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DALIT REFORMS IN MAHARASHTRA:CONTRIBUTION OF JOTIBA PHULE AND AMBEDKAR

Prof.Prashant V.Ransure

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Arts,Commerce and Science college, Nashik,

Ozar (Mig)Nashik.

This article tries to focus on the various stages through which Dalit movement and consciousness has passed from the mid of the 19th century to till present day, and how the various Dalit leaders, especially Jotiba Phule, and Ambedkar, a fought for Dalit rights and emancipation. we know that the weaker section in general and the scheduled caste in particular have suffered from multiple deprivations and were the victims of collective domination since time immemorial. With the course of time some Dalit's showed, courage to fight back the age long system of exploitation. The main objective of Dalit movements was to create a counter culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in the society. However, they were not against any individual caste or communal group, but against the establishment, the government but, the society as a whole.

An early environment for the emergence of the protest movement for the Dalits was created by the collective efforts of Jyotiba Phule, Shivram Janba Kamble, Gopal Baba Walangkar, Kisan Fagoji Bansode and others leaders in Maharashtra. The Mahar revolution movements in Maharashtra, showed way to the attempts of the untouchable castes to organize and agitate for social and political purpose in various parts of India, including the Dalits of Madras, the charmers of Chhattisgarh area, the depressed classes of the Punjab and the Namshudras of Bengal. All these Movements have not only provided the lower masses with the base for establishing Self-esteem, self-determination, self-respect, and honor among them, but also a means for protesting against the supremacy of upper-caste and classes in the society. As a matter of fact, the quest of the Dalit activism, raised the consciousness of the Dalit masses, this new consciousness brought about new changes for the Dalit movement

Moving on to the various reform movements that took place in Maharashtra, I would differentiate it in two, ways the first one is the Dalit issues and the another one that focused more on the eradication of evils like improving the conditions of the high-caste Hindus and their women by fighting against Pardha, child-marriage, age of consent, Widow remarriage to female infanticide, others. The high caste reformers seem to have ignored the fact that there are two types of categories within Hinduism. Thus, many leaders from Dalit communities took the initiative to fight for their cause. For this the earlier attempts were made by Non- Brahmins, Jotiba Phule was the one from the Mali community (traditional occupation of gardener) classed with the Maratha Kunbis, led the campaign against the caste system and the other evils prevailing with in the society.The times when he was developing a strong Dalit following, his main organizational work was in fact among the middle-to-low non-

in 1888. Later with the enlightened British rule provided an opportunity for the masses to get themselves liberated from the slavery of the Brahmins. But at the same time he also criticized the British bureaucracy for its policy of supporting higher education and but its tendency to rely upon Brahmin subordinates. He also criticized the economic policy of the British rule which was unfavourable to the poor peasants who were ultimately Dalits. Thus Phule was the true leader of Dalit masses despite of his birth identity. His efforts to raise Dalit socially, economically and educationally, paved way for many other Dalit reform movements which were later headed by great leaders like Ambedkar.

Born as an untouchable, Ambedkar was not an exception in facing the same humiliation and torment, which every untouchable had to face in Indian society. He had seen people not having sufficient food to eat, no roof over their heads, no land under them, women with no clothes to cover their bodies. Like other Dalits on his community Ambedkar too started receiving nasty and inhumane treatment from the high-caste Hindus at a very early age, but despite of the hurdles, he never put off the zeal to fight back these difficulties. Very soon after his arrival to Bombay in 1923, he plunged into the work of the upliftment and emancipation of his fellow brothers and sisters. He saw the unlettered poverty stricken and superstition-ridden people leading a miserable life on their own land due to the dominance of blind faith and belief in the age old tradition of getting exploited unquestioningly on the name of religion. He, in order to emancipate them, set before them certain goals and guided them about how to reach the goal. His main aim was to make the Dalits aware of their miserable plight, their legitimate rights and to arouse among them the new awakening. In pursuance of this aim, he gave them a pronged message, "Educate, Organize and Agitate"

Ambedkar's life and work, constitutes a glorious chapter in the history of India. Later in his life he became a follower of the Kabirpanth and was an admirer of Jotirao Phule. Ambedkar in his writings and speeches had dealt exhaustively and pointedly with the evils of caste system. According to Ambedkar, the caste system is not merely a division of labour, but a hierarchy in which one labourer is graded above the other causing discrimination. This division of labour was not spontaneous; it was neither based on natural aptitudes nor on choice. It was based on the dogma of predestinations, Ambedkar writes,

"Caste system involves attempt to appoint takes to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of social status of the parents" (Ambedkar, vol.1, 35).

According to Ambedkar, castes are autonomous and there was no authority anywhere to compel caste to admit a new corner to its social life. Ambedkar adopted an unconventional way from getting out of the control of the caste system and got converted to Buddhism; however, he was aware that his act of conversion could bring a lot of criticism both from his followers and his critics. Despite all the criticism, Ambedkar was so fearless that his expression was never inhibited even by Gandhi's creed and Praxis. He was not a mere depressed-class leader, but a defender of human rights of the weaker and the exploited people. So he set up educational institutions to raise the level of consciousness of the serf-like people. "Tell the slave that

he is a slave and he will revolt against his slavery." was his motto. So he started journals and educational institutions for the Dalits and fought for women's equality and labour rights. Ambedkar's perspectives on caste can be seen in his works such as *Caste in India*, (1917), *Why go for Conversion* (1987), *Annihilation of Caste* (1987) and *Who Were the Sudara?* (1946), *What Gandhi and congress has done for the Untouchables* (1945). In these works he has critically analyzed the caste system from the historical and social perspective. Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste' invited the attention of Mahatma Gandhi as well as high caste Hindus reformers, and enlightened intellectuals, who were active in abolishing enforced widowhood, child marriage, dowry system etc, but was not eager to abolish the caste system for various selfish reasons. Ambedkar says,

"There is no doubt, in my opinion that unless you change your social order you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilize the community either for defense or for the offence. You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste. You cannot build up a nation. You cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundation of caste will crack and will never be a whole. The only question that remains to be considered is how to bring about the reform of the Hindu social order? How to abolish caste? This is a question of supreme importance."⁴

There is a view that in the reform of caste, the first step to take is to abolish sub-caste. After studying various religions Ambedkar believed that Buddhism was the greatest of all the religions as it was not merely a religion but also a great social doctrine. His research oriented mind was fully convinced by the empirical, logical, pragmatic and humanistic teaching of the Buddha. In all his writings and speeches Ambedkar mentioned the necessity of liberal religion in human life. According to him religion is part of one's inheritance. He writes,

"It pains me to see youths growing indifferent towards religions. Religion is not opium as some holds it. What good things I have, have been the benefits of my education to society I owe them to the religions feeling in me. I want religion, but not hypocrisy in the name of religion."⁵

Thus Religion to him was the driving force for human activities. He further remarked, "Man cannot live by bread alone. He has a mind which needs food for thoughts."⁶ According to Ambedkar's understanding, Buddha and Dhamma are essentially moral. By morality he means compassion, caring for one's fellow human being and for the natural world, feeling a sense of responsibility and commitment being actively committed to the well being of the world. Morality, unlike ritual obligation, springs from the heart of the individual and is based on a sense of brotherhood.

Some of the steps taken by Ambedkar, which proved a landmark in changing the face of Hindu dominated society are discussed below: **Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha** (1924):

Dr. Ambedkar founded the Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha on 20th July 1924 with an aim to spread the culture of education among the depressed classes. Bahishkrit means 'Exterio' or 'out caste'. It was basically for the high school students whose expenses of clothing, stationary & boarding were to be borne by the Sabha itself. The Sabha also established an institution to inculcate a liking for learning and knowledge and a love for

social service into the minds of the students of the depressed classes. The students soon started conducting a monthly magazine called Vidya Vilas. He also prepared a Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of Depressed classes in the Future Constitution of Self governing India and submitted it to the minority subcommittee. To Dr. Ambedkar, the Round Table Conference laid the foundation of self Government of India and proved to be a successful so far as the rights of the depressed classes were concerned.

Kalaram Temple Entry Satyagraha (1930) :

As an integral part of untouchability, the untouchables were denied entry into the Hindu temples. The Kalaram Temple at Nasik had been a major place of worship for the Hindu devotees of Rama. It was therefore decided to launch an agitation Satyagraha for the purpose. The struggle commenced on 2nd March 1930 & continued for about a month, paving way to the Dalit victory.

Round Table Conferences and Poona Pact:

To frame the future Constitution of India, the British govt. convened a Round Table Conference in London in 1930 for which Dr. Ambedkar was also invited. He was present for all the three conferences and raised the issues of Dalits at international level.

First Round Table Conference:

British Government arranged Round Table Conference in London in 1930 in order to solve the political problems in India. Dr. Ambedkar put forth the plea of untouchables before conference at an international level. The main intention behind it was to give political safeguards to untouchables in the future Constitution of India.

Second Round Table Conference:

On 7th September 1931 Second Round Table Conference was arranged in London. Dr. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for the untouchables in the conference. Because of his efforts untouchables got political representation and political voice in modern India. Gandhiji attended the conference on behalf of Indian National Congress strongly opposed Dr. Ambedkar's demand of separate electorates for the untouchables. However Ambedkar convinced the Conference and asked them to grant separate electorate for the political development of Dalits. Then Prime Minister Ramsey Macdonald accepted the demand of Dr. Ambedkar and declared Communal Award.

Poona Pact (1932):

Gandhiji started fast unto death to oppose separate electorates granted to the untouchables under the Communal Award. Dr. Ambedkar met Gandhiji in Yerwada Jail at Poona where discussions were held and an agreement was reached. This agreement is known as the Poona Pact (1932). Dr. Ambedkar was rather compelled to sign the Poona Pact against his will sacrificing the interests of his people to save the life of Gandhiji.

Mahar Watans and Dr. Ambedkar:

Mahar watan was another such issue called for an attention of Dr. Ambedkar. Mahar watan meant a piece of land given to a Mahar, a major caste among the untouchables in which a Mahar or his family members had to serve the village & the Government day and night just for some food grains from the villages and meagre salary

from the govt. Hence, for their well being, Dr. Ambedkar introduced an amendment to the Bombay Hereditary offices Act of 1874, which aimed at freedom of contract for the Mahars & suggested that the Baluta should be converted into a money cuss and it should be collected with the land revenue. Thus Ambedkar wanted to end the exploitation of not just Mahars of Maharashtra but of Dalits all over India⁷.

To conclude both Jotiba Phule and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar diligently, worked for the annihilation of the caste system within the Hindu society, tried to bring equality, at all the spheres of the Indian social, political, economical and religious life, to bring about the radical change in the Indian social system, for this Jotiba Phule's work and his writing, will always play a vital role in enlightening the mass in the time to come similarly the work and of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar has not only awaken the Dalit movement in Maharashtra but the impact of it seen on the entire social system of the Indian society, as per Dr. B.R.Ambedkar it is not the movement that will end, and the dalits will be emancipated, if it is the continuous process, so Dalits have to Educate, Agitate and Organise.

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