

Writing 'History from Below': Challenges and Pitfalls

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Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society by Braj Ranjan Mani, New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, pp. 456, Rs. 895

At a time when the thrust is on deconstruction of history and debunking of conventional theories, it was only a matter of time when someone would come up with a book *Debrahmanising History*. The book is an attempt to portray Indian history in subaltern framework, an attempt in which the author seems to have been fairly successful.

I

In the first chapter the author writes that the Vedic people came from outside and subjugated the original inhabitants of this land, who were described as *dāsas* in their texts. The varṇa system was devised so as to maintain the brahmanical superiority and that the Vedic literatures and other ancient scriptures preached hatred for the people down in the ladder. It was marked by excessive sacrifices and rituals. The concept of *matsnyāya*—devouring of smaller fishes by the bigger ones—and *dandanīti*—rule by force—were the bases of the Vedic religion and Hinduism. Thus, the Brahmins were all powerful and subjugated the weak, i.e. the *dāsas*, who became the Śūdras. Gradually, a section of Śūdras became the *ati-Śūdras*—the untouchables. In a nutshell, the whole philosophy of

Hinduism was devised in the manner so as to keep some people—Brahmins—powerful and the larger masses subjugated. However, to counter this, the *śramana* sects emerged, which rejected the Vedic or brahmanical philosophy.

In the second chapter, the author opines that Buddhism and Jainism were the most powerful of the various *śramana* sects and emerged as major religions. But it was Buddhism which presented a viable and coherent socio-religious alternative to the Vedic-Brahmanism. He counters the view that Buddhism was originally 'a system of morality or ethics than a religion'. For him, Buddhism was a full-fledged religion from the very beginning as it was basically 'about our understanding of what life is about'. He tries to show how Buddha opposed the caste system and how the Buddhist dialectics were the anti-thesis of *Upaniṣadic* absolutism.

The third chapter deals with the medieval bhakti saints, whom the author prefers to term 'subaltern saint-poets'. The movement which started from about AD 500 peaked by the 15th and 16th century AD. It caught the imagination of the masses due to its simplicity and egalitarianism. The author tries to sketch a broad overview of this movement by discussing Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu Dayal, Nanak, Basava, Akka Mahadevi, Namdev, Chokhamela, Tukaram, Savata Mali, Mirabai, Gora, Sena, Tirumalar, Sivavakkiyar, Pamvati

Sittar and others. For the author, the movement was an extension of the earlier *śramanic* heterodoxies.

In the fourth chapter, the author depicts how colonialism and spread of modern education contributed to the emergence of 'Vedic Brahmanic nationalism'. Several social reformers emerged like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekanand and others but for the author, they were all brahmanical agents.

The fifth chapter is devoted completely to Jyotirao Phule, 'the first man in modern India to launch movement for the liberation of caste-oppressed, toilers, men and women'. He dreamt of replacing 'Rama Rajya with Bali Rajya'. Although he had to face great hardships due to his chosen goal, he did not stray from his objective and laid the foundation for a strong Dalit movement in the years to come. He is often portrayed as British loyalist but he was a severe critic of the British, the author says.

In the sixth chapter, the author portrays how the work started by Phule was taken up in other parts of the country—Shahu Maharaj and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, Iyothee Thass and Periyar in Tamil Nadu, Narayan Guru, Kumara Asan and others in Kerala, Bhagyareddy Varma in Andhra, Mangoo Ram and Chotu Ram in Punjab, Acchutanand and Ram Charan in UP, Hari Chandra Thakur and others in Bengal, Sonadhar Senapati in Assam,

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besides several others. The strategies adopted by these lower caste leaders were different but they had a common aim—to fight caste oppressions.

Chapter seven deals with Gandhi's efforts to eradicate untouchability and his differences with Bhim Rao Ambedkar. For the author, Gandhi was the main brahmanical agent who snatched away the movement from the Dalit leaders through his Machiavelli practices. All his love for the Dalits was an eye-wash. His chief concern was to ensure that the Dalits stay within the Hindu fold. He virtually coerced Ambedkar to sign the Poona Pact, which finished all chances of the emergence of a genuine Dalit leadership. Ambedkar was systematically isolated by Gandhi and his team, the author says.

The author finally concludes with the comment that even after so many years of independence, not much has really changed for the depressed. The benefits of India being a welfare state, is being cornered by a few. There are in fact two India—one of the 'haves' and the other of the 'have nots'.

II

Every civilization has evolved in a particular way, by following a particular culture, i.e. a way of life. Indian civilization, being one of the oldest, too has evolved in a particular manner, which has given it a distinct identity and greatness. But in spite of all greatness there are some lacunae—atrocities committed on a large section of the society on the basis of caste being one of the prime ones.

It is now by and large an accepted fact that there has been continuity in the Indian culture and tradition all through the ages. This kind of continuity is probably matched only by the Chinese civilization. But within this continuity there have always been notes of dissent at regular intervals. The first note of dissent came in the sixth century AD

by the heterodox sects, Buddhism and Jainism being the major ones.

These notes of dissent were not necessarily from the lower section. Many of the founders of the heterodox sects were men from the upper castes. Both Māhāvira and Gautama Buddha were Kśatriya. In medieval period, Bāsava, who started the Lingāyat movement, was a Brahmin, while Guru Nanak was a Khatri, an upper caste. They vehemently came out against the rigidities of caste system and monopolizing of religion by the Brahmins. This has provided the Indian civilization with the much needed flexibility and the capacity to accommodate divergent viewpoints and manifesting and re-manifesting itself as per the requirement of a particular age. It is still manifesting itself—with the commitment of giving power to the deprived and subjugated. And all sections of the Indian society are contributing in this endeavour.

Institutionalization of religious sect is a natural process. The prophet, messiah or the one who is seen to be the founder of a religion gives the message of moral precepts to the people during his lifetime. Most of them including Buddha did not want to start a new religion¹ (mentioned by the author, p. 104). In *Angutara Nikaya* it is mentioned: 'Buddha neither claimed himself to be a divine incarnation nor a prophet; but claimed himself to be an awakened person, who by his own effort and insight, attained the state of purification of which human kind is capable.'² The messiah develops a following and some of his ardent followers become his disciples. After the messiah departs, the followers give his thoughts a shape. His sayings and teachings are compiled in the form of a scripture. Some buildings are constructed where they meet and pray, which eventually becomes their place of worship. To maintain the place of worship and to conduct prayers, priests come into existence. Besides, some kind

of trust or mechanism is formulated with office bearers to run these places. The priests and the followers of a religion start worshipping in a particular manner, which becomes the style particular to that sect and thus the process of ritualization starts. This has been the pattern for almost all religions. Ritualization is thus inevitable in the course of evolution and growth of a religion. However, the problem comes when those who manage the religious activities start giving more emphasis to rituals and stray from the essence of religion. It is then that voices of dissent are raised by those who oppose this excessive ritualization. This leads to division in religion and emergence of new sects.

Although Hindu religion is an evolved one, it too has gone through these phases. It is an established fact that during the Vedic times the people worshipped natural forces and there was no concept of idol worship. The caste rigidities too emerged slowly. There are several examples to prove this point. One of the verses of *Kaṭhak Sāmhita* of *Yajurveda* says, 'kim brahmaṃsye pitram, kim pracasi mātṛam, śrutam chet asmin vedyam, sapitāha sapitā-maha', which means: Why do you ask who is the father or mother of the Brahmin? If he has learning then that is the father and grandfather. The story of Satyakāma in *Chandogya Upaniṣad* may also be cited here.³ Even during the Buddha's time, only by *karma* could one become a Brahmin. In fact the author writes, 'While the Brahmins had started asserting . . . had not yet accepted birth based status group' (p. 104). The rigidities occurred in the caste system mainly from the Gupta period. But even in the late ancient and early medieval period, several religious scriptures were composed by men from the lower castes or 'lowered' caste, as the author terms them. Vālmiki who composed *Rāmāyaṇa* was a *dasyu* and was surely not from the upper caste. The

Māhābhārata in Oriya was written by Sūdrāmuni Sarla Das during the reign of Kapilendra Deva (AD 1435-1466)⁴. Sridhara Swami, whom Caitanya has referred to as his guru had said, 'janmana jāyate sūdra sanskārayi dwija ucchate' meaning that a Śūdra by birth can be changed into a *dwija* (twice born) with his meritorious work. Thus, even if the caste system had become rigid by the Gupta period, there was scope of some kind of accommodation for the lower castes to climb up the ladder of caste hierarchy. However, this was not that easy practically and the lower castes did have to face considerable hardships.

The author interestingly emphasizes on the concept of 'lowered' caste. He refuses to term the castes in the lower rung of the caste hierarchy as lower castes and instead calls them 'lowered' castes. He contends that some of the castes were lowered over a period of time and hence they should be termed as 'lowered' castes. This is an interesting and logical contention. However, instead of saying that some castes were lowered over a period of time, we may also say that few castes were 'raised' and caste distinction emerged in the Indian society.

There seems to be an opposition from the author for the reformers who quoted ancient scriptures for advocating reforms instead of pleading for the same on moral ground. He sees all such reformers to be brahmanical agents. However, the point is that when these social evils were not prevalent in the ancient times and none of the scriptures advocate them, why demand for abolition of social evils should not be made by citing these scriptures. It is more effective as these scriptures are revered by the people at large. The author's terming of reformers like Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekanand, Gandhi, etc. as brahmanical agents is just like Anil Seal's branding of Gandhi as a 'dalal' or 'broker'.⁵

There is a fundamental difference between the lower caste movements of northern and eastern India and that of the southern and western India. In northern and eastern India, there were powerful castes between the Brahmins and the lower castes. For example, Rajputs and Kayasthas in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and Kayasthas and Baidyas in Bengal were powerful and influential and served as the buffers. Hence, mobilization along caste lines was a later phenomenon here and it was not Brahmin versus rest of the castes affair. The situation in southern India was completely different. Here the Brahmin domination was complete and although the Brahmins were less in number, they occupied 90 per cent of government jobs. Hence all castes other than Brahmins came together and demanded corrective measures. It is in this way that reservations in jobs were first introduced in the Madras presidency. This helped several of the castes—which otherwise owned land and were economically powerful—to emerge as the dominant caste. Even Gail Omvedt accepts that the early non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu was elitist.⁶

Several of the men from the lower castes who took up the cudgels of reform movement were from what is today termed as the Other Backward Caste. In fact, it were the OBCs who demanded reservations in the jobs. Although these castes were backward socially and culturally, they owned lands and were economically powerful. Once they got the benefits of reservations, it did not take time for them to emerge as dominant castes. Sociologist MN Srinivas commented after his path-breaking fieldwork of Rampura village, 'The dominant castes, who are generally non-Brahmins and owners of the land, are among the worst practitioners of inequality and exploitation, their victims being the local poor, particularly the landless members of the Scheduled Castes.'⁷ He also found that 'the dominant caste of peasants in Rampura

is plainly opposed to the emancipation of untouchables. Government efforts to improve the position of untouchables are often frustrated by the leaders of the locally dominant caste.'⁸ Besides, he also found that even the SCs who moved up the ladder of caste hierarchy started practicing the same kind of discrimination against those of the fellowmen below them. To quote him, '... the dominant castes are not the only practitioners of inequality. It occurs at lower levels inclusive of the Scheduled Castes who form a hierarchy among themselves. One of the commonest—and rather cynical features of the present movement towards equality is that each caste regards itself as the equal of castes superior to it while simultaneously denying similar claims from those inferior to it. The rhetoric that is used by the new egalitarians frequently hides this unpleasant truth.'⁹ In the present times, it is the dominant OBCs who are the main exploiters of the Dalits. To cite a recent example, last year the Dalits of Kandadevi, a southern hamlet in Shivganga district of Tamil Nadu were finally allowed to pull a 300-year-old ornate chariot having an idol of Lord Shiva—that too symbolically—after court intervened in the matter. They were being opposed by Thevars, one of the OBCs and the dominant caste of that area.¹⁰

The debate on the question of including social reforms on the Congress agenda had started soon after its formation. But its leaders did not want to take it up as they thought that it would dilute their struggle against the British. The Congress, however, changed its stance in 1917 and even Balgangadhar Tilak denounced caste system. In 1923, the Congress finally decided to take active steps for removal of untouchability. This was mainly due to the initiative of Gandhi, who by now was the unquestionable leader of the Congress. Temple entry movements were launched, which, even the upper castes supported.¹¹ Besides, Gandhi also

started calling them 'Harijan' meaning the children of god and took other ameliorative measures. But he was not ready to go beyond and did not condemn the varṇa system. This was the difference between him and Dalit leaders like Ambedkar.

Gandhi's stand on caste system cannot be seen in isolation. A leader is a product of his age. He should have the vision of looking beyond his times but he should also have the understanding to know as to how far he should look and how much is practically achievable. Gandhi had mastered this art. For him, India's independence was the most important goal. Pragmatic that he was, he could not afford to take up issues that would prove to be divisive. He was, however, convinced that untouchability was the greatest bane of the Hindu society and it had to go. But he knew that the time was not ripe to talk of its complete eradication immediately. The upper caste Hindus had to be prepared mentally for the inevitable. He, however, also understood the role of the masses in the freedom movement. For the movement to gain teeth, it was essential that the masses were involved and so the depressed classes, the minorities and the women had to be included in the freedom movement. To attract them, it was essential to improve their lot and thus, inclusion of social reforms in the Congress agenda was a must. But he knew how much the upper caste Hindu was ready to accept and stopped right there. After all he was Mahatma, the undisputed leader of the country and had to carry all sections of the people with him.

Egalitarian society is a utopia, an ideal. There has never been a society in the world which has been ideally egalitarian. There were differences among people on the bases of race, wealth, sex, colour, etc. Even in the modern times, the African Americans were discriminated in a liberal society like the United States, which claims to be the champion of civil liberties. It took

quite a struggle for the African Americans to force the white rulers to treat them at par. However, the fact remains that they are still discriminated upon in the US. Similarly, casteless society is a utopia. But this does not mean that we should not strive for such a society. The ideal should always be to work for a society which does not discriminate one from the other on the bases of caste, creed, religion. It would, in some way or the other, definitely reduce discrimination and exploitation from our society. But are we working for such a society? Will there be a non-discriminatory society in near future? The answer is an obvious 'no'.

With the advent of British and spread of English education, while the spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity spread on the one hand, the consciousness about one's identity, clan and community also grew stronger, on the other. Thus, the educated Indians started forming caste associations. Yogendra Singh writes, 'Horizontal mobilization of caste on vertical lines into caste association used to take place long before independence.'¹² The caste association and mutual aid organizations on caste basis also acted as an impediment in the process of dissolution of the caste.¹³ After independence, the policy of positive discrimination for the weaker sections—although essential—is coming in the way of dissolution of the caste. Some scholars opine that this has increased caste consciousness. It is thus a challenge for all of us to devise ways to reduce caste consciousness without in anyway reducing our commitment to social justice.

III

The production of the book is good. There are, however, some typographical errors. A glaring factual error occurs on page 252 where the year of publication of *Communist Manifesto* is mentioned as 1948 instead of 1848. The language of the book is very smooth and free-

flowing. It has been presented in a very lucid manner, making the book a very easy and interesting reading. The author has written the book from the heart and it shows his concern about the bane of the caste system that has so completely engulfed the Indian society. Of course, he has made his intentions clear in the preface itself—it is with a point of view that he is writing the book. However, while writing a book of academic nature, one should try to be balanced even while contending one's own viewpoint. The author has not fully succeeded on this front. He has not taken a complete view and has used material selectively. This makes the work polemical which dilutes the strength of the arguments that the author wants to make. Besides, even a polemical work requires that we analyze the counter arguments seriously and effectively, lest the academic work suffers from a new form of 'proselytization'. Moreover, in his bid to be extra critical, the author's choices of words seem to be out of place in a serious text (eg. ransacking the brahmanical text, p. 204).

On the whole it is a good work. Unconventional work of this kind provides the much needed 'cutting edge' which leads to debates of a new kind that may give an entirely new twist to the direction of research. The book is a welcome step as an alternate historical viewpoint and writing 'history from below'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This phenomenon is known as Apotheosis in philosophy of religion. The propounder of a religion is revered as a hero and it is hero-worship which ultimately ends up as the hero becoming God.
2. *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, A Review by B. Kar in JICPR, Vol. XIX, No. 1, 2002
3. The fourth section of the fourth chapter of *Chandogya Upaniṣad* has the story of Satyakāma, the son of Jabālā, a maid servant. Satyakāma wanted to get education. He asked Jabālā his gotra. His

mother said that in her youth, she worked as a maid and moved from place to place. It was during this period that she conceived him and hence she did not know his gotra. When Satyakāma approached Gautama, son of Haridrumata and requested him to accept the former as his student, the latter asked him his gotra. Satyakāma said what his mother had told him. Gautama was impressed by the frankness and truthfulness of Satyakāma. He was convinced that the way Satyakāma had spoken the truth, was more than enough to prove that he was a Brahmin. Mahadevan, T.M.P. *The Upanishads Selection*, Madras: G.A. Natesan and Co., pp. 180-81.

4. Eschmann, Anncharlott et. al. (ed.) (2005), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional*

Tradition of Orissa, New Delhi: Manohar, p. 166.

5. Chandra, Bipan et. al. (1992), *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, pp.17-18
6. Omvedt, Gail (1995), *Dalit Visions*, Delhi: Orient Longman, p. 55
7. Srinivas, M.N. (1994), *The Dominant Caste and Other Essays*, Delhi: OUP, p.100
8. Ibid., p. 100
9. Ibid., p. 100
10. *The Hindu*, 22nd June 2005. Even this was cosmetic. After court orders to the district administration to ensure the participation of the Dalits only 25 Dalits were allowed to take part in the procession after an agreement with the Thevars. Although the state government had put up posters asking

the Dalits to come forward and take part in the ritual, this was only an eyewash. In reality, the administration was hand-in-glove with the Thevars in ensuring that the Dalits did not participate in the ritual.

11. Chandra, Bipan et. al. (1992), *Op.cit.*, pp. 230-31. The Vaikom Satyagraha was supported by many upper caste organizations like the Nair Service Society, Nair Samajam, Kerala Hindu Sabha, Yogakshema Sabha, the leading organization of the Nambuduris.
12. Singh, Yogendra (1993), *Social Change in India: Crisis and Resilience*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, p. 172
13. Desai, A.R. (1976), *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p. 257

Forthcoming
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Employment Role of Micro Enterprises in Himachal Pradesh *Theoretical and Qualitative Assessment*

Vinod K Anand

This research-based study focuses on the state of Himachal Pradesh. A purely qualitative (rather indicative) assessment has been undertaken of the micro enterprise sector in the state on the basis of a survey of the units falling within a highly limited, but reasonably representative, sample frame. The study makes an effort to link the profile of this sector to what obtains in other areas, regions, and countries, and tests, once again qualitatively, the applicability of existing theory to the micro enterprises active in Himachal Pradesh. In essence, the study focuses on a number of basic economic and other characteristics of the micro enterprises, such as ownership, geographical dispersal, cost structure, income and output patterns, potential for generating self- and wage-employment, their role in the migration and urbanization process, and their effectiveness in meeting the legitimate requirements of the local community. It also analyses both, the exogenous and endogenous constraints and problems as faced by this sector, especially in terms of risk aversion, additional demand, lack of innovation, bureaucratic red tape, and the policy of globalization, opening up, and liberalization as reflected particularly in the context of the WTO (World Trade Organization) regime. And finally, it offers a comprehensive and feasible policy package, which includes basically a support strategy, restructuring, reward system, strategic partnering, and merger possibilities.

It is hoped that the study will help the researchers and policy makers to have an insight into the theoretical and qualitative assessment of the existing situation of micro enterprises in Himachal Pradesh, and will enable the concerned Government Bodies, Support Agencies, and Non-governmental Organizations to improve their assistance strategies to these businesses. In fact, the research output will have immense policy implications for the concerned authorities as they seek to devise programmes to promote the operation of micro enterprises, either independently, or as a larger strategy of employment generation and technological efficiency. In this context the crucial parameters are: sources of finance, accessibility of commercial credit, entrepreneurial and technical development, on-the-job training, and infrastructure requirements.

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