

## Where do the Shudras find themselves in India today?

Shudras comprise approximately half the population of India, the second most populous country on earth. The Mandal Commission concluded in the 1980s that the OBCs, not including the “upper” Shudra castes, represent 52 percent of all Indians. This amounts to over 650 million people at present—more than twice the population of the United States, more than three times the populations of Pakistan or Brazil. By comparison, the “forward” castes—Hindu castes outside the OBCs, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—all together count for no more than 20 percent of the Indian population.

For a group with their enormous numbers, the Shudras remain vastly underrepresented in positions of power across all aspects of political, social and economic life, be it in government or business, religion or education. Particularly at the national level, they remain subordinate to Brahmins and Vaishyas—particularly Banias. This applies just as much to the upper Shudras, who are today in a strange position. Their insistence that they had higher status than other Shudras contributed to their exclusion from the OBC lists. Now, millions of them across the country, angry at stagnant opportunity and mobility, are demanding that they be recognised as members of the OBCs as well, to get access to reserved positions.

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Where are the Shudras in national politics and government? They are barely represented among the higher judiciary and bureaucracy. The reality is that Shudra leaders are, at most, regional forces. Certain upper Shudra castes have mobilised very effectively and control powerful parties—consider the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, or the Kammas, Reddys, Kapus and Velamas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. But the power of these parties and their leaders is confined to their home states and regions, and is often based on caste and regional chauvinism, preventing wider solidarity. These leaders’ attempts to ally with the powers at the centre have only underlined their subordination, and are yet to bring meaningful benefits to their Shudra constituents. The national parties—the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party—have no one representing the concerns of the Shudras in their circles of real decision-making authority. Both are controlled by Brahmins and Banias.

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“In the present state of the literature on the subject, a book on the Shudras cannot be regarded as a superfluity,” BR Ambedkar wrote in 1946 in *Who Were the Shudras? How They Came To Be The Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society*. New archaeological and genetic studies have raised questions over his theory of their origins, and whether the Shudras were Indo-Aryans at all, but beyond that the state of the literature on the Shudras has barely changed in all the years since. Hardly any scholars have turned specifically to the Shudra’s predicament in independent India. There are no good books on Shudra history or culture, and in the press there is barely any writing on the Shudras that looks beyond the narrow confines of electoral politics.

Simply, the Shudras have not so much as had anyone bring their problems to their own attention. Even Ambedkar’s writing on the Shudras failed to do for them what his other works did for the Dalits—make sense of their historical, political and spiritual situation, and inspire a pan-Indian movement for emancipation. Without a unified consciousness, the Shudras are co-opted into an unreformed Hinduism that still considers them inherently inferior, and are easily bent to the wishes of Brahminical political parties and social institutions. So now as much as ever, writing on the Shudras cannot be regarded a superfluity.

**NARENDRA MODI BECAME PRIME MINISTER** in 2014 on the back of proclamations that he belonged to the Other Backward Classes, implying that he was a representative of the Shudras. Many accepted the proclamation without the scrutiny it deserves. Looking closely at Modi’s caste group, the Modh Ghanchis of Gujarat, we should be skeptical of his assertion of Shudra status.

The caste system is strictly ordered by occupation, and reserves commerce for the third varna, the Vaishyas. The Modh Ghanchis’ participation in commerce is a mark of Vaishya status. They are not treated as a neech caste in Gujarat. The community’s vegetarian habits also suggest Vaishya rather than Shudra roots. Modh Ghanchis are traditionally literate, as traders must be, and this is another sign of non-Shudra status. Caste rules prohibit Shudras from learning to read or write, and prescribe barbaric punishments for defying the ban.

There is a corresponding trend among the Shudras, with some castes at the bottom of the intra-varna hierarchy seeking recognition as Scheduled Castes to claim the official benefits that this brings. Their claims merit critical thought as well, particularly from Dalits, to guard against an imposition of Shudra power over Dalit castes. As a form of Shudra Dalitisation, going in the opposite direction to the Sanskritisation of the upper Shudras, it should serve not to sharpen caste conflict but to build greater solidarity among those struggling against caste.

In bringing them to where they are today, MK Gandhi and Ram Manohar Lohia were crucial not just as politicians, but also as thinkers who shaped Indian mores. Both were organic intellectuals of the Banias, both had prestigious Western educations and mastery over English, and both wrote and published extensively. They gained immense stature amid the largely Brahmin thinkers who directed the freedom movement and the early republic, and this greatly raised Bania prestige and self-respect.

Gandhi was especially impressive to the Brahmins. His public image and personal habits—his attire, his fasts, his vegetarianism, his obsession with purity in the Brahmin ritual mode—drew heavily on the ascetic values of Brahmin philosophy. He was a Bania paying tribute to Brahmin ways.

Just as importantly, Gandhi also opened a path for industrial capital to enter modern Indian politics. Publicly, Gandhi was severely critical of the industrial economy and advocated a return to village economics. Privately, he had no qualms about accepting the support of Bania industrialists and encouraging them in big business. The Birlas and Goenkas, in particular, gave very generously, clearly not threatened by Gandhi's public rhetoric, and earned equally immensely. It is notable that Gandhi's vision of village economics came with an idealised conception of caste as a desirable mode of the division of labour. He spoke against untouchability, but never against the caste system itself. Effectively, he endorsed the Vaishya monopoly over commerce and capital, and was willing to abandon the Shudras and Dalits to exploitation.

Gandhi's political philosophy relied on financial capital from industry and cultural capital from Brahminism. This reflected the main premises of the Banias' assertion as a community: they had great financial power, and had embraced the ways of the Brahmins. Gandhi embodied the Bania claim to equality at the top of Indian society and power.

Another crucial figure to study in this context is BR Ambedkar. Rising from a caste that Brahminism deemed untouchable, he too mastered English and studied in the West, and overcame far greater prejudice

than Gandhi earn a place among the intellectual shapers of republican India. His example shows us the power of philosophy even when wealth is not available as an instrument of uplift, as it was for the Banias. He showed the way to progress for those most oppressed by caste. This involved constructing a Dalit identity that combined self-respect and a complete rejection of Brahminism and Hinduism, which he saw to be synonymous.

Ambedkarite philosophy has had some success in weakening Brahminism, but the Shudras never understood its power. If they had taken up this ideology or something similar, with a focus on the role of caste and religion in their oppression, their position today could have been significantly different. Instead, they turned to regional leaders promoting caste chauvinism as self-respect, and a socialism that spoke of economic but never caste oppression.

Early in the history of republican India, the Banias were shown the way to rise above their previous position—by joining industrial and business power to Brahminical culture. Gandhi was their prophet. They have since made further advances, to achieve their current status. Ambedkar built a radically different way for the Dalits, and they have made some progress too. The Shudras had no one to show them a way out of their trap, and they remained where they were, in the inferior spiritual, social and political position assigned to them by Brahminism.

**IF THE SHUDRAS WANT TO BREAK FREE** of the Brahminical trap, they need their own path-breakers. Today's leading Shudra politicians are not only geographically constrained, they are also constrained intellectually. None of today's most prominent Shudra politicians are intellectual leaders of any note, or have any vision for how to lead their constituents forward beyond the next election. They cannot imagine a way to unite and uplift all Shudras across the lines of caste and region. The work of imagining such a way must also belong to Shudra intellectuals, but there are hardly any of them who can take on sociopolitical and philosophical roles at the national level.

This is a shocking reality, and one that the Shudras must change. But to begin thinking about how to change it, we must first understand the nature of the trap that the Shudras find themselves in.

The hold of Brahminism traces back to the writing of the Vedic texts three millennia ago. Those texts established a philosophy that stigmatised all productive labour and science, and established the spiritual supremacy of the anti-materialistic and unproductive Brahmins. This ideology was challenged by others, but by the medieval period, starting roughly 1,200 years ago, Brahmin hegemony was deeply and widely established.

Under it, Shudras were expected to produce the goods necessary for societal survival, yet stripped of their dignity for doing so and denied all spiritual and educational rights. Their life was tied to hard labour, denying them the leisure necessary for engaging in philosophy. They were banned from the priesthood—that was reserved for the Brahmins only—and from reading or writing, denying them the ability to access the Sanskrit scripture responsible for their oppression, let alone to interpret it for themselves. They also had severely restricted property rights. Many of the most valuable goods of the time were used as divine offerings, but Shudras could not deal in these, for fear that they would be tainted by their low status. Thus, two important areas of advancement were out of their reach: spiritual philosophy and the acquisition of wealth through business.

Many Brahmins, meanwhile, were early adopters of English education. William Carey, a British Christian missionary, and Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali Brahmin, established a famous English-medium school in Kolkata in the early nineteenth century. The Banias also founded English schools in western India soon after. Both these varnas enthusiastically sent their sons to English schools, and these sons filled the administrative and legal positions that the British opened up to Anglophone Indians. Nehru, Lohia and Gandhi were all products of this trend.

The deepest roots of these Shudra inferiority complexes lie at the spiritual level. They have internalised the idea that they have no place in the highest domains of knowledge, and behind this idea is the ingrained notion of inequality. This is entirely due to the Brahmin-controlled spiritual system, which has convinced the Shudras that they do not have the same rights as the dominant castes even in the eyes of god. The Brahmins' most powerful weapon to enforce that concept is the priesthood, and they have guarded their exclusive hold over that position more fiercely than any other. No Shudra has ever become a priest at the famous temples in Tirupati or Puri, or any number of lesser Hindu sites. The denial of even the aspiration to priesthood has been central to making the Shudras disinterested in philosophy and intellectual progress, as philosophy has its oldest origins in religious discourse.

Until they overcome this, the Shudras cannot dare to think for themselves, and will continue to submit to Brahmin spiritual, social and political philosophy. Last year, for the first time, a religious board in Kerala followed the same reservation policies that apply to government recruitment in its selection process for temple priests. This meant that 30 of the 62 priests it appointed were Shudras, and six were Dalits. This is a necessary correction to Brahmin hegemony, but the truth is that such steps are unimaginable across much of the country today.

**THE SHUDRAS HAVE NEVER BEEN SERIOUS** about overcoming their lack of skill in English, or their disinterest in philosophical and intellectual pursuits. This must change if they are to produce intellectuals capable of bringing their continued exclusion from national politics and discourse to an end. But the question remains as to what paths are open to any Shudra intellectuals who are ready to tackle their community's predicament.

The only major group of Shudras to successfully escape Brahmin and Bania control is the Sikhs. To do this, they had to completely break away from Hinduism and forge their own spiritual system. They constructed their own scripture, the Guru Granth, and run their own religious centres. They control both the major political forces in Punjab, the Akali Dal and the state unit of the Congress. Unlike the Shudras, the Sikhs have acquired global visibility and are even rising in the power structures of countries such as Canada. Their spiritual independence gave them the base for these achievements. The only other groups with power and prominence in the Indian diaspora are still Banias and Brahmins.

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The Shudras have the option of rejecting Hinduism for radical anti-caste doctrines or other religions, but in the present situation it would be naïve to expect that massive numbers of them will use it. Many of them, at least for the foreseeable future, will want to keep living as Hindus. These Shudras must demand equal spiritual status, and equal access to the priesthood. They must fight for the right to engage with and interpret Hindu scripture through Shudra eyes. They must insist on free and open Hindu theological schools and colleges, where any Hindu, regardless of caste, can choose to pursue priesthood. It is essential for the Shudras to understand their collective power within Hinduism. Without their numbers, that religion risks collapse. If they do not use their strength, the situation will remain unchanged. Their position will remain like that of the Nairs, who claim to be ardent Hindus but have no intellectual influence on the religion, deferring to the Brahmin priests.

The time has come for Shudras to ask for equality in every sphere, or to seek alternatives in every sphere. If Hinduism does not accept their insistence on spiritual equality, they should consider forming new religions as part of their movement for assertion. They must reject the low status imposed on them by Brahminical thinking, and the notion that offending the dominant castes comes with the risk of bad karma and rebirth. For that, they will have to produce a massive amount of alternative thought and literature that can displace the current paradigm.

Alternative Shudra literature and philosophy must focus on establishing a base for Shudra self-respect, whether within Hinduism or outside of it. The parallels for this kind of writing exist in other movements of oppressed people across the world, from the Black Power movement in the United States to the Dalit movement here in India. These movements have produced histories, novels, films, spiritual discourses and more that reject the degrading images and beliefs of oppressed people that have been handed down to them by dominant groups, and replace them with constructions of their own making. These new ideas are the fuel for social and political action.

For Shudras, self-respect must begin by subverting the Brahminical theory that the work of production is spiritually polluting. What Shudras do, what they make and even what they eat is shown in Hindu religious and philosophical texts as unworthy of divine respect. Historically, they have been so diffident in the face of this assault that they have been convinced that they do not have a culture of their own. But just because this culture has not been written into books does not mean that it is not there.

The Shudras are carriers of a millennia-old culture centred on their agrarian and productive work. Its values are not the sanyasi values of asceticism and inaction, but ones of fertility, creativity and effort. Shudra culture eschews the frequently violent stories of Hindu mythology for tales of material plenty. It replaces the metaphysical obsessions of the Brahmins with an immense knowledge of nature, agriculture and production processes, learnt through scientific observation and practical experience. Through their work, the Shudras have been engaged in medicine, husbandry, engineering and many other productive disciplines. All of this should be recorded and celebrated.

Shudras must insist on the great value of their work and culture. They are producing basic resources—food, clothing, housing, art, music and so on—that allow the survival of the nation. Shudras must ask who contributes more to societal well-being, the labouring Shudra or the ascetic Brahmin. If the culture of productive communities is treated with dignity and respect, they will employ more and more of their energies, further adding to the national good. The suppression of the culture and self-respect of the country's largest productive and labouring mass means a huge loss of national resources. This understanding should form the core of a new Shudra nationalism.

A new paradigm of Shudra consciousness will go far towards building a national politics outside Brahminism and Bania economics. Besides throwing off their self-denigration, the Shudras will have to

redefine relationships between castes within their varna, and also their relationship to oppressed castes and communities beyond it.

If the Shudras want to make their large numbers count on the national level, beyond the confines of their home states and regions, they must construct a pan-Indian Shudra identity, without intra-Shudra discrimination. The Brahminical notion of Shudra inferiority is written to apply to the varna as a whole, so it must be tackled as a whole, not on a caste-by-caste basis.

A change in Shudra consciousness will also affect the state of Dalits and other oppressed groups. Once the Shudras discard the philosophical basis for believing in their inferiority, they will no longer have a basis to believe that other castes are beneath them. Once they stop serving Brahmin and Bania interests, they should see no advantage to intimidating Muslims or Christians. On the contrary, they will find many reasons to stand with all those whom Brahminism wrongs. This should also be part of Shudra nationalism, which should never be antithetical to assertion by Dalits, Adivasis or other groups battling Brahmin and Bania domination.

**THERE IS A NEED TO LOOK** at Shudra self-denigration and the dominant forms of Indian nationalism and national politics today. Brahmins and Banias have dictated the direction of popular national feeling right from the freedom struggle, and in the absence of their own intellectuals the Shudras have unquestioningly followed those views. Ambedkar raised a dissenting voice to point out that any pursuit of national glory was empty without reform to end the country's shocking social inequalities, but his perspective was sidelined.

Today, the Shudras are enthusiastic supporters of Hindu nationalism, without realising that it is actually Brahmin-Bania nationalism. The BJP's Hindutva assures the supremacy of the RSS's Brahmin ideologues, and its economic policies inflate the profits of giant Bania-owned corporations. The Congress can put forward no economic alternative, and its "secular" nationalism increasingly resembles the BJP's Brahminical one. Rahul Gandhi, the Congress president, has declared himself a thread-wearing Brahmin, seeming to think that this strategy can endear him to the masses.

Much of Hindu nationalism is built on Shudra oppression and exclusion. The politics of cow protection is one example. The theory of the cow being a sacred animal is the work of Brahmins, who never grazed the animal and never depended on it economically. That burden belonged to the Shudras, but they have no say in constructing that animal's status. The bans on cattle slaughter since Modi came to power have



destroyed the cattle economy, since farmers can no longer sell their animals for economic purposes. But the Shudras have quietly accepted this tragedy, which has damaged the rural economy across the country.

Hindu nationalism has won the Shudras nothing but stagnation. The highest levels of the intellectual, spiritual, political and economic domains remain mainly in Brahmin and Bania hands after Modi became the prime minister. There has been no change in the Shudras' social or economic status. Hindu nationalism has only further consolidated the power of Brahmin ideology and Bania capital, and the Shudras are protecting it even at their own cost.

Ambedkar wrote in *Who Were the Shudras?* that Brahminism had rendered the Shudras a “low-class people without civilization, without culture, without respect and without position.” All that has happened since his time has failed to fundamentally alter this deplorable fact. Only a new Shudra consciousness can change it, and set the Shudras, as well as the country, on a better course.