

The Page Mnemonist

Shinde has a huge Ambedkar-related library, and there is no better index than his mind

RAKSHIT SONAWANE ON RAMESH TUKARAM SHINDE



Shinde with his collection at his small tenement in Goregaon, Mumbai

PHOTO BY AMIT HARALKAR

- **The Bookman** Ambedkar was a voracious reader and his personal library comprised over 50,000 books
- **Carton Count** It took 32 cartons to ship the books Ambedkar bought in London during the Round Table conference

Casual passers-by might mistake Ramesh Tukaram Shinde for a pensioner reading a newspaper in the small iron-grilled verandah of his Goregaon tenement. But the perception will change completely if they listen to him speak on his mobile, giving callers precise information on Babasaheb Ambedkar, his works and the social

revolution he wrought. Shinde is a one-man helpline for all things Ambedkar, and even serious scholars turn to his prodigious memory and his huge collection of journals, documents and books, many of them out of print, by and on the Dalit leader who steered the writing of the Indian constitution.

His acuity and unwavering eye for detail belie his 83 years: he can pick any book or document from his collection and open it at the page where the relevant information is. It's the kind of memory that develops from a deep engagement with a subject and with the written and printed word. Eminent writers and scholars from all over India and abroad have come to rely on it and they visit him for guidance or to consult his corpus. However, he's no academic himself: he's a retired employee of the Mumbai Port Trust (MbPT).

Born into a poor Dalit family in Chapadgaon village of Niphad tehsil in Nashik district in 1933, the youngest of four siblings, he lost his father when he was just 18 months. Thereafter, his mother moved to Mumbai, where his uncle was employed with the MbPT and lived in official quarters in Wadala. She soon got a job as a manual labourer in MbPT and rented a room in the same locality. The area was a bastion of the Dalit movement, which had found fertile ground in the flourishing metropolis, and ran parallel to the labour and political movements that were taking shape there. Naturally, Shinde grew up as an activist. And on his mother's death in 1953, Shinde, who had by then completed his matriculation, joined MbPT as a temporary 'helper'. He later became a clerk.

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“After Babasaheb’s death in 1956, a few of us started a library called Milind Dnyanarjanalaya at my friend Bhagwan Gangurde’s house,” he says. “The idea was to read books and make others read.” But in a couple of years, they had to close down the library: borrowers not caring to return books, the bane of many a small library. That’s when Shinde thought of building a personal collection. He’d visit Thacker & Co, Ambedkar’s publishers, to buy them, besides scouring the shops of kabadiwalas and pavement booksellers across Mumbai, looking especially for first editions at prices he could afford. “But it was in Pune you got rare books, and every month, I’d try to visit Pune.”

Shinde married Babanbai in 1956. Ambedkar adopted Buddhism on October 14 that year, and Shinde and 15 of his friends were present at the Nagpur function.

“For us it was a momentous day...Babasaheb administered the 22 oaths jettisoning

Hindu gods and rituals, to embrace Buddhist principles. It changed our lives forever,” he says.

Shinde’s book collection continued to grow after his family moved on resettlement from the Raoli Camp slum to his Goregaon tenement. The obsession was such, he’d also buy second editions of Ambedkar books, seeking out with the keenness of a researcher the changes made across two editions. Among the rarities in his collection of over 4,000 items are *The Buddha and His Gospel*, which Ambedkar had meant for private circulation in 1955, before formal publication as *The Buddha and His Dhamma*; Jyotiba Phule’s *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak*, a manifesto for a universal religion of truth, and a 1911 edition of his *Gulamgiri*; Baba Padmanji’s 1857 book on the plight of Hindu widows, *Yamuna Paryatan: Hindu Vidhvanchya Sthithiche Nirupan*; P. Lakshmi Narasu’s *The Essence of Buddhism* (1907); Sir H.S. Maine’s *Village Communities in the East and West* (1872); and Krishnaji Keluskar’s *Buddha Charitra* (1898), a book that was gifted to Ambedkar when he completed his matriculation.

Besides books, there are the paraphernalia of the religious, cultural and political movements occurring around and after Ambedkar’s time in which Dalit participation was energetic—chapbooks, flyers announcing Dalit performers and their performances, pamphlets, accounts of struggles in urban slums.

A Japanese student studying Gandhi started reading up on Ambedkar too and came to Shinde—and left convinced the Dalit thinker’s work was more lasting.

Ambedkar biographers and scholars like C.B. Khairmode, Dhananjay Keer and Y.D. Phadke have consulted Shinde. Anupama Rao, professor in the department of history at Columbia University, who has consulted Shinde over the years for her research work, regards him as not just a collector, but one of the key organic intellectuals of the Dalit movement. “Dada, as I call him, had the vision to understand the social and cultural history of the region in which the movement grew, rather than to focus solely on Ambedkar and his deeds,” she said in an e-mail interview. “For this reason, Shinde’s collection is crucial in allowing us to locate Ambedkar in his time, even as it suggests that Ambedkar’s thought exceeds any archive that might try to contain the radical force of his thinking.”

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Rao, who thanks Shinde in her book *The Caste Question: Dalits and Politics in Modern India*, is in awe of how, in times when communication was difficult and

his own life circumstances made it impossible for him to travel as much as he might have liked, Shinde still tracked down books, driven chiefly by his acute sense of the reach of these writings. She says, “This is an archive of ephemera together with serious, considered writings and polemical tomes that would fall under the category of systematic thought—it moves across the popular, to the esoteric, and everything in between. And because it’s the collection of someone who respects intellectual labour, it is not one-sided or biased.”

As for the collection itself, Rao describes it as “the gift of a fugitive archive of ignored yet profound thinkers, and the actions of ordinary men and women whose demands for their dignity, rights and self-respect has fundamentally shaped our democracy. His is a labour of love that was undertaken at enormous personal sacrifice. He has remained in the shadows for too long, and the legacy of his collection remains precarious.”

Precarious it surely is. The 2005 deluge in Mumbai brought eight feet water into his house and most of his collection, kept on the ground floor, went under. After the waters receded, friends, neighbours and several organisations helped salvage the books. Socialist leader Mrinal Gore handed over the keys of the Keshavrao Gore Trust, where the books were dried for one and a half months.

Shinde has helped change minds and perceptions. He speaks of Toro Momura, a Japanese student, who was working on a thesis on Mahatma Gandhi. Out of curiosity, he started reading on Ambedkar and ended up visiting Shinde and working through his collection. Says Shinde, “He changed his views, and said Babasaheb’s work was fundamental and long-lasting, even greater than Gandhiji’s.”

Shinde has one serious concern left: What will happen to his library after his death? He has spoken to various individuals and organisations, but no concrete help is forthcoming. “Whenever anyone approaches me for information or reference material, I readily provide it. But what will happen to these books after me? I don’t have the kind of money required to conserve and maintain old books.” Shinde’s son Sunil, who lives with him and is a reporter with a Marathi daily, says, “He has devoted himself to the movement and to books....I remember, when I was around seven, my mother had given money for buying rations, but father spent it on books, triggering a domestic quarrel.” Over time, his mother realised the importance of the work and her anger faded away.

Shinde makes what may seem an odd request, steeped though it is in generosity. “While profiling me,” he says, “please carry my address and phone number. I want more people to contact me for free consultation.” He may be found at No. 321, Chawl No. 40, Motilal Nagar No. 1, Goregaon (West), Mumbai. For directions, call 9769797320. Dada will guide you.

Rakshit Sonawane, Starting as a factory and port worker, Sonawane became a journalist in 1985.