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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a Historian

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Abstract

Ambedkar was well versed in various disciplines. Hence he was able to contribute with authority to various disciplines. Ambedkar's contribution to history is discussed in the present paper. He examines the various popular theories and their limitation in the understanding and unfolding of events related to history. The paper explores the problem of objectivity, imagination and interpretation as understood by Ambedkar.

Key words : Ambedkar, History, Ranke, Goethe, Will Durant, Buckle, Karl Marx, Thomas Carlyle, Causation, objectivity, Imagination, Interpretation, Documents.

Introduction

Ambedkar was a versatile personality who left an undeniable impression on many subjects including history. The paper examines the methodology adopted by Ambedkar in the writing of history. Ambedkar's notion of history could be looked into on two basic premises:

1) To look at Ambedkar's view of History and in that course to detect his methodology and his inclinations. 2) To narrate the history as understood by him.

Ambedkar was more trained as an economist than a historian. But his involvement in social and political activism had compelled him to develop a long-standing obsession with history. Hence his writings have remained more historical than his concern for any other subject matter.

Analyzing Ambedkar's writings one comes to perceive that he was in favour of the kind of objectivity that Leopold Von Ranke had advocated. Ranke wanted an accurate statement of facts and his thought shaped the 19th century historical writings. Like Ranke, Ambedkar too espoused a great love for accuracy as seen through all his writings. To quote his own words, which has been described at the very introduction of his work 'who were the shudras?' as Ambedkar puts it: An historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interest, fear, resentment or affection; and faithful to the truth, which is the mother of history, the preserver of great actions, the enemy of oblivion, the witness of the past, the director of the future. In short he must have an open mind, though it may not be an empty mind, and readiness to examine all evidence even though it be spurious.¹

But Ambedkar knew very well that Rankean objectivity was the "objectivity of a eunuch", as Arthur Marwick puts it in his work the Nature of History. He felt that adopting Rankean objectivity was to become "bloodless and nerveless", as the German historian Sybel says.² So Ambedkar always wanted to arrive at "Serviceable truth"³. Truth judged from an objective standpoint.

Ambedkar firmly believed in the role, played by great men in shaping history as described by the historian Thomas Carlyle, in his book 'Heros, Hero-worship and Heroics in History'. He never believed in the philosophy that 'Man is the captive of time'. To hold the view that Time, call forth the man and he on his part did nothing, was to wrongly interpret history, was the belief of Ambedkar. He said that there were three different views on the causes of historical changes.

1. The Augustian theory of history, according to which history is only an unfolding of a divine plan, till it is completed on the day of judgement.

2. The view of Buckle, who held that history, was made by Geography and Physics.
3. The view of Karl Marx, according to whom history was the result of economic forces.

Ambedkar says none of these three theories would admit that history is the biography of great men as propounded by Thomas Carlyle. Indeed they all deny man any place in the making of history. According to Ambedkar, the observations of Buckle and Marx do not represent the whole truth. He says that “they are wrong in holding that, impersonal forces are everything and that man is no factor in the making of history. That, impersonal forces are a determining factor cannot be denied. But that the effect of impersonal forces depends on man, must also be admitted.”⁴ He gives a rather glaring analogy that: “. . . flints may not exist everywhere. But where it does exist, it needs man to strike flint against flint to make fire. Seeds may not be found everywhere. But where they do exist, it needs man to ground it to powder and make it a delectable and nutritious paste There are many areas devoid of metals. But where they do exist, it needs a man to make instruments and machines which are the basis of civilization and culture”⁵.

Thayer in his biography of Theodore Roosevelt says, There comes a time in every sect, party or institution when it stops growing, its arteries harden, its young men see no visions, its old men dream no dreams; it lives on the past and desperately tries to perpetuate the past. In politics when this process of petrification is reached we call it Bourbonism and the sure sign of Bourbon is that, being unconscious that he is the victim of sclerosis he sees no reason for seeking a cure. Unable to adjust himself to changed and new conditions he falls back into the past as old man drops into his worn-out arm-chair.

Ambedkar says, “There are periods of decay and possibilities of destruction though which every society has to pass. Some survive, some are destroyed and some undergo stagnation and decay.” But the reason why some survive is to be found in the dictum of Carlyle, who puts it in his characteristic way as: “No time need have gone to ruin, could it have found a great enough, a man wise and good enough; wisdom to discern truly what the time wanted, valour to lead it on to the right road thither, these are the salvation of any Time.”⁶ Ambedkar says, Time may suggest possible new ways. But to step on the right one, is not the work of Time, it is the work of Man. Thereby concluding that “man is a factor in the making of history and that environmental force whether impersonal or social if they are the first are not the last things.”⁷

Ambedkar greatly believed in the ‘Theory of Great Men’ as propounded by Carlyle. After an exhaustive discussion, he holds that a combination of both sincerity and intellect are necessary to make a man great. But these are not necessarily sufficient. A man possessed of these two qualities must be motivated by the dynamics of a social purpose and must act as a scavenger of society. So, as a historian he believed that it was not only important ‘just to state the facts as they are’, but also to have constructive purpose. This was what Ambedkar meant as the “Serviceable Truth”. He also knew that it was impossible as a human to be value neutral. That the historian is governed and moulded by factors of known perceptible environment. Hence the renowned historian Will Durant remarked, “Know the historian before you know his history.”

Ambedkar further says that the ideal before which the historian has to place himself should be as defined by Goethe, who said: The historian’s duty is to separate the true from the false, the certain from the uncertain, and the doubtful from that which cannot be accepted Every investigator must before all things look upon him-self as one who is summoned to serve on a jury. He has only to consider how far the statement of the case is complete and clearly set forth by the evidence. Then he draws his conclusion and gives his vote, whether it be that his opinion coincides with that of the foreman or not.⁸

Ambedkar says, this advice is very valuable and necessary provided the historian does not come across a missing link. It is in this context that the use of imagination becomes relevant and important. Like Causation and Objectivity, Imagination is also one of the important philosophical issues in historical understanding. Today post-modern historians

Richard Roty and Hyden White have used the term imagination to deconstruct.⁹ Further, according to Langlois and Seignobos, the French historians, who say in the very beginning of their work 'Introduction to the study of History' as "No Documents No history", and further, "question for which the documents do not find answers are not questions at all."¹⁰ The implication of these statements is that the Documents are the Be all and End all of history and that all historical reconstruction essentially depends upon documentary evidence. While, as a working principle for a would-be researcher, this statement is good and very useful. But if a serious historian were to stick to this dictum good history would not result from it.

This is because in the due course of historical reconstruction the historian faces the challenge of answering the gaps in history for which there are no documentary evidence at all. These gaps raise certain questions for which the documents do not provide any answers. Such gaps are common as the historian necessarily deals with the historical past. Consequently Langlois, Seignobos and Ranke used the term interpretation. But interpretations have to be used with great precaution. So the first important use of imagination is that, imagination helps fill gaps in historical reconstruction. However, in using imagination to fill gaps through historical reconstruction it has to be remembered that this imagination has to be constructive— in the sense that one should objectively try only to answer the question. Secondly in using imagination, the historian has to keep his reconstruction within the parameters of available documentary evidence.

Ambedkar in the course of his investigation into the study of ancient Indian history says that, he was confronted with many such missing links. As MountStuart Elphinstone has observed, "no date of a public event can be fixed before the invasion of Alexander; and no connected relation of the natural transactions can be attempted until after the Mohammedan conquest."¹¹ In such a case, Ambedkar believes, that it is permissible for him to use his imagination and intuition to bridge the gaps left in the chain of facts by links not yet discovered and to propound a working hypothesis suggesting, how facts which cannot be connected by known facts might have been inter-connected. He feels that rather than holdup the work, it would be prudent enough to resort to constructive imagination to tide-over the difficulty created by the missing links which have come in the way. However if the critics were to refuse such a thesis on the ground of not being based on direct evidence, is considered a bad law according to Ambedkar. For the critics main concern should be to examine whether the thesis is based on pure conjecture or whether the thesis is possible and if so does it fit in with the facts. The thesis therefore in great part should be based on facts and inferences from facts. And where it is not based on facts or inferences from facts, it has to be based on circumstantial evidence of presumptive character resting on considerable degree of probability.¹²

While dealing with an institution the origin of which is lost in antiquity, it is a case of reconstructing history where there are no texts, and if there are, they have no direct bearing on the questions raised. In such circumstances what one has to do is to strive to learn what the texts conceal or suggest without being even quite certain of having found the truth.

The task is one of gathering survivals of the past, placing them together and making them tell the survivals of the past, placing them together and making them tell the story of their birth. The task is analogous to that of the archaeologist who constructs a city from broken stones or of the paleontologist who conceives an extinct animal from scattered bones and teeth.¹³ Hence, he concludes that a trained imagination is a desideratum for no scientific inquiry can be fruitful without it and more so he believes that "hypothesis is the very soul of science."¹⁴

Conclusion

Ambedkar accepting objectivity as the parameter for any historian, over rides it by advocating 'Serviceable truth'. He on his part believed in the intervention of man rather than divinity in the unfolding of events related to history. He was

also in favour of imagination and interpretation to tide over the difficulty of missing link in history. Thus Ambedkar's writings form an essence to any serious historical understanding.

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