# Clearing of the Ground – Ambedkar's Method of Reading

Ankit Kawade[1]

## Abstract

This essay attempts to study and explicate the method of reading as operative in Ambedkar's writings. The essay is organized around five thematic sections, each aimed at discussing a methodological concern guiding Ambedkar's investigations. His engagements with the religious texts of Hinduism in general and the *Manusmriti* (*The Laws of Manu* or *The Law Code of Manu*) in particular have been used here to explicate the substance and implications of what has been described by Aishwary Kumar as Ambedkar's 'politics of reading', a highly suggestive phrase that points towards the political as well as epistemic stakes of Ambedkar's acts of reading.

## Keywords

Ambedkar's writings, clearing ground, Philosophy of Hinduism, caste, Hermeneutics, Dalit studies

## Ambedkar's Historicizing Gesture

In the beginning of his unfinished manuscript titled *Philosophy of Hinduism*, Ambedkar writes, '[i]t is obvious that such a study must be preceded by a certain amount of what may be called **clearing of the ground** …' (1987b, p. 3). Ambedkar often prefaces his studies with reflections upon his way or method of approaching a particular theme or question. In this particular instance, we encounter him using an evocative or a metaphorical term for describing his methodological stance with regard to his subject matter, i.e. outlining the philosophy of Hinduism. He writes about the necessity or imperative of carrying out a preliminary activity before the study of the philosophy of Hinduism proper could begin; and designates that activity as 'clearing of the ground'. An inquiry into Ambedkar's method of reading the *Manusmriti*, which serves as a focal point for all his investigations

[1](M.Phil. Candidate, Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)
E-mail: ankitkawade@hotmail.com

into what he calls the 'literature of Brahminism' (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 239), requires that we pay attention to and interpret what Ambedkar means by the phrase 'clearing of the ground'.

We may begin by asking the following questions – What is that 'ground' which requires a 'clearing'? What do 'clearing' and 'the ground' mean for Ambedkar? We may rely upon cues provided by Ambedkar in his other texts to find possible answers to these questions. It is suggested here that what 'clearing' and 'the ground' mean for Ambedkar is eminently revealed by other evocative or metaphorical terms that Ambedkar uses while describing his way of working through a particular theme, topic, or sets of questions. In the beginning of his unfinished treatise titled *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India,* whose composition begins during the 1940s, Ambedkar writes of the necessity of carrying out an 'exhumation' (1987c, p. 152) of ancient India.[1] The reason and purpose underlying such a task of 'exhumation' concerns the difficulty of knowing ancient India historically. He writes:

> Much of the ancient history of India is no history at all. Not that ancient India has no history. It has plenty of it. But it has lost its character. It has been made mythology to amuse women and children. This seems to have been done deliberately by the Brahminical writers… By this the pith of history contained in it is squeezed out. (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 151)

The distinction between what is 'history' proper as opposed to what is merely 'mythological' in ancient India is important for Ambedkar, with the crucial caveat that what is actually mythology as documented in ancient India has been confused with its history. The deliberate distortion which Ambedkar alleges on the part of 'Brahminical writers' for not having what he calls a 'historical sense' (Ambedkar, 1990b, p. 10) is crucial for outlining his method because it bears an implicative importance for Ambedkar's 'politics of reading' (Kumar, 2013, pp. 127–128) and writing the history of ancient India as such.

Ambedkar is here as conscious of denying the status of historical knowledge to the prevalent history of ancient India as he is in his insistence that ancient India does possess a history, just not the one that we have been told about by Brahminical writers. It is not clear exactly who it is that Ambedkar is referring to here – it might be a reference to professional historians working on ancient India, to leaders within the anticolonial movement who had a scholastic investment in ancient Indian history, or to the writers of *smritis* and *shastras* and their concomitant interpreters and commentators within the

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[1]Ambedkar's usage of the word 'exhumation' has implied a general interest in the 'archaeological' method as pioneered by Michel Foucault in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Moreover, Giorgio Agamben (2009, pp. 81–82) has alerted us to the history of the archaeological method which, as he points out, goes as far back as the works of Immanuel Kant, who had first used the term 'philosophical archaeology'. Agamben (2009, p. 8) also points to the element of an 'archaeological vigilance' as underpinning his own method, writing that 'every inquiry in the human sciences – including the present reflection on method – should entail an archaeological vigilance. In other words, it must retrace its own trajectory back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematized'. The most notable contemporary work which makes use of the archaeological method whose intellectual genealogy is as Foucauldian as it is Ambedkarite, is Gopal Guru's essay *Archaeology of Untouchability*. Guru (2012, p. 222) writes, '… the archaeological method [is] inevitable for the detection of untouchability, which sits deep in the anxious self.'

canonical discourse of Hinduism. The precise scope of his reference notwithstanding, the denial of the status of historical knowledge to what Ambedkar thinks is actually mythology and the insistence that ancient India does possess 'the pith of history' (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 151) is highly significant once we take note of the logic of what may be called Ambedkar's historicizing gesture in reading the history of ancient India. Consider his words:

> Ancient Indian history must be exhumed. Without its exhumation ancient India will go without history. Fortunately with the help of the Buddhist literature, ancient Indian history can be dug out of the debris which the Brahmin writers have heaped upon in a fit of madness. (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 152)

There is a deep sense of urgency with which Ambedkar (1990b, p. 10) approaches the problem of the history of ancient India, and there is a sense of an imperative in his insistence that our knowledge of ancient India must become consistent with 'historical sense'. Why is Ambedkar so perturbed if ancient India goes 'without history'? Why does it strike Ambedkar as so important that ancient Indian history must be rescued from the throes of the mythological beliefs that have formed around it? Moreover, why must its history be 'exhumed'? And what is shown (or shone) forth once the debris above this ground is 'dug out'? In finding out the answers to these questions, we find possible cues towards understanding what Ambedkar means by the phrase 'clearing of the ground' (Ambedkar, 1987b, p. 3).

The 'ground' for Ambedkar refers to the history of ancient India which is so overwhelmed by the debris of mythology above it that it requires a 'clearing'. Indeed, Ambedkar (1987c, p. 152) writes, '[w]ith this exhumation of debris, we can see ancient Indian history in a "new light". Once the ground is cleared, it becomes possible to view ancient Indian history as being different from its mythological overdetermination and thus in a potentially "new light".' What is the character of this 'newness' with which Ambedkar wishes to view ancient India? That he wishes to view it historically and not mythologically is clear enough. However, what is the character of this historicity that Ambedkar is eager and insistent to see established with respect to our knowledge of ancient India? In other words, what is the significance of Ambedkar's gesture to historicize what we know of ancient India, and how is it related to Ambedkar's method of reading?

It is argued here that Ambedkar's historicizing gesture is significant because it inserts the impulses of historicity and temporality into a tradition which is conceptually averse to either of them. This aversion is enabled and accentuated by the religious belief that holds Hinduism to be *sanatan* or eternal in character. 'According to the Hindus,' writes Ambedkar (1987d, p. 128), 'they are sanatan which means that they are "eternally pre-existing".' In the preface to his unpublished manuscript titled *Riddles in Hinduism*, composed during the mid-1940s, Ambedkar writes about the necessity of undermining this belief:

> ...Hindu society has changed from time to time and that often times the change is of the most radical kind... I want to make the mass of people to realize that Hindu religion is not sanatan. (Ambedkar, 1987d, p. 5)

The stakes of inserting historicity and temporality into the gamut of *sanatan dharma* is eminently political, meaning that claims of change of even the most radical

and revolutionary kinds could be envisaged within a religious tradition whose mythological debris prohibits the visibility of the trail of historical changes that have occurred therein. In claiming that Hindu society is 'sanatan', two broadly political aims are achieved. First, such a claim seeks to establish that the condition of the Hindu society has not undergone any significant changes in its very long 'history'; that even with successive foreign invasions, the basic structure of the Hindu society remained unchanged. The resilience of the Hindu society against change is converted into a claim of its normative desirability, such that a tradition which has seen no fundamental or radical change may as well be claimed as normatively so efficacious that it perforce *required* no change. From here, the step towards making the future-oriented claim that denies the necessity of making or carrying out any fundamental change within the Hindu society is easily taken. For its apologists, the Hindu society is 'sanatan' not only in its past but more importantly in its future as well, such that any demand which redacts a structural change within the Hindu society – which would require some measure of discontinuity from its past – is compelled to rely upon its eternalist narrative and made to furnish such justifications which claim a more fundamental continuity with tradition.[2]

Ambedkar, in thus claiming that the Hindu society is not 'sanatan' – that is not 'eternally pre-existing' – denies this tradition's historical as well as future-oriented pretensions. His historicizing gesture is aimed precisely against such a view of eternalism, which has resulted in the belief among the Hindu masses that their social order has followed a particular hierarchical structure since 'eternity' and as such it is bound to follow it in its future as well. The mythologically justified suturing of eternity (past) and infinity (future) in the social and political present – which carries at its base the reactionary demand that the social order remain as it is – is sought to be challenged by Ambedkar's historicizing gesture which arguably witnesses a different suturing: that between time and finitude. The sense of urgency with which Ambedkar insists upon the historicity of ancient India is oriented towards this political demand of recognizing that the Hindu society has seen changes, even the most radical changes, in its history over different temporally distinct periods, and that it is very much capable of seeing similarly radical changes in the present as well as in the future.

Ambedkar's method of reading thus, consists in the insistence upon and documentation of change which forms the content of any historical knowledge of ancient India. The purposes to which the mythology of ancient India is put to use by Brahminical writers is properly shown by Ambedkar to be in service of a reactionary ideology which disclaims the possibility of change as such, whether in the past, present, or the future. Moreover, by denying the concept of eternalism, Ambedkar uncovers the nature of the Brahmanic understanding of time in terms of eternity and infinity which obfuscates the perception or experience of time distinctly in terms of the past, present, and the future. These distinct forms of time become interchangeable in what he calls 'Brahmanic theology' (Ambedkar, 1987d, p. 5) with precise social and political consequences, such that the appearance of the social order in one form of time (present) is made to coincide with others (past and future). In short, by claiming that

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[2]Ashis Nandy (1990, p. 51) describes this phenomenon thus: '… the tradition in India is to alter the dominant culture from within, by showing dissent to be a part of orthodoxy or by reinterpreting orthodoxy in terms of the needs of dissent. This is especially true of ideological deviations or innovations, the type of challenges the society has repeatedly faced and become experienced at handling.'

ancient India does possess a history – which however awaits to be 'exhumed' or 'dug out' (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 152), and by claiming its conventional history as being of the character of mere mythology – Ambedkar opens up or readies the Hindu society for politics as such, where being open to politics implies the readiness to experience even the most radical of changes. This is the precise import of the 'new light' (Ibid) that Ambedkar proposes an exhumation of ancient Indian history or a clearing of its ground would likely bring forward.

## The Road of Rational Thinking

The uses of the method of exhumation and clearing occur in Ambedkar's historical reflections regarding the inquiry into the origin of untouchability as well. In his study titled, *The Untouchables: Who Were They And How They Became Untouchables?* published in 1948, investigative concerns reappear which we have observed as operative in other works written during the same decade. Ambedkar (1990a, p. 244) justifies his methodological approach based on the nature of his subject matter thus:

> My critics should remember that we are dealing with an institution the origin of which is lost in antiquity. The present attempt to explain the origin of Untouchability is not the same as writing history from texts which speak with certainty. It is a case of reconstructing history where there are no texts, and if there are, they have no direct bearing on the question. In such circumstances what one has to do is to strive to divine 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 story of their birth.

That ancient India requires a historical treatment and why the stakes of such a historical treatment are absolutely important for Ambedkar's method of reading have been discussed above. This citation provides us with an idea of what difficulties arise once such a decision to write and to interpret the history of ancient India is made.[3] Ambedkar points to the methodological obstacles faced by an investigator while seeking answers to the question of the origin of untouchability, and suggests the necessity of adopting different protocols and procedures in first ascertaining the very possibility of complete textual reliance for finding the answers to this question. He suggests identifying and paying utmost attention to the points of what the texts 'conceal' (Ibid). It is the text here that becomes the ground which would then require a clearing. Textual debris has to be dug out to find what was buried or concealed underneath it so as to let that ground shine forth under the new light such that it becomes visible to the eyes of the investigator. In doing so, Ambedkar observes that the nature of the institution under question demands a different approach from its historian, such that it becomes possible that the resulting investigation exceeds the work proper of history-writing itself – that it might not be regarded as a work of history at all. The measure of difference between his awareness of falling short of following traditional historiographical approaches to investigate the origins of untouchability and his own professed method is thus expressed by him through the following analogies:

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[3]In a similar vein, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1999, p. 93) observes that '…mythical *ur*-knowledge presents special difficulties to historical research. What it has to do is to reconstruct a tradition that is not at all directly accessible and that, insofar as we know anything about it at all, is penetrated through and through with philosophical and poetic influences.'

> The task is analogous to that of the paleontologist who conceives an extinct animal from scattered bones and teeth or of a painter who reads the lines of the horizon and the smallest vestiges on the slopes of the hill to make up a scene. In this sense the book is a work of art even more than of history. The origin of Untouchability lies buried in a dead past which nobody knows. To make it alive is like an attempt to reclaim to history a city which has been dead since ages past and present it as it was in its original condition.[4] (Ambedkar, 1990a, p. 244)

The analogies drawn between the historian as a paleontologist and the historian as a painter, and more importantly, Ambedkar's temptation to term this study as a 'work of art even more than of history' (Ibid), is suggestive not only of Ambedkar's methodological departures but also indicative of the difficult nature of the question of the origin of untouchability. For Ambedkar, it is not possible to throw light upon the subject of the origin of untouchability if the ground of its existence is itself concealed from our view. Any attempt to throw light upon this question must be preceded by a prior work of clearing, which for Ambedkar represents a particular gesture or disposition of historicization towards ancient India. Such a gesture of historicizing is at the same time a work of making tradition itself heterogeneous. Making a tradition, heterogeneous implies the work of throwing open such possibilities that were (or were not) able to actualize themselves in the past. Where Ambedkar points towards the necessity of not perceiving the Hindu religion as 'sanatan', i.e. as eternal, and recognizing that the Hindu society underwent changes even of the most radical kinds, the attempt is directed against such views which hold tradition, history, or religion to bear out only one set of meanings, while overlooking or actively suppressing such elements which destabilize or seek to revise the mythological narrative of *sanatan dharma*. Ambedkar's attempts to engage with the 'literature of Brahminism' (1987c, p. 239) and his attempt to treat questions of the origin of untouchability with a 'historical sense' (1987c, p. 10) mark out such an attempt of making tradition itself critical, i.e. as a site of heterogeneity.[5] We have already discussed that such an attempt carries the names of 'exhumation' and 'clearing' in Ambedkar's works. However, we may pay attention to another description available within his work which clarifies his concern of treating ancient India historically and not mythologically; which had a decisive

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[4]It is notable that Ambedkar's reliance upon archaeological analogies for their methodological salience is evidenced right from his first published essay titled *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*. In the beginning of that essay, underscoring the importance of examining 'ruins' and 'remains' as a reliable 'guide' within the realm of thought, the young Ambedkar (1979, p. 5) writes, '[y]ou all have visited, I believe, some historic place like the ruins of Pompeii, and listened with curiosity to the history of the remains as it flowed from the glib tongue of the guide. In my opinion a student of Ethnology, in one sense at least, is much like the guide.'

[5]Valerian Rodrigues (2017, p. 107) notes that '[u]nlike the popular perception, Ambedkar does not subscribe to a disembodied modernity but proposes a critical interpretive method to read culture and traditions. He argues for a critical retrieval of culture rather than commit oneself to a partisan other.' Rodrigues' words are directed as a criticism against Partha Chatterjee's (2004, p. 9) view, which states that 'Ambedkar was an unalloyed modernist. He believed in science, history, rationality, and above all, in the modern state for the actualization of human reason.' Another interpretation which contrasts Rodrigues' view of Ambedkar's engagement with the question of tradition is Soumyabrata Choudhury's (2018, p. 106): 'Ambedkar's so-called pragmatism was not a nominalism and his thoughts on religion didn't divulge in the mediocre pieties of hermeneutic philosophies – and philologies – of tradition.'

bearing upon making ancient India's history itself open for political contestations. In the preface of his work *Riddles in Hinduism*, Ambedkar (1987d, p. 5) writes:

> This book is an exposition of the beliefs propounded by what might be called Brahmanic theology. It is intended for the common mass of Hindus who need to be awakened to know in what quagmire the Brahmins have placed them and to lead them on to the road of rational thinking.

Ambedkar's description of the mythological or mythical treatment of ancient India wherein pointers of change are obfuscated is here termed as 'beliefs' central to the propagation of 'Brahmanic theology' (Ibid). According to Ambedkar, the mythic representation of ancient India as unchanging and of Hindu religion as 'sanatan' or eternal is of the nature of unexamined beliefs or convictions. Ambedkar's work was intended for the readership of the Hindu masses that needed to be awakened from their dogmatic slumber and led towards the state of enlightenment. Indeed, such a concern is indicative from the subtitle of *Riddles in Hinduism*, that is '*an exposition to enlighten the masses*'. Ambedkar's engagement with the literature of Brahminism carries a highly critical disposition because of which his method of reading can only be termed as being of the character of 'rational thinking' (Ibid) which, according to him, is what is most absent in the disposition of Brahmanic writers towards Hinduism. The link between throwing light upon something as the metaphorical representation of rational thinking – the link that is clear from the word 'enlightenment' itself – is here evident enough, such that the necessity of viewing ancient India under a new light for Ambedkar can be said to be nothing other than seeing and most importantly *thinking* rationally. Nevertheless, we may still ask what are the elements of such a method of rational thinking for Ambedkar? Put differently, what does thinking rationally involve for Ambedkar?

## A History of Madness

Ambedkar's concern for weaning ancient India away from a mythological treatment towards a properly historical treatment is noteworthy for its methodological innovations in investigating questions, such as the origin of untouchability. In doing so, Ambedkar viewed himself as clearing the ground of the debris that has been heaped upon it by Brahminical writers in 'a fit of madness' (Ambedkar, 1987c, p. 152). It might be said that Ambedkar's efforts at a 'clearing of the ground' – a process he would term 'rational thinking' – was the antithetical correlate to the drive for concealment that Ambedkar observes as operative among Brahminical writers, which is characterized by him as a case of epistemic 'madness' (Ibid).

Nevertheless, Ambedkar is here not merely dismissing such acts of reading that he finds to be inadequate to the substance of the questions under consideration. Indeed, in *Riddles in Hinduism*, when discussing the theory of the origin of mixed castes in the *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar after voicing his utter dissatisfaction with the theory forwarded by Manu and other *smritikaras* (law-givers), asks the question, 'Is there a method in their madness?' (1987d, p. 225). The Shakespearean strain of this question notwithstanding,[6] Ambedkar can be read to have proposed, albeit by way of a question, that even the madness that is operative in Manu may have a method

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[6]See Kumar, 2015, pp. 125–134 for a superb analysis of Ambedkar's reading of the works of Shakespeare.

to it. It is argued here that the *Manusmriti* emerges as the focal point through which Ambedkar seeks to exhume the work of epistemic madness that he observes as being operative in the 'literature of Brahminism'. Ambedkar's work of 'rational thinking' is then nothing other than the aim of writing Brahminism's history of madness. In this regard, Soumyabrata Choudhury (2018, p. 85) writes:

> …the question of "madness" arises in Ambedkar not only for the puzzle of Manu's terrible laws; it also arises in a larger context – the context of 'reason' itself. It arises as the enigma of how can a rational person *not* consider the Hindu caste system, including Manu's laws, mad? Obviously targeted at Gandhi, the judgement is that whoever does not recognize the madness of caste is not being a 'man of reason'.

Keeping such a view in mind, it is possible to argue that madness itself acquires the sense of an ingenuity among the Hindus. Madness is not something which is unremarkable in its appearance, function, and in what Ambedkar (1987b, p. 23) calls its 'operative force'. Madness belongs to the nature and quality of deception, cunning, and mystification: it is capable of vacillating between being cold-blooded on the one hand and breaking into diabolical fury on the other. Recognizing the work of this ideology as madness and charting its social, historical, and political provenances is the beginning of what Ambedkar calls 'rational thinking'. It implies the critical labour that attempts to plot and draw out the vast artifice of untruth that consummates the 'literature of Brahminism', while at the same time not disclaiming a moment of marvel at the sheer genius with which it enthralled most of its interpreters across historical periods, especially in the modern age. What are the elements of the Brahminic 'method' through which this 'madness' operates?

Method, understood in its etymological formulation in Greek as *methodos*, simply means 'way' or 'path', and such an elementary meaning can be evidenced in which the term 'method' and 'approach' are still used interchangeably. Ambedkar shows an implicit awareness of such an etymological trajectory which can be taken to reveal a central element in the 'method' of Manu's 'madness'. 'Manu's ways', Ambedkar (1987c, p. 285) writes, 'are silent and subterranean…' Such an observation is again a pointer of Ambedkar's way or method of reading, where his attention is focused upon Manu's words as much as his silences, and the overall 'subterranean' topology upon which both of these orders of utterances exist within the text of the *Manusmriti*. There is always something implicit, secretive, buried, and covered within the topology of this text whose ground cannot be taken to be that of a smooth surface, such that in a Wittgensteinian manner, Ambedkar can also be seen as treading upon the 'rough ground'[7] leading up to the interpretation of the *Manusmriti*. The grain and the impulse of Ambedkar's insistence upon rational thinking can only be appreciated when such a nature of the literature under investigation is taken into account. The way or method of Manu consists in being 'silent and subterranean', and an act of reading and interpretation of this text, according to Ambedkar, must be of the character of

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[7]Consider the following methodological reflection from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (2009, p. 51e): 'The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement … The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!'

an 'exhumation', where meanings of deliberate silences are sought to be dug out and uncovered from the debris of words that have kept them shrouded.

It is as if Ambedkar forges his methodological departures that are exemplary of 'rational thinking' as against the grain of the epistemic 'madness' of Manu itself, whose method or way is not adequate to merely dismiss as being unimportant towards any theoretical elaboration or explanation. The method that Ambedkar finds as operative in Manu's 'madness' is perhaps proof enough of its sheer hold and grip upon the 'Hindu mind' (1987b, p. 23). And it is precisely towards addressing and appealing to the rationality of the 'Hindu mind' – dormant and unconcerned as it may be in its dogmatic slumber – that Ambedkar writes a text like the *Riddles in Hinduism*. Sample his words:

> The…purpose of this book is to draw attention of the Hindu masses to the devices of the Brahmins and to make them think for themselves how they have been deceived and misguided by the Brahmins. (Ambedkar, 1987d, p. 5)

The insistence that the Hindu masses think for themselves is both an affirmation of their capacity of thinking as well as an acknowledgment that this capacity is kept unused by them. Indeed, to be able to understand Ambedkar's method of reading, his insistence upon thinking for oneself is highly important to underline. Perhaps the central procedural element in Ambedkar's method of reading is the role that is attributed to the importance of the act of questioning itself. It is no coincidence that each chapter within his *Riddles* ends with a question, where each chapter is of the nature of a provocation which invites a response from his intended audience – the 'Hindu masses'. The following analysis seeks to discuss how the central role of the question within Ambedkar's method constitutes the formative element in his acts of reading the 'literature of Brahminism' in general and the *Manusmriti* in particular. It shall be mainly argued that such a methodological insistence where the stance of questioning preponderates is intimately linked to the notions of courage and freedom within Ambedkar's works, such that courage and freedom can be taken to be the two guiding aspects within Ambedkar's acts of reading as such. For Ambedkar, courage is what is required for the exercise of 'freedom of speech' against a tradition which he argues is so averse to questioning and being questioned in the first place.

## Love of Truth

Ambedkar is painfully aware about the unwelcome reception of his presence within the field of studying religion and religious history. Such an awareness should enable us to appreciate the intensity of the demand of courage in engaging with religious scriptures which Ambedkar was ritually forbidden from accessing as an untouchable. His awareness of working in a field whose highly-placed practitioners mark either an active animosity or a passive conspiracy of silence towards his desire of exercising the right to think is expressed by him in the following words:

> …some may question my competence to handle the theme. I have already been warned that while I may have a right to speak on Indian politics, religion and religious history of India are not my field and that I must not enter it. I do not know why my critics have thought it necessary to give me this warning. If

it is an antidote to any extravagant claim made by me as a thinker or a writer, then it is unnecessary. For, I am ready to admit that I am not even competent to speak on Indian politics. If the warning is for the reason that I cannot claim mastery over the Sanskrit language, I admit this deficiency…15 years ought to be enough to invest even a person endowed with such moderate intelligence like myself, with sufficient degree of competence for the task. As to [the] exact measure of my competence to speak on the subject, this book will furnish the best testimony. It may well turn out that this attempt of mine is only an illustration of the proverbial fool rushing in where the angels fear to tread. But I take refuge in the belief that even the fool has a duty to perform, namely, to do his bit if the angel has gone to sleep or is unwilling to proclaim the truth. This is my justification for entering the prohibited field. (Ambedkar, 1990b, p. 11)

Ambedkar's 'justification' for deciding to enter the field of religion and religious history marks two highly crucial interpretive moments. First, his awareness of the lack of mastery over the Sanskrit language is set aside by him as being the decisive criterion of competency. It is fairly well known that Ambedkar had desired to learn Sanskrit but was summarily disallowed by his teachers during his early schooling years. As a result, he had to instead learn Persian in his school. It was only much later in 1921–22 at the University of Bonn in Germany that he could begin to learn Sanskrit, indicating the sheer difficulty for an untouchable to have learned, let alone mastered, Sanskrit in India during his time (and surely, in our time as well). Second, Ambedkar's awareness of the dangers of treading upon such a 'prohibited field' is presented both with humility and courage, as expressed by Ambedkar in evocative terms using the metaphors of 'sleep' or slumber again. Ambedkar's metaphorical usage of sleep with the angel's unwillingness to speak the truth is contrasted with the image of the fool who may be innocent but certainly not foolish, in that she is aware that what Ambedkar (1987c, p. 290) calls the 'rights of intelligence' hold out a sense of duty, namely, that of speaking the truth.

What makes religion and religious history of India so decisive for Ambedkar that he finds it essential to enter it even at the risk of trespassing into a 'prohibited field' (Ambedkar, 1990b, p. 11) is because that is where he thinks the weight of the debris of epistemic 'madness' is the greatest, and equally importantly, where the work of 'rational thinking' is most necessary. Religion and religious history in this case constitute the 'ground' which requires 'clearing', and the fact that his critics do not see this necessity is the surest evidence of their dogmatic sleep. This dogmatism is represented for Ambedkar in their hubris that mastery over Sanskrit automatically transforms them into possessors of truth. Here, we may take a cue from Martin Heidegger (1981, p. 8) and state that for Ambedkar, the '[r]eadiness to confront the inception of our history thus remains more vital than any knowledge of languages.' It was precisely this readiness which distinguished or separated, according to Ambedkar, his effort at studying the religious history of India as against his critics. It might also be said that for his critics Ambedkar was most lacking in holding forth what Heidegger (1981, p. 7) terms a 'love of antiquity', that his efforts at reading sacred scriptures critically or rationally were a mark of his dismissal or hatred of tradition itself. Against such a 'love of antiquity' demanded by his critics, Ambedkar (1987b, p. 86) instead holds out what he terms a 'love of truth' within his investigations. To the eyes of the investigator who wishes 'to point to a new way of looking at old things' (Ambedkar,

1990a, p. 242), nothing is outside the ambit of inquiry, least of all antiquity and sacred scriptures. Here Ambedkar's (1987d, p. 9) efforts at 'stirring the masses' towards the 'road of rational thinking' (Ibid, p. 5) is most reminiscent of the following view of Immanuel Kant, who similarly disclaimed against orthodox voices which sought to take religion out of the purview of rational thinking:

> Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit. Religion through its holiness and legislation through its majesty commonly seek to exempt themselves from it. But in this way they excite a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to that unfeigned respect that reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination. (Kant, 1998, p. A xi)

When Ambedkar (1987b, p. 8) says that '[r]eligion must be put on its trial', that is religion must be opened up towards what Kant would call a 'free and public examination', the place of questioning in his method of reading becomes eminently clear. There is a moment in his *Philosophy of Hinduism* where Ambedkar anticipates the first and perhaps the most insurmountable difficulty by way of the reception of his investigations among his intended audience of the Hindu masses. He writes, '…when one begins the inquiry one meets with an initial difficulty. The Hindu is not prepared to face the inquiry' (Ibid, p. 22). What makes the Hindu so reticent towards inquiry or questioning, according to Ambedkar? Why does Ambedkar declare that the Hindu does not wish to 'face' Hinduism's trial where Ambedkar wanted to 'assess its worth as a way of life' (Ibid, p. 5)? Was it that the reluctance towards coming face-to-face with Hinduism's trial at the hands of an accomplished legal advocate that Ambedkar was, marked already in the Hindu an anticipatory admission of their own guilt?

To ascertain the reasons behind this recalcitrance of the Hindu towards questioning as such, Ambedkar turns towards the *Manusmriti*. For him, it is in the *Manusmriti* that the Hindu impetus against questioning and being questioned, 'rational thinking' and 'love of truth' – in short, the method of its 'madness' – acquires its historical inception. Such an exposition of the *Manusmriti* in Ambedkar's works is linked to the claim that there was an absence of what he terms 'freedom of speech' in ancient India. He views the *Manusmriti* as exemplifying this absence whose injunctions carry explicit prohibitions upon the act of questioning. Ambedkar (1987a, pp. 114–115) cites the following verses from the *Manusmriti* to substantiate the claim.[8]

> II. 10. But by Sruti (revelation) is meant the Veda, and by Smriti (tradition) the Institutes of the sacred law: those two must not be called into question in any matter, since from those two the sacred law shone forth.[9]

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[8]Throughout his writings, Ambedkar uses Georg Bühler's translation of the *Manusmriti* as it appeared in the series of texts edited by Max Müller titled *Sacred Books of the East*. For additional reference, Wendy Doniger's and Patrick Olivelle's translations are also provided as footnotes for each verse quoted by Ambedkar from the *Manusmriti*. The variations in each of these editions make us realize to what extent one's interpretation of the text is determined by the translation one chooses to rely upon.

[9]II.10.—'The Veda should be known as the revealed canon, and the teachings of religion as the tradition. These two are indisputable in all matters, for religion arose out of the two of them' (Doniger, 2000, pp. 17–18); '"Scripture' should be recognized as 'Veda', and 'tradition' as 'Law

> II. 11. Every twice-born man, who, relying on the Institutes of dialectics, treats with contempt those two sources (of the law), must be cast out by the virtuous, as an atheist and a scorner of the Veda.[10]

> IV. 30. Let him (householder) not honour, even by a greeting, heretics, men who follow forbidden occupations, men who live like cats, rogues, logicians, (arguing against the Veda,) and those who live like herons.[11]

Ambedkar interprets these verses as embodying the fact that although a certain degree of freedom of speech was allowed in ancient India, the scope of its exercise was sought to be circumscribed when it came to the *Vedas* and the *Smritis*. However, consecrating a set of books as being divine and thus closed for questioning was by itself unremarkable for Ambedkar, for such a phenomenon could be observed among other religious traditions in the world as well. Ambedkar interprets Manu's prohibition upon questioning as implicating the issue of freedom of speech in ancient India, and more specifically, the scope allowed for the exercise of this freedom. In his view, the specificity of not only the *Manusmriti* but the whole of the 'literature of Brahminism' lies in the fact that they consecrate or render divine and inviolable the fourfold social structure of *varnashrama dharma* as such, thereby consecrating the principles of hierarchy and rank with it. Ambedkar is emphatic in arguing that the Hindus are quite singular when it comes to consecrating not merely a scripture (as many other religious traditions have historically done) but the social order prescribed and sanctified by it, something which was not done by the holy books of other religions.

## Necessary Originality

Ambedkar (1987a, p. 114) further argues that the prohibition upon questioning relegates freedom of speech only to 'those who are in favour of the social order'. To protect the sacred character of the social order of caste, Manu goes to the length of legislating that those who seek to rely on the 'Institutes of dialectics' (or what Doniger has translated as 'logic' and Olivelle 'science of logic' – must be 'cast out' from the bounds of the social order itself, i.e. rendered excommunicated or ostracized. This is evident when Manu prescribes the householder not to greet 'heretics' and 'logicians', and it is important to note that the definitions of who is an atheist, a logician, or a 'dialectician' in ancient India depended entirely upon one's questioning stance towards the *Vedas*. However, Ambedkar does not merely point towards the fact of the *Manusmriti* prohibiting such speech as directed against the social order. In his commentary to these verses, Ambedkar (1987a) simultaneously emphasizes upon

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Treatise'. These should never be called into question in any matter, for it is from them that the Law has shined forth.' (Olivelle, 2004, p. 23)

[10]II.11. — 'Any twice-born man who disregards these two roots (of religion) because he relies on the teachings of logic should be excommunicated by virtuous people as an atheist and a reviler of the Veda' (Doniger, 2000, p. 18); 'If a twice-born disparages these two by relying on the science of logic, he ought to be ostracized by good people as an infidel and a denigrator of the Veda.' (Olivelle, 2004, p. 23)

[11]IV.30. — 'He should not give honour, even with mere words, to heretics, people who persist in wrong action, people who act like cats, hypocrites, rationalists, and people who live like herons' (Doniger, 2000, p. 77); 'He must never honour the following even with a word of welcome: ascetics of heretical sects; individuals engaging in improper activities, observing the 'cat vow', or following the way of herons; hypocrites; and sophists.' (Olivelle, 2004, p. 67)

the crucial importance of the exercise of freedom of speech against an unfree social order. He says, 'In the freedom [of speech] there is not freedom for dialecticians, no freedom for logicians to criticize the social order [,] which means there is no freedom at all' (Ibid, p. 115). This comment is highly significant because it not only indicates the formative context where Ambedkar's later efforts at institutionalizing freedom of speech during his constitutional engagements acquires its pedagogical or discursive ground, but also for its insistence in seeing freedom of speech as being the ontological condition which makes the articulation of unfreedom and the political demand for freedom possible in the first place.

Freedom of speech here is associated with speaking against the social order, implying that the true value of free speech is realized when it becomes a criticism of unfreedom. Fostering freedom in the realm of speaking and thinking is important because it opens up the possibility of articulating an opinion or a judgment against unfree social institutions, thus making possible the political demand for other kinds of freedom as well.

Ambedkar points out one more political consequence of the prohibition of questioning as found in the *Manusmriti*. The 'Hindu mind' is highly averse to questioning and in turn, to being questioned, thus marking a deleterious effect upon freedom of speech. He makes the following observation underlining the reasons for which we must value the condition of free speech:

> It [freedom of speech] is a necessary condition of all progress intellectual, moral, political, and social. Where it does not exist the status quo becomes stereotyped and all originality even the most necessary is discouraged. (Ambedkar, 1987a, p. 98)

Originality here is proposed by Ambedkar as being the first casualty of the injunctions against free speech in the *Manusmriti*, evidenced by the aversion towards questioning that he found as operative among the Hindu masses, including its highly-placed intellectuals. Ambedkar can be interpreted here as saying that for new institutions, relations, sensibilities, and dispositions – in short, for a new order to emerge – the occurring of new forms of *thinking* is the most 'necessary' (Ibid). Unoriginality in the realm of thinking is here linked as being the logical counterpart of an unfree social order, where the consequences of unfreedom reach the most remote recesses of the mind, such that it is no longer able to think or imagine any other possibility other than what it is currently living (and dying from).

Originality here is used as a noun and not as a predicate for something, such that we can interpret Manu's injunctions against questioning not only discouraged original thinking but also original social relations or an original social order itself. For example, Ambedkar attempts to criticize such authors who find the *Purusha Sukta* in the *Rig Veda* and the *Manusmriti* as being highly unique or original in proclaiming the origin of social classes from the divine body of the creator, and thus positively desirable on account of this uniqueness. Ambedkar (1990b, p. 25) writes, '[t]he *Purusha Sukta* would really have been unique if it had preached a classless society as an ideal form of society.' It is important to underline that Ambedkar uses the term 'classless society' here, in making the more fundamental point that the literature of Brahminism's most striking unoriginality comes to the fore in its repetitive upholding of the idea of inequality and hierarchy, and how that renders Hinduism rather unoriginal

among other world religions. Hinduism would really have stood out as being unique or original among world religions if it had advocated for a 'classless society' (Ibid), i.e., if it would have done or thought something unprecedented in its official capacity as a religion.

## Conclusion: Ambedkar's 'Public Solitude'

The essay had begun with the claim of underlining the political as well as the epistemic stakes of Ambedkar's acts of reading. Such a claim enables us to not only highlight the radicalization of reading that is achieved within Ambedkar's politics, but also helps us appreciate the relation between reading and collective action within forms of emancipatory politics as such. Such a radicalization of reading for politics resembles the productive relation as existing between 'theory' and 'practice' within the Marxist tradition of thought. For even if reading and thinking may constitute acts which require the condition of solitude, Ambedkar's acts of reading and thinking take place within a context which is nonetheless not 'privative'. His acts of reading and thinking, which singularly exceed the removes of such thinkers' private solitude which render them politically inconsequential, may be characterized in terms of what may be called Ambedkar's 'public solitude'.[12] The concept of 'public solitude' aids us in highlighting the grain of Ambedkar's thinking as having taken place within the context of the rough and tumble of his strenuous political engagements and activism. It gives us an idea of not only what it meant to be a political philosopher in twentieth-century India, but also what a thinking in public, which is gathered from the midst of a tremendous and sorrowful solitude may look like.

## Acknowledgement

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[12] I owe this concept to the public teachings of Prof. Soumyabrata Choudhury in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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