

Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, (New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 2005), Rs. 550, IV+446 pp., Pbk, (ISBN 978-93-5098-077-4).

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Braj Ranjan Mani in his celebrated book *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* attempts a profound and genealogical survey of the major dalit- bahunjan intellectuals ,over a period of two-thousand five hundred years of Indian history. Mani directs his critical faculties towards the inherent socio-political imbalances generated and perpetuated in the Indian , (pre-dominantly Hindu) society and initiates a study of the structures which propagate inequality and seeks modes of resistance against such hegemonic practices. In the introductory chapter of his book Mani highlights the contradictions which are operational , not only in the economic nodule of the society but are also in the intellectual and moral structures of the society. In a Foucaultian manner he is cognizant of “ role of the powerful in the production of knowledge that affect the life of all”(19). The macro-narratives or the “public” transcript as Mani calls them always are in denial of the micro-narratives, they are unlikely to reveal “the depth and dimension of conflict in history and culture.” (19) The master narratives engaged in appropriative and hegemonic process of misrepresentation need to be resisted, and as Mani rightly suggests, this Manichian binary of dominance and resistance prevails in social life as much as it does it in the intellectual and cultural realm. A simple Marxist reading of the issue of caste is not sufficient and Mani through Ambedkar mounts a critique on the simplistic Marxist base- superstructure dogma which at times tend to efface the cultural-religious modes of exploitation such as patriarchy, caste and race. Rather Mani uses the concept of id eology which Gramsci expounded to understand the issue of “caste” ,he also employs Stuart Hall’s extension of the term, who resituates ideology in culture as ‘the mental framework’ through which ascribed statuses are produced and validated. Through his book, Mani seeks to demonstrate how resistance to caste and brahmanism arose as counter ideology simultaneously, with their emergence in both secular and religious realms.

The first chapter of the book , Historical Roots of Brahmanic Dominance and Shamanic Resistance initiates the epistemic enquiry into the emergence of structural imbalances in the social framework of the Vedic culture. In this brilliantly argued chapter Mani postulates how the caste system as an elaborate maze of graded hierarchies was discursively formulated by the Aryans, who as invaders from central Asia sought to retain their racial purity and impose authority over the indigenous inhabitants of northern India whom they called “dasyus” . As Mani postulates the knowledge production process of the Aryans graphs this division particularly in the Vedas. The Vedic cosmogony in the

form of *yajna* too encouraged such hierarchies of caste. However, caste and brahmanism did not go unchallenged. The shudras and ati-shudras were never fully assimilated or hegemonized and they continued to register their protest in various forms. Texts like the *Shanti Parvan* of Mahabharata along with the much critiqued Manusmriti are full of passages which hint towards a sustained discontent in the lower castes and prescribe measures against such ruptures. *Shanti Parvan* defines shudra as one who defies dharma and the *Anushasan Parvan* portrays shudras as “destroyers of the king.” The brahmanical anxiety concerning *Kaliyuga* can also be understood from this perspective as *arajaka* or anarchy is defined in brahmanical literature as the collapse of caste order. Mani however identifies strains of resistance to the brahmanic hierarchies in the “shramanic counter-tradition which was based on egalitarianism. The shamanic tradition is anti-thetical to the brahmanic tradition and is associated with pre-Aryan Indus Valley civilisation. The shamans had a common liberal perspective on the issue of hierarchy as they believed that all people were subject to same social and spiritual law, a belief which finds echo later in the Bhakti movement.

The second chapter Buddhist India can be seen as an extension of the first chapter as Mani himself identifies Buddhism and Jainism as parts of the shamanic tradition. Reading into the philosophical visions of the likes of Ajit Keshkambal, Prakuddha Katyayana, Puran Kassapa along with the more prominent Mahavir and Buddha, Mani finds a striking similarity between these strivers and thinkers of Iron Age in their rejection of caste system. However the Buddha was unique in achieving an equilibrium between external and inner evolution by “stressing both an acceptance of life and detachment from it”, which made Buddhism more popular than Jainism. Buddha propagated the idea of *dhamma* by which he countered the Vedic Upanishad theological dogmatism which was steeped in castism as well as the extreme individualism of the Jainism, as it focussed on universal good of all of humanity. Buddhist philosophy based on *paticca*, *samuppada*, *anatta* and *annica* all of which underline the constant flux and mutability of the material world cognitively resist the rigid *Atman-Brahman* binary as well as the rigid ascribed status of caste system in Vedic brahmanism.

In the third chapter of the book writing on the sant poets Mani observes:

Of late, the dalit-subaltern radicals and those engaged in the work of rediscovery of the Indian past are increasingly stressing a close affinity between Buddhism and radical streams of Bhakti.

It cannot be denied that there is a close proximity between the teachings of Bhakti saints and Buddhism, as the former seems to imbibe the Buddhist ethos. Though the Bhakti movement stretched over a considerable period of time they share a common socio-political situation of origin. The defeat of Buddhism, the Muslim invasion, the severely damaged economy, the state of extreme poverty coupled with the brahmanic regimentation and high handedness all factored in to rise of Bhakti resistance. The Bhakti Saints did not propagate the idea of a transcendental brahmanic God, rather their God had an “existence within their selves in the form of individual and social conscience”, which in itself initiates a resistance to the dogmatic brahmanism. The subaltern identity of the most of the sant poets like Haralayya, Namdev, Chokhamela, Tukaram, Gora, Kabir and others explain the bhakti cults engagements in social reform.

The sant poets also understood the need to democratise language and culture. Mani graphs this in this chapter by drawing extensive references from the likes of Kabir and other who mostly wrote in vernacular, a fact which expresses the inherent resistance to brahmanism in the Bhakti movement, as brahmanism sought to deny knowledge to the lower castes by restricting the dissemination of Sanskrit. Mani focuses particularly on Kabir in this chapter highlighting his constant strife with it through *sahaj sadhana* which sought to bypass the religious dogmas of vedic religion.

One of the central events regarding the theorisation and politicisation of caste in the pre-independence India which Mani addresses is the famous Gandhi-Ambedkar debate regarding caste, which Ambedkar extensively theorizes in his famous book *Anihilation of Caste*. Much like Arundhati Roy who sought to revitalise the debate in her introduction to Ambedkar's book, which she titled as *The Doctor and the Saint*, Mani in the seventh chapter of the book attempts to provide his readers with an insight into this very important debate. Mani seeks to debate against the nationalistic school of historiography who tend to portray Ambedkar as ‘an unpatriotic reactionary for his politicisation of caste’ (339). Mani argues that Gandhi's “politics of piety” was in sync with the upper-caste politics and he was anxious to include the untouchables in the Hindu fold to form a Hindu majority, for which he sought to portray the untouchability problem as a Hindu problem rather than a National problem. As Mani postulates in sync with Ambedkar, “the authorised - hagiographical-version of Mohandas Gandhi is very different from the real one.” The irony being that he found enlightenment in the hegemonic Varnashrama Dharma to counter colonial domination. It was this subtle veneration of caste system in the nationalist politics of Gandhi which Ambedkar sought to counter. Ambedkar's argument that “the freedom which the governing class in India was struggling for its freedom that rules the servile classes in India” rather than being an endorsement of colonialism is a critique of the narrow parochial nationalism, which Mani rightly points out in the chapter *Nationalist Power Politics, Excluded Masses*, and the Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate.

Mani in his book provides a genealogical reading of all the resistance movements to the brahmanic caste system in India. In his writing back project Mani traverses a considerable path starting from the vedic age and engaging with the changing nature of brahmanism and its resistance through the medieval and colonial period. Mani also makes detailed readings into the philosophy of social reformers like Phule who initiated the rewriting of history and mythology taking the untouchables into consideration. In his epilogue Mani quotes Gautam Buddha:

Do not believe in anything (simply) because you have heard it.

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.

Mani in his book attempts to provide such an understanding of history which is unencumbered by the traditional historiography and seeks to bring to surface the hegemonic ills of the brahmanism, exposing the nexus between caste system, exploitation and corruption.

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This book is a very important intervention in the discourse concerning dalit politics at this current juncture where forces of oppressive right wing politics are engaging in intrusive acts of assimilation and epistemic violence. Mani's book acts not only as a resistance discourse to the politics of violence, but serves as an important text for scholars who are interested in locating counter narratives in the academia. Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society is a palimpsest which allows for a dialogic engagement with the threat of hegemonic forces of caste-politics. Hence this book should be a highly recommended one in the corridors of institutions which dare to register their dissent.