

A STUDY OF MAKING OF DR. BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR

(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ROLE OF MARATHA NOTABLES)

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Abstract: BabasahebBhimrao Ambedkar was although a Mahar by birth but was born in a family that had already risen above traditional Mahar village service by seeking employment in the British army. He was born in a family where his grandfather was literate, father was literate and so were the women in family and therefore, there was absolutely no suspicion that Ambedkar would be educated. But education for Ambedkar was not as rosy as it was for the upper Caste as access to education was based on caste not merit. The objective of the paper is to analyse the socio-religious context under which the Maratha rulers namely SayajiraoGaekwad of Baroda and ShahujiMaharaj of Kolhapur contributed in making Ambedkar, The Intelligentsia Ambedkar.

Keywords- Mahar, Maratha, SayajiraoGaekwad, ShahujiMaharaj of Kolhapur.

Ambedkar stepped into the public domain in 1920s, a period when the untouchables had begun to organize themselves as an autonomous political entity at the all-India level with its base in the provinces. He argued that the liberation of untouchables had to be fought for by the untouchables themselves and the movement of Untouchables was an integral part of the national freedom movement for freedom does not mean freedom for few.

Ambedkar was born on 14th April 1891 at Mhow, near Indore, where his father, RamjiSakpal was appointed in the local military school. His father was deeply attached to the mystical Varkari sect and became a follower of Kabirpanth as well as held admiration for JotiraoPhule, the pioneer of major reforms among the low castes in Maharashtra. Ambedkar's mother Bhimabai, also belonged to a MaharKabirpanthi household that had had military service background for generations. Ambedkar was the youngest child of his parents and had lost his mother just at the age of five.

The young Ambedkar began his primary education at Dapoli in Ratnagiri district and continued it at Satara. He started his high school along with his brother and it was during this time that he actually realized how painful untouchability was. In 1900, Ambedkar was admitted to the English School at Satara but pangs of untouchability followed. Ambedkar's father RamjiSakpal shifted to Bombay and admitted his son to Elphinstone High School in 1904 and Ambedkar completed his matriculation from the same in 1907. Ambedkar was probably the second in the Mahar community to pass Bombay University matriculation, although some army Mahars, among them his father, had had equivalent education in army schools.¹ DabakChawl, the community in which the family lived held a celebration to mark this achievement.² Encouraged by his father and several caste-Hindu teachers and with the financial help of the Gaekwad of Baroda, Ambedkar attended Elphinstone College.³ He completed his B.A. with English and Persian as his subjects.

After his B.A., Ambedkar joined the armed forces of Baroda as Lieutenant but had to return to Bombay within a few days because of his father's demise. Later, he secured a scholarship which the Maharaja of Baroda had instituted for backward caste students to study abroad and joined the Columbia University in 1913. It was here that Ambedkar came in contact of great teachers such as John Dewey, Edwin Seligman and A.A. Goldenweiser and shaped his learning and ideology.⁴ At Columbia University Ambedkar completed an M.A.

with a dissertation on “Administration and Finance of East India Company” and his Ph.D. on ‘National Dividend: A Historical and Analytical Study’. A major paper was also written by him on ‘Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development’.

Further Ambedkar joined London School of Economics in 1916 where Edwin Seligman introduced him to Sidney and Beatrice Webb from whom Ambedkar imbibed Fabianism and learnt the role of state from J.A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse. He also joined the Grey’s Inn for Bar-at-Law. However, his studies were interrupted because he had to return to India in 1917 to execute the bond to serve the state of Baroda in return for the scholarship. The environment at Baroda was very hostile and humiliating due to him being an untouchable. Ambedkar could not find accommodation by using his real identity even in Baroda. Ultimately, he had to pretend to be a Parsi to find a room in a lodge owned by a Parsi but he was found out and had to leave. The incident had an engraving impact on him. Bhagwan Das mentions in ‘Thus Spoke Ambedkar’:

Throughout the day I searched for a house to live in but miserably failed to get any place to hide my head. I approached my friends but all turned me down on some plea or the other, expressing their inability to accommodate me. I was utterly disappointed and exhausted. What to do next? I just could not decide. Frustrated and exhausted, I quietly sat down at one place, with tears flowing out of my eyes. Seeing no hope of getting a house, and no alternative but to quit, I tendered my resignation and returned to Bombay by the night train.⁵

At Bombay Ambedkar was appointed as Professor of Political Economy at Sydenham College, an institute modeled on the pattern of London School of Economics. He made submissions to the Southborough Committee, started a fortnightly called MookNayak and collaborated with ShahujiMaharaj of Kolhapur in forming the Depressed Classes Forum in 1920. Thus Ambedkar started out his journey as a socio-political reformer.

He returned to England in October, 1920 in order to complete his studies. He finished his Master’s degree in June, 1921 with the financial help from another Maratha notable, the Maharajah of Kolhapur.⁶ From this point onwards, the Maharajah of Kolhapur, ShahuMaharaj, assumed the same paternalistic role towards Ambedkar as the Maharajah of Baroda had once done.⁷ His benevolence found its expression in the letter of recommendation which he wrote in his favor for the London School of Economics –

[Mr Ambedkar] will explain you the difference between the Backward Castes and the Brahmin bureaucracy. Also he will tell you what suffering one who tries to sympathies has to undergo at the hands of the bureaucrat Brahmins who claim to have democratic ideas, wish to raise the backward castes but who really crave nothing better than an oligarchy for themselves. He intends to lay before you, the enlightened public of England, the view point of non-Brahmin Hindus who are unanimous in the opinion that in asking for Home Rule, the real object of the Brahmin has been to regain and establish their long lost power.⁸

In November 1927, Ambedkar successfully defended his thesis ‘The Problem of the Rupee’ at LSE and in 1927 he was awarded a PhD by Columbia University for his thesis entitled “The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India”.⁹ He thus became the first Untouchable to obtain a doctorate.¹⁰

Ambedkar got himself registered at the Bombay Bar in 1923 to start legal practice at the High Court but his untouchable background put off many clients and he had to supplement his income by teaching. He taught mercantile law at Batliboi’s Accountancy Training Institute from June 1925 to March 1928. From June 1928 to March 1929 he was professor of law in the Government Law College, Bombay. Yet there cannot be any denial

of the fact that it was his legal training and exposure to egalitarian ideals of society along with his own bitter and painful experiences of pangs of untouchability that stood by him when he was defending untouchables either in the courts or in the political arena and made him the first pan Indian leader of untouchables.

Ambedkar benefitted immeasurably from being born in the Military town of Mhow (as education was compulsory for the children of the military) but it was not just the birth place, his personal qualities – his intelligence and his energy – played a key role, as did the familial, social and regional contexts which shaped his life as the heir of the pioneering anti-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. The predicament of his caste resulted in his socio-political awareness but the decisive factor in his struggle against caste was his education which exposed him to the egalitarian values and allowed him to question the genesis and mechanism of caste. And education which came out to be his guiding factor was facilitated by the two great Maratha rulers Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda and Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur.

Sayajirao Gaekwad was the Maharaja of Baroda State from 1875 to 1939, and is notably remembered for reforming much of his state during his rule. On assuming the reins of the state his first tasks included education of his subjects, upliftment of the downtrodden and reforms in judicial, agricultural and social set up of the state. He was the first Indian ruler to introduce, in 1906, compulsory and free primary education in his state, placing his territory far in advance of contemporary British India.¹¹

Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur, the first maharaja of the princely state of Kolhapur, was a man of broad humanity and uncompromising courage. He took keen interest in the removal of untouchability and in betterment of the lot of the depressed classes. He promoted education among the low castes to liberate them from the tyrannous dominance of the Brahmins. He appointed untouchables to the posts on his personal establishment; he granted them sanads to practice law; he took meals with them in public. He provided untouchable students with free education, lodging and boarding.¹²

Hence it can be said that both the Maratha notables had been pro untouchables in their outlook. Shahuji Maharaj had been denied the Maratha Kshatriya status by the Brahmins of Kolhapur in 1901, barring him from performing vedic rites, even for family ceremonies¹³ and this transformed his non-Brahmin orientation which was the result of Phule's rigorous efforts for socio-religious reforms in Maharashtra, into an anti-Brahmin orientation which was quite evident in his letter of recommendation which he drafted in favor of Ambedkar. Sayaji Rao whose Maratha origins partly explain his benevolence vis-à-vis other non-Brahmins (Maratha kings had a tussle with Brahmin Peshwas) had difficulties in recruiting teachers for the schools he had opened for untouchables¹⁴ as the Brahmins who had monopolized education to a certain extent were not ready to teach in these schools. He could only recruit Muslims and Arya Samajists. Hence Sayajirao Gaekwad started supporting the studies of promising young low caste men¹⁵, a policy that produced a non-Brahmin intelligentsia for state administration¹⁶.

Although Ambedkar benefitted greatly from this anti-Brahmin attitude of the Maratha notables yet the favor was granted only after assessing Ambedkar's potential. When Ambedkar was presented to Maharajah of Baroda the latter asked him several questions and being impressed by his answers immediately granted him a scholarship¹⁷. Similarly, Shahuji Maharaj, with whom Ambedkar had come in close contact in 1919 through Dattoba Powar¹⁸, being impressed by Ambedkar not only gave him financial assistance for Mook Nayak but also declared in a prophetic vein: "You have found your savior in Ambedkar. I am confident that he will break your shackles. Not only that, a time will come when, so whispers my conscience, Ambedkar will shine as a front rank leader of All India fame and appeal."¹⁹ at a conference held at Kolhapur on March 21, 1920.

Thus it can be concluded that it was not just by mere chance that Ambedkar became the first pan-Indian leader of Depressed Classes. His personal attributes of hard work, devotion and indomitable spirit; his social and familial background shaped his destiny for it was not just for the sake of benevolence that the Maratha rulers, Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda and Shahuji Maharaj of Kolhapur had provided him financial aid for his education abroad that inculcated in him the principles of liberty and equality. This benevolence was under the context of the non-Brahmin solidarity that was persistently inherent among the Marathas owing to their age long conflict with the Brahmins as well as also under the context of Non-Brahmin movements initiated by Jotirao Phule to deal with brahmanical atrocities. On returning to India, Ambedkar channelized his egalitarian values to refine his tools of social analysis to contest with a socio-political system which victimized the Untouchables to pay off this benevolence.

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