

Ambedkar's Critique of *Sacred* Testimonies and Liberatory Practices

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Introduction

Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), a contemporary Indian thinker and the chief architect of the Constitution of India, has significantly impacted the socio-religious landscape of India. His vision of social change derives from the subversion of the “grand narrative” rooted in the Hindu religious scriptures which govern the religious-cultural predicament of Indian society. Ambedkar’s method can be regarded as critical, hermeneutic, inter-textual and historical in nature. It is through these methodological stances, he vehemently questions the role of Vedic testimony for committing violence of social injustice, particularly, in shaping the destiny of the Untouchables¹ and women. In intertwining social injustice and knowledge-question, Ambedkar can be aligned with the contemporary Western discourse on epistemic injustice that has evolved interest in critically evaluating the testimonial aspect of knowledge. As a valid epistemic practice, testimony, in the ordinary sense, is recognition of the cognitive labour and epistemic contribution of people in terms of their beliefs and justifications. Articulation of testimony, particularly, in creating and fostering social identity which is exclusionary in nature, nonetheless, is the site of epistemic, ethical and social injustices. Besides the idea of personal testimony, there is another conception of testimony, where certain texts are granted insurmountable authority. When the textual authority becomes coercive in constituting social identities and causing social pathologies, the method of critical hermeneutics, in bringing the texts within the ambit of interpretations

1 The Untouchables or Dalits, below the category of Shudras in the Hindu social system, were considered so because they were forced to remove human waste and animal carcasses. Ambedkar termed them ‘broken men’. (Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji: The Essential Writings of B R Ambedkar. New Delhi 2002, 114). The term untouchable is rarely used by Indians, including Indian anthropologists, who prefer to use various euphemisms such as ‘harijans’, a word coined by Gandhi, which means the people of God, or Scheduled Castes, their official name in modern India. The Untouchables are distributed over hundreds of castes all over India.

and reconstruction serves as a tool for social change. It is against this sense of testimonial verdict in the hegemonic Hindu religious scriptures, that Ambedkar's critique and life-long activism is associated with. This paper analyses Ambedkar's critique in relation to 1) how does social injustice emanate from epistemic injustice and 2) how can he contribute to the contemporary Western discourse of epistemic injustice and liberatory practices?

1. Testimony in Indian Philosophy

Indian philosophical systems, recognize testimony as a valid source of knowledge. The words of trustworthy persons are considered secular (*laukika*) testimony but fallible, while the Vedas² (the oldest extant texts of India) are considered impersonal and infallible. The Vedas are considered the valid source of supra-sensible or extra-empirical knowledge because their author is the all-knowing God. Among the systematic Indian epistemology in the philosophical systems of Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Nyāya and Advaita, testimony is considered a valid source of knowledge. The Mīmāṃsā believed in the Vedas, originally orally transmitted, and considered them as consisted of meaning-bearing sounds³ which are equally eternal.⁴ They are self-evident and *apaaurusheya* (not composed by any human person). Sāṃkhya also holds the view that human persons cannot be the authors of the Vedas as the liberated ones have no concern with them, and those who are not liberated are not competent for this work.⁵ The Vedānta, particularly, the Advaita, says that whenever there is a conflict between perception and inference (inferential reasoning) as sources of knowledge, the knower should accept the latter; similarly, in a situation of conflict between inference and scriptural testimony, the latter is to be accepted.⁶ Indian epistemologies grant inherent validity and authority to the scriptures on the Hindu ritualistic and sacrificial practices. Given the epistemic

2 Veda means "sacred knowledge", and divided into four parts: Rīg, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. Each Veda has sub-divisions: the Samhita "Mantra" collections, Brahmana "theological/ritual commentary," Aranyaka "wilderness texts," and Upanisads "metaphysical treatise" (See Flood, Gavin: Vedas and Upanisads. in: Flood, Gavin (ed.): The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism. Maldon 2013, 66–101, 69).

3 Samadder, Sanjoy: Indian and Western Perspective of Verbal of Testimony, Calcutta 2015, 28.

4 The authorial argument of Indian philosophers affirms the eternity of the Vedas. The particular order of words in the Vedas is considered as permanent because the words in the Vedas are not arranged by any agent, human or divine (See Mahadevan, T M P: Outlines of Hinduism, Michigan 1961, 133).

5 Sanjoy: Indian Western Perspectives of Verbal Testimony, 35–36.

6 Ibid., 102.

role of scriptural injunctions, they constitute the conceptions of knowledge, justification and rationality and thereby people's beliefs, identity and the moral purpose of life. In legitimizing the foundation of society, and also in building the narrative of what could be an "ideal society," they occupy epistemic privilege and exercise social power. However, the epistemic-social dynamics of Vedic testimony results in a society which is stratified and ruled by the upper class called the Brahmins. The Brahmanical hegemony in holding socio-political and economic power, is divisive in creating a class-structure.

According to Ambedkar, the religious literature of the Hindus, includes (1) The Vedas, (2) The Brahmanas, (3) The Aranyakas, (4) Upanishads, (5) Sutras, (6) Itihas, (7) Smritis and (8) Puranas having no superior and inferior distinctions⁷ until the claim made about the infallibility of the Vedas. He argues that the Hindu Scriptures are enmeshed in contradictions and absurdities which make the infallibility of Vedas a "riddle."⁸ The ancient sages treated Vedas as a human and historical product⁹ and some respectable and authoritative groups even opposed the Vedas as books of authority.¹⁰ According to Ambedkar, there was also a time in India, when the Vedas along with tradition, moral instructions and agreement in an assembly were considered authorities until the time of Gautama, the founder of Nyaya school and author of *Nyaya Sutra*, when the Vedas occupied the sole authority. He also objects that there is anything spiritually and morally elevating in Vedic injunctions. Analysing Ambedkar, Sikder points out that the higher caste used them as methods to establish themselves as the sole authority and induced fear that people would be deprived of the joys of heaven, if the Vedic injunctions were not followed.¹¹

Ambedkar's critical approach to the scriptural testimony becomes significant in questioning the legitimacy of *Varna*¹² system, the four-fold division of classes as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This four-fold division finds its basis in *Purushasuktha* hymn of Rig Veda 10.7.90.1-16 which presents a grand view of "primordial man" dissecting himself to create the human society. The hymn says, his mouth

7 Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Writings and Speeches Vol. 4, Maharashtra 1987, 53.

8 Ambedkar identifies different riddles in relation with Hindu practices: 1) the riddle of knowing why one is a Hindu, 2) the riddle in declaring the Vedas as unquestionable and infallible, 3) the riddle of Ahimsa, 4) the riddle on infighting of the Hindu gods and 5) the riddle on the human and animal sacrifices (See Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji: Riddles in Hinduism the Annotated Critical Selection, New Delhi 2016).

9 Ambedkar: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, 29.

10 Ibid., 31

11 Sikder, Sayanti: An Overview of Five Riddles from Ambedkar's "Riddles in Hinduism", in: <http://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/> (20/11/2023).

12 Literally 'varna' means colour and it originates from the word 'Vr' which means classification. See Karan, Balaram: *Varna Jati and Reverse Discrimination*, Calcutta 2022, 20.

becomes the priestly class (Brahmins), his arms warriors (Kshatriyas), his thighs artisans (Vaishyas) and his feet servants (Shudras). Beneath is the place for the Untouchables.¹³ Also, among different theories on Indian caste system, the “traditional theory”¹⁴ presents caste as of divine origin and an extension of the *Varna* system. *Varna* and caste, often used interchangeably, represent two forms¹⁵ of social stratification. *Manusmriti* (one of the legal texts of Hinduism) advocated the *Purushasuktha* hymn as a divine injunction and claimed that the hierarchy is established by assigning each group its duties and obligations based on birth and corresponding status and privileges. Also, it enforced restricted socialization as marriages between the members of different castes and eating together were prohibited. Ambedkar calls these scriptural directives as of “criminal intent and anti-social in its results.”¹⁶

In consonance with the above-mentioned hymn, Bhagavad Gita Chapter 18, verse 41, states that occupations of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are well-divided on the basis of inherent *gunas* (qualities): *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (valor), and *tamas* (darkness). Each social group takes up activities according to their natural tendencies and skills, and contribute to the welfare of the society. Four *Varnas* dwelling on three *gunas*, however, is illogical according to Ambedkar.¹⁷ Also, the ideal of four-fold division is faulty as “the lumping together of individuals into a few sharply marked off classes is a very superficial view of man and his power”¹⁸ and it does injustice both to the individual and the society.¹⁹ The Gita also directs that a wise man should not produce doubts in the minds of ignorant persons toward the observance of the duties of *Varna* and warns that salvation without it is not possible. This means however great a devotee may be, a person from lower class, has to live and die in the service of the higher classes. Societal acceptance of the testimonial injunctions, Ambedkar argues, form a shared set of normative beliefs and dogmas about the class-composed society.

13 Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji: Who Were the Shudras, Bombay 1949, 11.

14 Ghurye, Govind Sadashiv: Caste and Race in India, Bombay 1969, 162–163.

15 The distinctions between the two are: 1) *Varnas* are four in number whereas castes are innumerable, 2) The caste system is based on birth while the *Varna* system is based on occupation, 3) *Varna* system has the sanction of the religion, that is, Hinduism, whereas the caste system does not have this sanction (Ibid., 792).

16 Tharoor, however, critiques Ambedkar’s sweeping denunciations of Hinduism as they left no room to admit those Hindus, who rejected and refused caste rules. According to him, Hinduism of spiritual enquiry and philosophical debate by Vivekananda and Sree Sankara were inclusive in nature. Moreover, the Hinduism of the Bhakti movement and of millions of Hindu homes encouraged pluralistic practices. (See Tharoor, Sasi: B.R. Ambedkar Flawed Genius, in: <https://open.themagazine.com/lounge/books/br-ambedkar-flawed-genius/> (22/11/2023)).

17 Ambedkar: The Writings of B R Ambedkar, 279.

18 Pandit, Nalini: Ambedkar and the Bhagavad Gita, in: Economic and Political Weekly 27 (1992) 21/22, 1063–1065, 1065.

19 Ambedkar: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, 321.

2. Scriptural Dominance and Social Marginalization in the Indian Context

The *Varna* system in invoking the idea of eternal servitude, Ambedkar argues, has created the category of Untouchables, the official doctrine of Brahminism.²⁰ An Untouchable is refused public water facilities, education, places of worship, eating with other classes etc. The discriminatory practices, supported by the scriptures, have made the Untouchables a depressed class. This is a unique phenomenon unknown to humanity, except the Hindus, where “power, position, money and politics fail in front of the caste-based discrimination.”²¹ Ambedkar himself suffered the brunt of social discrimination and deprivation since childhood as he belonged to the Mahar community, a category of untouchable. The Indian caste system, finding its basis in *varna*, creates a graded social order based on birth and perpetuates hierarchical structure in fixity of occupations, graded wage structure, forced labour, and graded punishments. Equally, education, knowledge and salvation are debarred for Shudras²² and also for women. Ambedkar writes:

India is the only country where the intellectual class, namely, the Brahmins not only made education their monopoly but declared acquisition of education by the lower classes, a crime punishable by cutting off of the tongue or by the pouring of molten lead in the ear of the offender.²³

Hindu Scriptural injunctions, especially *Manusmriti* besides sanctioning the *Varna*, treated women as subservient to men having no independent power of decision for marriage, selection of partner, choices of life and right to dignity portraying them

20 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 96.

21 Pahari, Ananya: Analysis of Caste-based Discrimination through the Spectacles of Bhimayana. Incidents in the Life of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, in: The Creative launcher 6 (2021) 5, 90–100, 99.

22 Under the system of Chaturvarnya, the shudras were subjugated by brahmins and were placed at the bottom of the gradation and were subjected to innumerable ignominies so as to prevent them from rising above the conditions fixed for them by law. Ambedkar considered the Untouchables and the Shudras as servile classes (See Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 146, 385). Scholars also opine that early representatives of the people who were later called Untouchables were of a lower status than the Shudras. Sometimes they were called “the fifth caste,” but brahmin authorities insisted that they were outside the Aryan social order. It is likely that all Untouchables were later labelled as “Shudras,” (See Gandhi Raj S: The Practice of Untouchability. Persistence and Change, in: Humboldt Journal of Social Relations 10 (1982) 1, 254–275, 259.

23 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 146.

as seducers and responsible for unjust acts.²⁴ Social stratification sanctified by the scriptural injunctions creates a dominant narrative that makes the lower class and caste a sub-human category. Ambedkar is equally critical of his contemporaries in endorsing the *Varna* system and not doing enough for the depressed class.²⁵

3. Ambedkar's Critique of Scriptures and Contemporary Discourse of Epistemic Injustice

Ambedkar's critical views on social injustice draw heavily from the epistemic wrongs caused by the Hindu scriptures. The Hindu scriptures, as a dominant normative framework, infested with power of social exclusion, if analysed with Miranda Fricker's theory, would be a "practically situated capacity to control other's action"²⁶ and augment "powerlessness" to the lowest strata. The prejudiced and disadvantaged position of the Untouchables and women can also be aligned with Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice, the credibility-deficit on account of a person's perceived social identity, and hermeneutic injustice for denying them the resources for understanding and producing the testimonies of their experiences of social exclusion.²⁷ The situation in this context is more serious as the marginalized is devoid of the right to speak as a participant of a community. One may also relate it with the notion of "epistemic smothering,"²⁸ a coerced silencing, which is the product of history of marginalization in which power structures create or preserve a given social order impeding speaker's capacity as an epistemic agent by restricting her access to epistemic exchanges. The epistemic authority of the Scriptures perpetuates social exclusion and hence epistemic silences. And, as Amandine Catala argues, the severe imbalance of power between the dominant and nondominant groups arbitrarily characterizes the nondominant group as epistemically unworthy.²⁹ Imbalances of power and resources between the oppressed and the oppressor

24 For example, Manusmriti 15:9 – *By running after men like whores, by their fickle minds, and by their natural lack of affection these women are unfaithful to their husbands even when they are zealously guarded here.*

25 Ambedkar argues that Gandhi endorsed that *Varna* is a matter of birth, so, profession is a heredity. This made class and income structures sacrosanct leading to rich/poor, high/low, owner/worker divisions leaving no room for social endosmosis. (See Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 160).

26 Fricker, Miranda: *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford 2007, 13.

27 Fricker, Miranda: *Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege*. in: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 29 (1999) 1, 191–210, 207–208.

28 Dotson, Kristie: *Tracking Epistemic Violence. Tracking Practices of Silencing*, in: *Hypatia* 26 (2011) 2, 236–257, 244.

29 Catala, Amandine: *Democracy, Trust, and Epistemic Justice*. in: *The Monist* 98 (2015) 4, 424–440, 429.

also diminish practical ways of effecting social change. Such social conditions which hinder the ability of individuals to live worthily demands the necessity of apt “recognition” that neutralizes structural prejudices as Paul Giladi³⁰ argues, and the formation of “network solidarity”³¹ that fosters pluralism for effective resistance. Ambedkar advocated for genuine recognition of the depressed class³² and formed diverse networks³³ amongst them to exterminate privileges of the higher castes. For him, “the wall built around caste is impregnable and the material, of which it is built, contains none of the combustible stuff of reason and morality. Add to this the fact that inside this wall stands the army of Brahmins, who form the intellectual class.”³⁴ At the All India Depressed Class Conference (1942), Ambedkar's appeal was to “educate, agitate and organize”³⁵ themselves. Lack of education minimizes the aspirations of the Untouchable; therefore, education is necessary for free thinking and to ameliorate their lives.

Social inequalities and sufferings within the Indian society, resultant upon the *sacred* scriptures, and importantly, hard resistances to social change forced Ambedkar to reconstruct the “text” which upholds democratic values. His faith in the constitutional democracy, in the Constitution of India, in his life-long struggle for social-political justice for the marginalized is built on several interlinked notions. In a society where untouchability and inequality had been institutionalized, based on Hindu scriptures, Ambedkar realized that the marginalized people will not get dignified life without the Constitution. His activism and demand for social justice has a unique blend of rationality and religion as the basis of democratic living. Religion, for him, is ethical to the core, and is a matter of principles. When it deteriorates into rules, it becomes a repository of commands or prohibitions. Religion as principle is intellectual in nature and offers useful methods for right course of action.³⁶ Ambedkar is equally emphatic that annihilation of caste requires only a notional change³⁷

30 Giladi, Paul: Epistemic Injustice. A Role for Recognition, in: *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 44 (2018) 2, 141–158, 145.

31 Medina, Jose: The Epistemology of Resistance. Gender and Racial Oppression Epistemic Injustice and Resistant Imaginations, Oxford 2013, 308.

32 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 9.

33 Sudhakar, Santhosh: Mukti Kon Pathe. Caste and Class in Ambedkar's Struggle, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 52 (2017) 49, 61–68, 63.

34 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 297.

35 Tandale, Dadasaheb: Educate, Agitate, Organize. Rising to the Clarion Call of Dr. Ambedkar, in: South Asian American Digital Archive <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/educate-agitate-organize> (10/4/2024).

36 Ibid., 298.

37 Ibid., 289.

to correct the fallacious caste-based discriminations. Antithetical to the Brahmanical orthodox ideology, he finds in Buddhism the egalitarian values of rational-moral society.

Ambedkar's embracement of Buddhism, and finally his religious conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism, is also not without rational interventions. He disagrees with the Buddhist doctrine of noble truths as it represents the Brahmanical theory of action (karma) and rebirth. Human suffering, for him, is socially inflicted, hence, living a dignified life is also to be cultivated as a social value. This social character, nonetheless, is available in the Buddhist principle of righteousness³⁸ which embodies wisdom (prajna) and love (karuna). For Ambedkar, a rational Buddha, whose activity is animated by the desire to uproot injustice and oppression is driven by an ethic of care.³⁹ He views democracy as *true* religion which provides ethical and rational basis in principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.⁴⁰ As Stroud remarks about Ambedkar, the trio "served as semi-transcendent values that offered a fallibilistic flexibility that was foreign to the Vedic tradition of sanatana (eternal) philosophy and dharma (morality) that he targeted in his anti-caste philosophy."⁴¹ While liberty, as against subjugation, is an "effective and competent use of a person's powers,"⁴² regarding equality, he argues that "humanity is not capable of assortment and classification."⁴³ Ambedkar may be criticized for making the text of the constitution *sacred*, but he would rather defend it as a rational demand for "attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen"⁴⁴ for associated living, where many interests could be consciously communicated. Participation in the "conjoint communicated experiences"⁴⁵ would end isolation and bridge a gulf between society and individual toward the fullest realization of human capabilities. If the infallible texts are subversive of this vision, democracy cherishes it in the virtues of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Scriptural testimonies constitute the social fabric, people's beliefs and practices. Ambedkar's critical reading of the Hindu religious scriptures and practices of social exclusion on the basis of what knowledge is and who has the right to know brings an ethical turn to the discourse of epistemic practices. This can be understood from

38 Ibid., 59.

39 See Loftus, Timothy: Ambedkar and the Buddha's Saṅgha. A Ground for Buddhist Ethics, in: Caste A Global Journal on Social Exclusion 2 (2021) 2, 265–280, 267.

40 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 189.

41 Stroud, Scott: Justice Democracy and Liberation. Ambedkar's Navayana Pragmatism and the Tortuous Path of Social Democracy, in: The Journal of Speculative Philosophy 37 (2023) 1, 41–60, 51.

42 Ambedkar: The Essential Writings, 276.

43 Ibid., 277.

44 Ibid., 276.

45 Ibid.

the perspective of virtue epistemology which assigns importance to intellectual virtues for cultural reformation and human flourishing. We can draw a parallel between Jose Medina and Ambedkar. Medina concedes that vices affect one's capacity to learn from others and facts, and inhibit the capacity of self-correction and being open to corrections from others.⁴⁶ Ambedkar's democratic principles of liberty, fraternity and equality present a conception of society with the ideal of social endosmosis⁴⁷ where there is a respect for diversity and tolerance of learning and un-learning. Such a vision of democratic society, as a corrective norm of virtue epistemology, assists seeing democracy as an epistemic institution. Elizabeth Anderson talks about structural remedies for massive structural injustices of role and spatial segregations⁴⁸ in terms of the virtue of epistemic democracy by which she means "universal participation on terms of equality of all inquirers."⁴⁹ She recommends integration across all social domains through "comprehensive intergroup association on terms of equality,"⁵⁰ as a remedial measure against social practices and structures leading to epistemic injustices. Ambedkar's critique emphasises democracy⁵¹ as a virtue in building a shared reality to have the possibility of correction in the dominant narratives and vulnerabilities of the marginalized. Fricker too argues that virtues become necessary for correcting "prejudicial distortions"⁵² and combating oppressive structures. Seeing democracy as a "way of life" towards integration, as an institutional virtue, in interweaving epistemic and social justice makes it a liberatory practice. In subverting scriptural dominance and replacing it with the "text," i.e., the Constitution, democracy can be upheld as a virtue in safeguarding the marginalized from epistemic and social injustices.

46 Medina: *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 31.

47 Social endosmosis as a free flow of ideas, values and practices upholds the value of fraternity in Ambedkar's writings. The term is also used by American pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, who was a professor of Ambedkar (*Democracy and Education*, 1916).

48 According to Anderson, role segregation is the assignment of social groups to different hierarchically-ranked roles, and spatial segregation is the assignment of social groups to different social spaces and locations (Anderson, Elizabeth: *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton 2010, 9).

49 Elizabeth, Anderson: *Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions*. in: *Social Epistemology* 26 (2012) 2, 163–173, 172.

50 *Ibid.*, 112.

51 The political philosophy of Ambedkar on democracy is a vast concept and it includes political, social and economic elements. It's a safeguard for the minority. Democracy offers a framework for solving problems through deliberations. Democracy as a transformative government is capable of changing the lives of citizens.

52 Fricker, Miranda: *Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing*, in: *Metaphilosophy*, 34 (2003) 1/2, 154–173, 170.

Conclusion

Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu *sacred* scriptures for inflicting inequalities and social pathologies for the Untouchables and women provides insights into understanding social injustices as emanating from epistemic wrongs committed by *sacred* testimonies. It also seeks an epistemic stance, entirely different from the infallibility of certain texts, in the rational-moral conception of democracy as providing conditions needed for associated living. Unlike the Brahmanical idea of the Hindu society based on gradation and rank, Ambedkar emphasises the attitude of respect and reverence toward fellowmen. His conception of democracy as a *true* religion in fostering the virtues of equality, liberty and fraternity envisages the idea of dignified life in living together. Having its basis in the Buddhist principles of wisdom and love, democracy as an intellectual virtue interweaves epistemic-social questions. Effectuating social change in a society that is deeply class and caste-ridden requires massive structural remedies and Ambedkar sees the possibility of correction in the institutional virtue of democracy. Insofar as the contemporary Western discourse of epistemic injustice seeks conditions of epistemic and social justice in democracy, Ambedkar contributes to the same vision.