

Ambedkar studies at Heidelberg

In recent years, Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956), India's great dalit leader, social reformer and first law minister after independence has gained increasing recognition in academic and political circles in Germany. Within the realm of scholarship at the South Asia Institute, his mediating role in the framing of the Indian Constitution has been adequately recognized (Kulke, Rothermund 1998: 394) as well as the implementation of constitutional safeguards for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Conrad 1995: 419) through so called reservation of seats in politics, education and administration. His political role, especially the social movement initiated by him, has been subject to a dissertation in political sciences (Hurst 2000) as well as part of a more elaborate discourse on the part of dalits in social movements in India (Fuchs 1999; 2003).

In the fields of German indology and history of religion, Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism at the end of his life caught considerable academic attention. He viewed Buddhism as theology of liberation (Gensichen 1995: 197) as well as an original development under the heading of civil religion (Fuchs 2001: 205). In addition, fieldwork among Mahars in Maharashtra focussed on the social relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism (Beltz 2001). Textual studies focussed on a comparison of Buddhist sources with Dr. Ambedkar's "The Buddha and His Dhamma" (Buss 1998; Fiske/Emmrich forthcoming), projecting Dr. Ambedkar's view of Buddhism as an effort to reconstruct the world (Beltz/Jondhale forthcoming).

Ambedkar studies apart, the concern with dalits has been the focus of a number of studies in social anthropology in the urban (Bellwinkel 1980) as well as the rural setting (Randeria 1993) setting. The most comprehensive project in this respect was an interdisciplinary research project, financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and linked with the Department of Modern Indology, South Asia Institute and the Department of Sociology, Delhi University. Under the heading of "Memory, Violence and the Agency", the topic was the role of dalits as victims and perpetrators in Bombay and Kanpur (Fuchs forthcoming). This project set an example for the Memorandum of Understanding between Heidelberg University and Delhi University in common fieldwork for the exchange of scholars and students.

During my fieldwork among dalits in Kanpur (Bellwinkel-Schempp 1998), I was often asked to give a speech, which I used to do with the introductory words, that I was born at Bonn in Germany, the town where Dr. Ambedkar studied Sanskrit. I had found the reference of a short, three months stay in 1923 in Dhananjay Keer's Dr. Ambedkar biography (Keer 1995: 49). My projection of benevolent German indology, transgressing the Hindu norms of reserving Sanskritic knowledge to the upper castes and caring for the dalits, was highly appreciated by my dalit audience. It made me even think of a Dr. Ambedkar Jayanti in 2003 in Bonn, why not, perhaps with the German "Dalit Plattform" and concerned scholars and dalit activists.

This idea made me visit the University Archives at Bonn on the 14th of January 2003 to find out more about Dr. Ambedkar's studies at Bonn university. Within no time I found * Dr. Ambedkar's application for registration with the Prussian Ministry of Science, Fine Arts and Public Education, a CV in German (!) and his registration into the university ledger on 29.4.1921, which reads as follows:

Father's profession: general; religion: Hindu; previous universities: Bombay, Columbia, London; number of semesters: 18; school leaving certificate: yes; subject: economics; date of birth: 14.4.1891; place of birth: Mhow; home town: Bombay; district: Bombay. So he delightfully upgraded his father's military rank. Noteworthy is also his religious affiliation- at the early stage of his life- certainly before he was contemplating on the question of conversion, he wrote Hindu under the heading of religion. Amazingly, Dr. Ambedkar registered for economics and not for indology.

In his handwritten CV he stated that he knew German well, because he had taken it as a minor at Columbia University: He continued: "I would like to mention that the University of Bonn through the kind help of Prof. Dr. H. Jacobi granted me to submit a ph.D. thesis in case I show adequate performance and I am enrolled for three semesters there." It is not clear in which subject he intended to submit his dissertation, or how he got in touch with Professor Hermann Jacobi (1850-1937), who was the leading German indologist of his times.

The chair for Indology and Comparative Linguistics at Bonn University was

very distinguished. Founded by August Wilhelm von Schlegel in 1807, Hermann Jacobi was the chair holder from 1889 to 1922. He had a great number of famous disciples, amongst them Helmut von Glasenapp, August Winter and Vasudeva Gokhale. The Russian scholar Cherbatskole, the Italians Ambrosio Balini, Luigi Salvi and George Herbert Grierson were regularly corresponding with him. It was said that all Indian scholars visiting Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, would pay their respect to Professor Jacobi.

But how did Dr. Ambedkar get in touch with Hermann Jacobi? In 1913/ 1914 when Hermann Jacobi was visiting professor at Calcutta University, Dr. Ambedkar just left for the US to take up his studies at Columbia University. The contact must have been forged through letters and correspondence, while Dr. Ambedkar was in London, working on his thesis at the London School of Economics. Well, they might have met personally during Dr. Ambedkar's brief visit to Bonn on the occasion of his registration at Bonn University. But that is all speculation. Dr. Ambedkar never took up his studies in Bonn. As he did not sign any lectures or attend any classes, he was taken off the university register on 12.1.1922.

Intentions and plans apart, Dr. Ambedkar's project of Sanskrit studies at Bonn university remained unfulfilled. German indology, represented through Hermann Jacobi, certainly played a supportive role in Dr. Ambedkar's endeavor to study in Germany. But for his scathing attack on Hinduism as well as his most creative view of Buddhism he had to rely on translations and secondary sources. But his hunger for learning never subsided. He took up Pali studies in the 40s (Bellwinkel-Schempp forthcoming). Finally, his conversion to Buddhism as an universalistic and egalitarian religion was for him a liberating act as for many dalits nowadays. Isn't his conversion to Buddhism the greater event to be commemorated by German indology and Sanskrit studies?

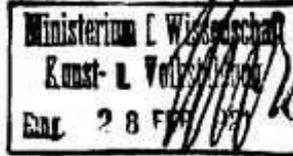
* I am grateful to Dr. Thomas Becker and Herrn Johannes Arens for their kind help.

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Next pages: Handwritten curriculum vitae and letter of intent of Dr. Ambedkar

Atom 38 26 I
3. Aufl.

J. Bonn
B.



10 King Henry's Road
Chalk Farm
London N.W. 3.

25 Februar 1921.

An

Das Ministerium für Wissenschaft Kunst
und Volksbildung Berlin.

Löbliche Behörd.

Es ist mein Wunsch an der Universität Bonn Deutschland,
Volkswirtschaftslehre zu studieren und erlaube ich mir mein
Curriculum vitae zu unterbreiten.

Studien

Akademische Befähigung

Satara Hochschule } 1901 bis 1907
Elphinstone " " }

Inskribiert an der Universität Bombay, 1908, wo ich 1912
den grad eines B.A. (Bachelor of Arts) erreichte

Inskribiert an der Columbia Universität, New York Amerika
1913 wo ich 1914 M.A. (Master of Arts) wurde und im Mai
1916 das Doktorat der Philosophie erwarb.

Inskribiert an der Universität London 1916. Unterbrochen
durch einen Aufenthalt in Indien von August 1917, bis
August 1920. März 1921 habe ich hier mein Studium
beendet.

Tätigkeit

Von September 1917 bis März 1918 am Finanz- und
Rechnungs-Departement Baroda (Indien).

Professor der Volkswirtschaftslehre am Sydenham College
für Handel und Volkswirtschaft Bombay von 1918 bis
März 1920.

Ich bin Indier. Ich kann deutsch, da es mein
Lebensfach für mein Doktorat in Columbia bildet.

Ich bin pekuniär unabhängig und kann mich während
meines Aufenthaltes in Deutschland selbst erhalten.

Ich möchte erwähnen, dass mir die Universität Bonn
durch die freundliche Vermittlung von Prof. Dr. H. Jacobi
- die Zusicherung der Möglichkeit ein Doktorat dort
abzulegen gab, falls ich - auf Grund meiner bisherigen
Leistungen - für 3 Semester dort inskribiere und eine
Dissertation einreiche.

Das ich erst gestern die Verständigung erhielt, dass
ich ans Ministerium in Berlin einreichen muss, um
die Erlaubnis für ein Studium in Bonn zu erhalten,
und da der Termin dafür der 1. März ist, was es
mir nicht möglich, alle nötigen Dokumente zu beschaffen.
Ich kann nur einschließen:

- (a) Die Copie eines Briefes von Prof. Seligman, Vorstand
des Department of Economics an der Columbia
Universität New York an Prof. Nicholson, Universität
Edinburgh, worin meine Befähigungen erwähnt werden.
- (b) Ein Zeugnis des Sekretariats der High Commissioner
for India das bestätigt, dass ich über hinreichende
Mittel verfüge.

In der Hoffnung, dass es mir entschuldigt wird,
falls ich gegen die Formalitäten verstoßen habe
und dass mein Gesuch bewilligt wird.

Zeichne ich,

B.R. Ambedkar

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