.

Why do the dalits have no history? The answer to these questions is obvious. It is not that the dalits have no history. It is more so that being subalterns of the worst order there cannot be much written sources available or recorded. Histories hitherto have recorded the history of the elite. Secondly there has always been an alternative source for history which has continued to be ignored on methodological grounds. These are the oral traditions. Convenient oral traditions have been made use of to construct history while inconvenient truths have been hushed or ignored. The construction of early phase of India was based on the Vedas which are oral traditions. These were put to written form subsequently. This indicates that, the oral traditions were taken cognisance, in the writing of history. However, not all oral traditions have been given the same importance. Thirdly the dalits have not also tried to record their own history. The reason being that their recorded history was not something that they could happily recollect, for, it would have been a collection of ignominious events, of discrimination, of humiliation and abuse of the highest order. Hence a dalits past to him/her was a burden which they carried and languished all through their life. It is here that we find Ambedkar attempting to transform their history from one that

was obnoxiously insane, to that which would affirm in them a sense of pride.

Now coming to the theme of the paper, there should always be a starting point for any research activity. The starting point for the study of Dalits could definitely be looked in Ambedkar's ideology.

Even before the emergence of Ambedkar we have had leaders who in a very subtle way were responsible in organizing a number of agitations across the country. Although there were leaders and movements almost in all parts of the country their contribution remains inconspicuous before the giant attempt made by Ambedkar. What Ambedkar did to the dalits was a life-time achievement. There cannot be such a huge gamut of literature constructed around a single person from among the dalit community as has been construed around Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was also responsible in creating a huge compendium of statistics of communities and of their socio-economic status. No other individual of contemporary times has ever created a document of this magnitude except Ambedkar. Even to this very day with the many research centers across India and with the existence of a number of NGO's we still stand in the same very place that Ambedkar had left us behind. Strangely enough, in one of the programmes aired by NDTV on 25-03-2010, at 10 pm, debating over an issue where in students in one of the school in Bihar were asked to write their name and caste on their answer scripts, also mentioned the population of dalits in India to be 65 million and even specified that half of them lived in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is to be noted that the 1921 Census Report mentions the strength of Scheduled Castes to be 31 million; the 1931 Census mentions it to be 44.5 million. While the 1951 Census mentions it to be 51.3 million.<sup>3</sup> The question here is that in three decades the Scheduled Caste population had swelled by 20 million in comparison to the total population of British India which was at that time 357 million. While the population of India today is over a billion, how is that dalit

population is languishing at 65 million i.e., six decades after the said 1951 Census.

This only speaks of the kind of polemic involved in so far as disclosing the strength of dalit population is concerned. India even to this day shudders to reveal the exact proportion of each community living in India. A huge population of a community could mean many things, apart from the right of financial allocation, proportional share in education, employment, administration, governance and control of resources.

Now coming to the understanding of dalits, the most significant thing for the dalits and in the understanding of the dalits is the question of identity. Dalit identity emerged as a result of an organized effort made significantly by Ambedkar. The foremost thing that Ambedkar did to create a sense of identity was firstly to unite the numerous scattered communities – thanks to the British, who brought them under a schedule – who thereafter came to be called as the ‘Scheduled Castes’.

Secondly, after having consolidated his hold over the dalits, Ambedkar then happened to resurrect their past glory which provided them a sense of temporary comfort, a sigh of relief from an agonizing past of contempt.

The polemic of 20<sup>th</sup> Century politics involved the garnering of strength based on the number game. The Congress and the Muslim League formed two distinct streams in India's struggle for freedom, based shearly on the magnitude of their supporting numbers. It was at this juncture that Ambedkar argument of a sizeable number of dalits forming a separate entity emerged as a demand worth not to be ignored.

In establishing the strength of the dalit communities Ambedkar made use of numerous Reports, in particular he exhaustively made use of the Census Reports. In the subsequent events the Census Report of 1931 formed the basis of caste categorization and Reservation Policy<sup>4</sup>. It is the 1931 Census Report which even to this day forms the base line for all political gambles. Ever since 1931 the numerical strength of

the dalits has become a contentious issue and due to its politico-economic issues the population of the dalits obviously would not grow.

Ambedkar ideology used as a source also helps in the understanding of their past and the present. Ambedkar perhaps was the first to understand by scientific explanations as to the cause behind their socio-economic disabilities. In this venture he tried to dissect their past and argued that it was Caste System that compelled them to their Prescribed Calling (Vasant Moon, Vol.1, P.57)<sup>5</sup>. While traditionally it was believed that the cause behind their disabilities was due to their Karma in their previous birth and due to their impure practices. However, Ambedkar squarely blames it on the caste system.

While explaining caste system, Ambedkar gives its various characteristic features as well, which are as follows: 1. Of a hierarchy which was “an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.” 2. Of the problem of surplus men and women. 3. Caste as a superimposition of exogamy on endogamy. 4. On how caste was perpetuated by the denial of livelihood (property), the denial of education and the right to bear arms. These form the quintessential in the understanding of the caste, of the past which also form the basis of the present. The understanding of these characters also help us in making an assessment of the present situation of the dalits and the various ways in which caste as a pervasive structure gets translated into modern times.

Ambedkar in order to understand the caste system and the Indian society begins with understanding of the Brahmanical Texts<sup>6</sup>. Understanding caste, the problem of Untouchability and that of the dalits cannot be done in isolation. Hence, rather than the study of the dalits alone, a comparative understanding of the various castes becomes inevitable, for caste do not exist in isolation. Starting from Brahmanical texts, he then moves on to contemporary dalit problems.

In the understanding of the contemporary problems, the Census Report of 1931 forms a benchmark which reflects the social plight of the dalits<sup>7</sup>.

With regard to economy of the dalits, Ambedkar's economic theories revolved round the connection between social status and economic position of an individual<sup>8</sup>. It is here that for the first time he gives a unique dimension to the problem of labour. He says that 'Caste Advocates' shelter in the name of division of labour as an essential prerequisite for the smooth functioning of society<sup>9</sup>. Ambedkar found caste not to be just a mechanism associated with division of labour, but rather, as a mechanism of exploitation as it is a "Division of Labourers" as well<sup>10</sup>. Ambedkar's economic contribution begins from his understanding of caste in terms of Division of Labourers.

Ambedkar then moves on to understand the kind of land relationship that dalits had with the rest of the community. He confronts the idea of 'Bonded Labour' being a deprived dalit at the mercy of other village communities, serving them perpetually. This is well explained in his agitation against the 'Mahar Watan' system<sup>11</sup>.

Further, having understood that a majority of dalits are associated with agriculture, holding just a small strip of land, he proceeds to make a viable proposition to fragmented holdings and says that the remedy lies not only in restricting the fragmentation of holding but also in making the fragmented piece of land holding viable by increasing the control over the factors of production.

## **Conclusion:**

Ambedkar's thoughts largely revolved round the institution of caste and of ameliorating the conditions of the dalits in particular. Thus, making Ambedkar's ideology today a starting point for any kind of research associated with the dalits, although not an end in itself.

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