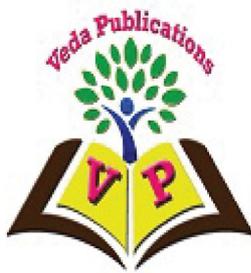


## DR. AMBEDKARR : A READING OF HIS BATTLE OF IDEAS FOR JUSTICE AND DIGNITY OF SHUDRAS IN INDIAN SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO "THE RIDDLE OF SHUDRAS"

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### Abstract

Who were Shudras and how they were constructed to be the fourth varna of Indo-Aryan society? Dr B R Ambedkar critically examines and answers these questions in his book *Who were Shudras?* The present paper would aim at the reading of the first chapter of this book titled "The Riddle of Shudras" and seek to present the method of critical reading developed by B.R.Ambedkar as his method of intellectual response to the social oppression that Shudras faced at the hands of supremacist Brahmin structural control. The paper would further contextualize its reading as a battle of ideas for restoring the lost dignity and innocence of Shudras in the backdrop of his activism as a politician and human rights activist. Moreover, it would also look at the struggle of B R Ambedkar as a means for total transformation and social change in the Indian society so that its struggle for freedom from British colonialism would simultaneously do away with the internal Brahmin colonialism also.

**Key Words :** Ambedkar, Shudras, Varna, Internal Colonialism, External Colonialism

Dr B R Ambedkar happens to be remembered throughout India today for his ideas and practices which he left behind as a legacy of his struggle for freedom ,equality ,justice and dignity of the underdog classes of Indian society ,particularly the Shudras who were treated as fourth class (varna) of Indo-Aryan society and did not enjoy the human rights that otherwise every human being is entitled to enjoy irrespective of class ,creed ,religion and colour he/she belongs to. Through his writings ,speeches and political activism ,Babasaheb liberated a vast section of Indian population from the essentialized ,dehumanized ,infantilized and marginalized fate of life that a so called "divinely sanctioned social order" of *Chaturvarnaya* had systematically subjected them to. He was the father of destitute and the voice of voiceless as he himself had suffered the same fate that his fellow Shudras had. Babasaheb was born in a Mahar family which faced discrimination and dehumanization like other destitute and oppressed classes of Indian society. Born to defy the oppressive social order and rebel against oppressive social ,religious and political tides of the time ,Babasaheb attained the highest form of education through a double Ph D ,subsequently joining politics to fight for the rights and dignity of man and dismantle all those lies that Shudras had been subjected to for their degradation and dehumanization. He was an uncompromising rebel against all forms of social injustices and inequalities and worked tirelessly for the regeneration of humanity ,for the well-being of mankind and transformation of mankind. His life, writings, speeches and political activism could be read as his struggle for the ideals of justice, equality, freedom ,liberty and dignity of man ,particularly the weaker sections of society. With such ideals as his principles for a struggle against all injustices, one may assert that Dr Ambedkar belonged to the league of that extraordinary class of revolutionaries and activists who sacrificed their lives for the freedom and liberty of others and asked for nothing in return. What the black people of America ,South Africa and the colonized people across the world were facing at the hands of their masters ,Shudras were facing the same oppression ,humiliation and biological and mental control at the hands of their Brahmin masters and the English colonizer and so needed the leadership of a

man who understood both the internal and external colonialism thereby initiating a struggle that would ultimately attain them freedom from both .The basic premise of all Ambedkarite writings seems to be that if all men are born of one man and woman ,then all men must be (1) equal ;and (2) all of them must be of the same essence which subsequently entitles them to the same fundamental rights and equal liberty. By using the same premise ,the present paper would read "The Riddle of Shudras" ,a chapter of his book *Who were Shudras* in the context of Ambedkar's struggle for justice and freedom for Shudras by critically examining the constructs that are not divinely sanctioned but figments of Brahmin imagination thereby establishing that B R Ambedkar used critical thinking and investigation as a means and tool for his crusade against the mighty and powerful structures of thought and control.

In order to restore the confidence of the Shudras and initiate an intellectual battle for their dignity and freedom ,Baba Ambedkar produced volumes of writings and speeches of which *Who were Shudras ?* holds an important position as it informs the reader through a critical investigation of all the available sources how Shudras were essentialised ,dehumanized and infantilized by the supremacist Brahmin thought control. It also makes clear that Shudras ,once upon a time ,held all positions of honour and dignity ;and ,it was through systematic processes that they were converted and forced into a degraded position in Indo-Aryan society. The book as a whole uses the technique of intensive questioning and probing of all the primary and secondary sources that talk about the subject and comes up with logical and reasonable inferences and conclusions so that he may convince the powers that be how the present position of Shudras is entirely man-made and how it has got nothing to do with the Universal logic and Divinity as understood in different religious thoughts and practices. The present reading of "The Riddle of Shudras" would thus establish a connection between reading critically/thinking critically and struggle for the ideals of social justice ,equality ,freedom and dignity of man as all these ideals would not be possible to come into being if the crusaders for the same do not use the tools of critical thinking and investigation for the truth about a certain

thing or practice. In other words, the present write up aims at showing a few samples of the intellectual potential of Babasaheb and how he told the truth to the oppressors of his time with regard to honourable and dignified status and position of Shudras whom he wanted to be treated as equals to any other class of Indian society, a mission which he finally accomplished by writing the Constitution of India.

The book mentioned above has the following chapters pertaining to the question of Shudra identity and their emergence as the fourth Varna of Indian society: "The Riddle of the Shudras", "The Brahmanic Theory of the Origin of the Shudras", "The Barahmanic Theory of the Status of the Shudras", "Shudras versus Aryans", "Aryans against Aryans", "Shudras and Dasas", "The Shudras were Kshatriyas", "The Number of Varnas, Three or four", "Brahmins versus Shudras", "The Degradation of the Shudras", "The Story of Reconciliation", "The Theory in the Crucible". All these chapters of the book look at the question of Shudras from different points of view and also trace the genesis of the whole issue from a multiple number of sources by using the technique of questioning and following that question for getting the most logical answer possible. It is with reference to this questioning and critical thinking involved in the making of this book that the present author calls it the deconstructive approach of seeking answers to different questions of identity; and the sample data for this paper would be analyzed from chapter one of the book only given the limitations in the scope of this paper.

Dr B R Ambedkar's writings and thoughts introduced India to a worldview which explains freedom in its broader perspective and allows every human being its due space and dignity irrespective of the caste, creed, religion and colour that he/she is born with. Justice, equality, liberty, human dignity and freedom form the basis of his ideas and philosophy vis-a-vis socio-political and economic dynamics of the state that he was envisioning after freedom from the British colonialism and the internal colonialism of Brahmins. His was basically a fight against two colonialisms: the external colonialism of Britishers and the internal colonialism of the supremacist hegemonic Brahmins who had subjected the Indian Shudras to a

third class treatment and denied them their basic human rights. His writings laid bare the structures and ideologies that controlled the Shudras as the Fourth Varna of Indian society and deconstructed all those myths that provided a divine justification of this below-human status of Shudras. The battle of ideas that he initiated for the liberation of Shudras and other such castes in India is in tune with the modern man's quest for justice, liberty, freedom, equality and human dignity. The cry for these ideals was going on in many colonized societies and so was true about India. The present paper attempts to see how B R Ambedkar fought for the dignity, honour and freedom of Indian Shudras who had less than fourth-class status in Brahmin literature and social practices. While initiating a scholarly investigation of the fourth-class status of Shudras in Indian social structure, B R Ambedkar critically examined religious literature of Indian Brahmins thereby attempting a deconstruction of the worldview that allowed Brahmins and other upper castes to exploit the Shudras. His book *Who were Shudras?* is highly enlightening in this regard. In this book, B R Ambedkar establishes how the Brahmin literature divided Indian society into four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras of which the Shudras were supposed to do all the base and mean jobs on the earth. He looks into the details that show how Brahmins dehumanized, infantilized and caricatured the Shudras. His deconstruction leads him to see that there was a time when Shudras enjoyed their life as normal citizens and they too used to be among priests, rulers and governing class of Indian society; but due to Brahmin manoeuvrings, they were gradually socially degraded and put into the role of an essentialised other of all 'good Brahmins' and 'Kshatriyas'. The Shudras had no right to education, human dignity, freedom and he/she was subjected to laws which were in total contrast to how a man/woman from the upper class society would be subject to. All in all, Indian society was unjust to Shudras and all the laws of Indian society were biased and inhuman towards this particular class of Indian society. B R Ambedkar examined the problem of Shudras, did all the necessary investigation of the same, subjected the available materials and social givens to critical questioning and came up with findings that shook the

corridors of power that be and forced the Indian intellectuals to come up with a constitution that does away with such inhuman ,unjust and Manichean social practices that make the life of a Shudra worse than an animal. Dr Ambedkar ,while trying to understand the sources of this unjust and inhuman treatment meted out to Shudras , discovers the origin of these social practices in *Chaturvarnaya* of Indo-Aryan society.

He writes :

“Any attempt to discover who the Shudras were and how they came to be the fourth Varna must begin with the origin of the *Chaturvarnya* in the Indo-Aryan society. A study of the *Chaturvarnya* must in its turn start with a study of the ninetieth Hymn of the Tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda-a Hymn, which is known by the famous name of *Purusha Sukta*.

What does the Hymn say? It says :

1. 'Purusha has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side enveloping the earth he overpassed (it) by a space of ten fingers.
2. Purusha himself is this whole (universe), whatever has been and whatever shall be. He is the Lord of immortality, since (or when) by food he expands.
3. Such is his greatness, and Purusha is superior to this. All existences are a quarter to him; and three-fourths of him are that which is immortal in the sky.
4. With three-quarters, Purusha mounted upwards. A quarter of him was again produced here. He was then diffused everywhere over things which eat and things which do not eat.
5. From him was born Viraj, and from Viraj, Purusha. When born, he extended beyond the earth, both behind and before.
6. When the gods performed a sacrifice with Purusha as the oblation, the spring was its butter, the summer its fuel, and the autumn its (accompanying) offering.
7. This victim, Purusha, born in the beginning, they immolated on the sacrificial grass. With him the gods, the *Sadhya*s, and the *rishi*s sacrificed.
8. From that universal sacrifice were provided curds and butter. It formed those aerial (creatures) and animals both wild and tame.
9. From that universal sacrifice sprang the *rik* and *saman* verses, the metres and the *yajus*.
10. From it sprang horses, and all animals with two rows of teeth; kine sprang from it; from it goats and sheep.
11. When (the gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? What (two objects) are said (to have been) his thighs and feet?
12. The Brahmana was his mouth, the Rajanya was made his arms; the being called the Vaishya, he was his thighs; the Shudra sprang from his feet.
13. The moon sprang from his soul (manas), the sun from the eye, Indra and Agni from his mouth and Vayu from his breath.
14. From his navel arose the air, from his head the sky, from his feet the earth, from his ear the (four) quarters; in this manner (the gods) formed the worlds.
15. When the gods, performing sacrifices, bound Purusha as a victim, there were seven sticks (stuck up) for it (around the fire), and thrice seven pieces of fuel were made.
16. With sacrifices the gods performed the sacrifice. These were the earliest rites. These great powers have sought the sky, where are the former *Sadhya*s, gods.' ( see Who were Shudras,p. 21,22)

By tracing the origin of the Shudra issue in these verses of *Chaturvarnaya* ,B R Ambedkar finds it easy to further the scope of his critical investigation so that the puzzle of Shudras could be seen from a multiple number of perspectives and thus solved for

getting them the much needed social justice. With reference to *Chaturvarnaya*, Dr Ambedkar establishes that the problem starts from the worldview that develops on the basis of these verses in *Chaturvarnaya* which was a mere cosmogony but later on developed as a full-fledged divinely sanctioned caste system where Shudras were relegated to the fourth Varna of the same. Dr Ambedkar subjects the *Purushasukta* to a serious critical examination in order to show the weakness and fallacies that it has innately in its structure and worldview. In other words, he establishes that the worldview preached and practiced by Brahmins of Indo-Aryan society is nothing but a figment of human imagination and not a divinely sanctioned commandment or worldview. This is how he erodes the myths that make *Purushasukta* unique and great in terms of its worldview:

“What are the features of the social ideal of the *Purusha Sukta*, which give it the hall mark of being unique? Though the existence of classes is the *de facto* condition of every society, nevertheless no society has converted this *de facto* state of affairs into a *de jure* connotation of an ideal society. The scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* is the only instance in which the real is elevated to the dignity of an ideal. This is the first unique feature of the scheme set forth in the *Purusha Sukta*. Secondly, no community has given the *de facto* state of class composition a legal effect by accepting it as a *de jure* connotation of an ideal society. The case of the Greeks is a case in point. Class composition was put forth as an ideal social structure by no less an advocate than Plato. But the Greeks never thought of making it real by giving it the sanction of law. The *Purusha Sukta* is the only instance in which an attempt was made to give reality to the ideal by invoking the sanction of law. Thirdly, no society has accepted that the class composition is an ideal. At the most they have accepted it as being natural. The *Purusha Sukta* goes further. It not only regards class composition as natural and ideal, but also regards it as sacred and divine. Fourthly, the number of the classes has never been a matter of dogma in any society known to history. The Romans had two classes. The Egyptians thought three were enough. The Indo-Iranians also had no more than three classes: 1 (1) The *Athravans*

(priests) (2) *Rathaeshtar* (warriors) and (3) the *Vastrya-fshuyat* (peasantry). The scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* makes the division of society into four classes a matter of dogma. According to it, there can be neither more nor less. Fifthly, every society leaves a class to find its place *vis-a-vis* other classes according to its importance in society as may be determined by the forces operating from time to time. No society has an official gradation laid down, fixed and permanent, with an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt. The scheme of the *Purusha Sukta* is unique, inasmuch as it fixes a permanent warrant of precedence among the different classes, which neither time nor circumstances can alter. The warrant of precedence is based on the principle of graded inequality among the four classes, whereby it recognizes the Brahmin to be above all, the Kshatriya below the Brahmin but above the Vaishya and the Shudra, the Vaishya below the Kshatriya but above the Shudra and the Shudra below all” (Who were Shudras?, p25-26).

In his *Who were Shudras*, Dr Ambedkar goes on exposing the different myths that have been woven by Brahmin scholars. For example, he tells us something revolutionary with reference to *Chaturvarnaya* as to how it makes the real ideal and the ideal real. The following passage sums the whole examination of the second riddle about the uniqueness and extraordinariness of *Chaturvarnaya*:

“In propounding the doctrine of *Chaturvarnya*, the *Purusha Sukta* plays a double game. It proceeds first to raise the real, namely, the existence of the four classes in the Indo-Aryan Society, to the status of an ideal. This is a deception because the ideal is in no way different from facts as they exist. After raising the real to the status of the ideal, it proceeds to make a show of giving effect to what it regards as an ideal. This again is a deception because the ideal already exists in fact. This attempt of the *Purusha Sukta* to idealize the real and to realize the ideal, is a kind of political jugglery, the like of which, I am sure, is not to be found in any other book of religion. What else is it if not a fraud and a deception? To idealize the real, which more often than not is full of inequities, is a very selfish thing to do. Only when a person finds a

personal advantage in things as they are that he tries to idealize the real. To proceed to make such an ideal real is nothing short of criminal. It means perpetuating inequity on the ground that whatever is once settled is settled for all times. Such a view is opposed to all morality. No society with a social conscience has ever accepted it. On the contrary, whatever progress in improving the terms of associated life between individuals and classes has been made in the course of history, is due entirely to the recognition of the ethical doctrine that what is wrongly settled is never settled and must be resettled. The principle underlying the *Purusha Sukta* is, therefore, criminal in intent and anti-social in its results. For, it aims to perpetuate an illegal gain obtained by one class and an unjust wrong inflicted upon another. What can be the motive behind this jugglery of the *Purusha Sukta*? This is the second riddle" (Ibid,31-32).

Similarly, Dr Ambedkar goes on to deconstruct the intent behind comparing the four *varnas* of Indian society to four organs of the Brahma's body, and he, thus, exposes the whole structure of misdeeds in these words :

"The last and the greatest of all these riddles, which emerges out of a sociological scrutiny of the *Purusha Sukta*, is the one relating to the position of the *Shudra*. The *Purusha Sukta* concerns itself with the origin of the classes, and says they were created by God—a doctrine which no theology has thought it wise to propound. This in itself is a strange thing. But what is astonishing is the plan of equating different classes to different parts of the body of the Creator. The equation of the different classes to different parts of the body is not a matter of accident. It is deliberate. The idea behind this plan seems to be to discover a formula which will solve two problems, one of fixing the functions of the four classes and the other of fixing the gradation of the four classes after a preconceived plan. The formula of equating different classes to the different parts of the body of the Creator has this advantage. The part fixes the gradation of the class and the gradation in its turn fixes the function of the class. The *Brahmin* is equated to the mouth of the Creator. Mouth being the noblest part of the anatomy, the *Brahmin* becomes the noblest of the four classes.

As he is the noblest in the scale, he is given the noblest function, that of custodian of knowledge and learning. The *Kshatriya* is equated to the arms of the Creator. Among the limbs of a person, arms are next below the mouth. Consequently, the *Kshatriya* is given an order of precedence next below the *Brahmin* and is given a function which is second only to knowledge, namely, fighting. The *Vaishya* is equated to the thighs of the Creator. In the gradation of limbs the thighs are next below the arms. Consequently, the *Vaishya* is given an order of precedence next below the *Kshatriya* and is assigned a function of industry and trade which in name and fame ranks or rather did rank in ancient times below that of a warrior. The *Shudra* is equated to the feet of the Creator. The feet form the lowest and the most ignoble part of the human frame. Accordingly, the *Shudra* is placed last in the social order and is given the filthiest function, namely, to serve as a menial" (ibid ,p.32-33).

Dr Ambedkar himself gives a thorough understanding of the damages that *Chaturvarnaya* does to the Shudra community through its Manichaen and colonial structure of thought. In his "Preface" to the same book, he makes a very important observation regarding the disastrous effects of *Chaturvarnaya* as it divides the mankind in an inhuman, unjust and discriminatory manner. He writes :

"IN the present stage of the literature on the subject, a book on the Shudras cannot be regarded as a superfluity. Nor can it be said to deal with a trivial problem. The general proposition that the social organization of the Indo-Aryans was based on the theory of *Chaturvarnaya* and that *Chaturvarnaya* means division of society into four classes—*Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (soldiers), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (menials) does not convey any idea of the real nature of the problem of the Shudras nor of its magnitude. *Chaturvarnaya* would have been a very innocent principle if it meant no more than mere division of society into four classes. Unfortunately, more than this is involved in the theory of *Chaturvarnaya*. Besides dividing society into four orders, the theory goes further and makes the principle of graded inequality the basis for determining the terms of associated life as between the four *Varnas*. Again,

the system of graded inequality is not merely notional. It is legal and penal. Under the system of *Chaturvarnya*, the *Shudra* is not only placed at the bottom of the gradation but he is subjected to innumerable ignominies and disabilities so as to prevent him from rising above the condition fixed for him by law. Indeed until the fifth *Varna* of the Untouchables came into being, the *Shudras* were in the eyes of the Hindus the lowest of the low. This shows the nature of what might be called the problem of the *Shudras*. If people have no idea of the magnitude of the problem it is because they have not cared to know what the population of the *Shudras* is. Unfortunately, the census does not show their population separately. But there is no doubt that excluding the Untouchables the *Shudras* form about 75 to 80 per cent of the population of Hindus. A treatise which deals with so vast a population cannot be considered to be dealing with a trivial problem" (Preface, *Who were Shudras*, p.9?).

With observations and inferences like this from the Hindu literature that he researched on, Dr Ambedkar establishes through his critical thinking/reading that all the disabilities, injustices, denial of status and social dignity to *Shudras* is not divinely sanctioned as the *Brahmins* would make us believe but simply means of biological and thought control constructed by *Brahmins* for the degradation and dehumanization of *Shudras*. By asking the two fundamental questions: Who were *Shudras*?; and How they became the fourth *varna* of Indo-Aryan society?, Dr Ambedkar through his research on the subject and critical engagement with the available materials reaches the following conclusions:

"(1) The *Shudras* were one of the Aryan communities of the Solar race.

(2) There was a time when the Aryan society recognized only three *Varnas*, namely, *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas*.

(3) The *Shudras* did not form a separate *Varna*. They ranked as part of the *Kshatriya Varna* in the Indo-Aryan society.

(4) There was a continuous feud between the *Shudra* kings and

the *Brahmins* in which the *Brahmins* were subjected to many

tyrannies and indignities.

(5) As a result of the hatred towards the *Shudras* generated by

their tyrannies and oppressions, the *Brahmins* refused to

perform the *Upanayana* of the *Shudras*.

(6) Owing to the denial of *Upanayana*, the *Shudras* who were

*Kshatriyas* became socially degraded, fell below the rank of

the *Vaishyas* and thus came to form the fourth *Varna*" (Ibid., p.11-12)

Now, the question is how this critical investigation of the *Shudra* riddle is related with the struggle for justice, equality and fraternity in the broader perspective as promised at the very outset of this write up. The answer to this question lies in the fact that all great intellectuals of the world have investigated the truth of truths and spoken it to the face of the oppressors so that they could be convinced by arguments about their unjust governance and dealings with the people. In this context, one may go on quoting from scores of his written materials and speeches how he has laid bare the truth of different issues and problems that India faced and argued for their resolution in a just and reasonable manner. It is in the same context that one may read the book *Who were Shudras?* And take it as an argument against the social injustice that *Shudras* faced, and as an argument for delivering justice to them which happened when finally Dr Ambedkar himself had the honour of writing the constitution of free India. Similarly, one may state that any argumentative writing of a great scholar and activist like Babasahib cannot be treated as mere rhetoric but as policy statement based on sound research that paves the path for the future of a country like India. For example, today when exclusivist forces have caused ripples in the unity of India, it is Babasahib's writings and vision thereof that people across the political spectrum invoke for defeating the fascist agenda of the exclusivist forces in India.



Concluding ,one may assert it with full force that Babasahib used his best energies for the ideals like justice ,equality and freedom of the oppressed class of people .For making this struggle effective and successful ,he wrote around thirty five books and delivered hundreds of speeches all revolving around the core theme of justice and egalitarianism .The subject-mentioned chapter of the book “The Riddle of Shudras” is just one example wherein he has argued against the man-made constructs vis-a-vis the oppression and degradation of Shudra community in India.

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