

Evils of Untouchability and the Question of Dalit Liberation: Revisiting “Mahad Satyagraha”

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The term ‘Dalit,’ considered to be of Marathi origin, literally means ‘crushed’ or ‘grounded’, or ‘that which has been grounded down’, delineating the ways of life and living conditions of a particular group of people belonging to the country, India (Kumar 3). In a nutshell, this alludes to socially oppressed groups, who were earlier tagged as ‘untouchables’. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule coined this term in the nineteenth century. ‘Dalit’ traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty and humiliation. The social ostracism meted out to these groups, was justified in terms of presumed sins committed in their previous birth, and ‘untouchability’ was justified under the idea of ‘karma’. ‘Untouchability’ was abolished when the Constitution of India came into effect in 1950, but such malpractice continues in varying degrees even today in almost all parts of India.

An individual, irrespective to the society he belongs to, is a member of a class. In this regard, the four-fold caste system or ‘Varnashram’ is unique to the Indian society, where the entire Hindu population is strictly compartmentalised into four classes, namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. This social division was tagged as being permanent, through the backing of a number of religious scriptures, collectively known as ‘Dharma Sashtras’, much revered by the Hindus, and the brahmins in particular. These so-called standardised law books, which the brahmins had looked up to, finally aided the society to

succumb to upholding social divisions, especially through ban on intermarriage or exogamy, thereby resulting in Caste System. B. R. Ambedkar has shown how such a strict division of society has led on to discrimination of the labourers into water-tight compartments. "This division of labour," Ambedkar states, "is not spontaneous, is not based on natural aptitudes. Social and individual efficiency requires us to develop the capacity of an individual to the point of competency to choose and to make his own career. This principle is violated in Caste System in so far as it involves an attempt to appoint tasks to individuals in advance, selected not on the basis of trained original capacities, but on that of the social status of parents" ("Annihilation of Caste" 47).

Rigid rules of casteism have always confined and restricted 'Dalit' lives, depriving them of their essential rights and liberties. Hence, 'Dalits' do not become a caste, but a community, where the experiences of the people, belonging to the lowest grade in the society and tagged earlier as "untouchables," are recorded. As we delve deeper, we come to know, the term 'Dalit' was implemented by early anti-caste intellectuals, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule as an act of rebellion, to establish a new identity for this community. With the aid of Dalit Panthers Movement in 1972, the word 'Dalit' gained recognition in order to eventually establish political equality and cultural liberation.

Born in an untouchable caste family of Mahars in Maharashtra, Ambedkar is the best advocate of Dalit human rights. He was a great scholar and a great humanitarian Dalit activist, himself facing humiliation since his childhood days, being marginalised and ridiculed by his upper-class classmates in school. This humiliation turns out to be the basic parameter in Dalit marginalization and exploitation in the Indian context. In fact, we will notice, how this subject of humiliation has been used as a social, political and cultural weapon to marginalize and oppress the Dalit community. This humiliation is closely related to the theme of untouchability. In this sphere, Ambedkar's vision is both relevant and significant because he was the first intellectual, who had raised the issue of untouchability

in the most effective manner. In addition, he considers the prevalence of caste system as a unique marker of inequality, which is a threat to the spirit of democracy.

Mahad, located in the Raigad district of Maharashtra, is situated on the banks of River Savitri. The people of high castes banned the entry of 'untouchables' to Chavadar Lake in Mahad on the ground that it was a private tank, reserved for the so-called high caste people of the society. As a result of such repression continuing for ages, Dr. Ambedkar led an agitation with his fellow Dalits, in March 1927, in an attempt to draw water from the same tank.

To put things into perspective, the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha had arranged for a conference at Mahad, on 19th and 20th march, 1927, which had paved the way for Mahad Satyagraha eventually (Limbale 47). This conference of the untouchables was attended by a huge number of people. Immediately after the conference had ended, they marched to the main tank of the town and drank water from there. Mahad Satyagraha led by Ambedkar was an attempt to win equal social rights for the historically excluded and marginalized untouchables. However, in spite of leading a peaceful and non-violent protest, Ambedkar and his followers were beaten up severely by the caste Hindus.

Pained at the condition of the marginalized Indians, Babasaheb was determined to relieve the Dalits from the clutches of casteist society. Accordingly, a Satyagraha Conference was again called on December 25, 1927. In that conference, a resolution was passed to burn the *Manusmriti*, which, according to Ambedkar, perpetuated the social, economic, religious and political slavery of the untouchables. The *Manusmriti* was burned on the same day, and subsequently, thousands of Satyagrahis, under the leadership of Babasaheb, marched towards the lake, marking the beginning of the protest. In Ambedkar's speech on this issue we get to know how the Mahad Satyagraha was not only an attempt to draw water for human consumption but was also a foundation stone for establishing human rights for the Dalits.

In the speech on "Mahad Satyagraha", Ambedkar addresses the Satyagrahis recalling the incident of March. Had their discourse been accepted earlier, they would not have had to begin their present undertaking. If we dive into the depths of this particular discourse in the colonial period, we will find that Ambedkar's ideologies regarding upliftment of the Dalits were simply branded as pro-British and anti-national by many upper caste Hindu intellectuals. This was primarily because many Dalits had actually supported the reform movement of British during the colonial regime, which aimed at an abolition of the caste-based hierarchy of Hinduism. This aspect had frightened the upper caste Hindus to the point that they started believing that they would lose their position which they enjoyed since times immemorial. As an immediate response, therefore, they inflicted violence.

As his speech progresses, we find Ambedkar raising pertinent question, "One cannot help asking the question, why do they forbid us alone?"(Dangle 258). First, he refers to the sacred creation of *Chaturvarna* (four classes) referred to in the *Rig Veda*. On this note, Raj Kumar writes, "The introduction of *Chaturvarna* (four classes) is rendered in a metaphorical way in the creation myth of the Purusha Sukta in the tenth mandala of the *Rig Veda*. It says that the creator (Lord Brahma) produced the first community (the brahmins) from the mouth, the second (the kshatriyas) from the shoulders, the third (the vaishyas) from the thighs and the last (the shudras) from the feet" (17). In this idea of the body of a purusha, there is no place for Pancham Varna or Dalits, but such a division of the society was mainly job-oriented with specific duties attached to each position. Over the centuries, this hierarchy continued to be implemented, with the practice of certain social customs. These later ages stand witness to the publication of *Manusmriti* by Manu during the rule of Pushyamitra Sunga (Kumar 20). As an aftermath of such caste gradation, the marginal groups came to be identified as 'asprushyas' or 'untouchables' with the lowest standing.

Ambedkar points out basic tenets of inequality regarding "intermarriage, inter-dining, inter-drinking and social intercourse" (Limbale 258). These boundaries are set, in

order to prevent transgression from one rank to another. He remarks that this was a deliberate ploy against them by the upper caste Hindus, in order to remind Dalits of their inferior status. Babasaheb states that this symbolic act of prohibition was to satisfy the motives of caste Hindus and the attempted non-violent protest by Ambedkar and his followers was a counter-productive stance to break free from such prohibitions.

Ambedkar had imbibed and accepted the spirit of 'Satyagraha' from Mahatma Gandhi. Babasaheb made this a part of education of the Dalits, so that they may be able to grasp the true meaning of 'Satyagraha' ('Satya' signifying quest or truth and 'agraha' signifying the desire to attain the truth) to achieve the spirit of national unity, with no caste discrimination (Dangle 259). From this point of view, Ambedkar argues that to uproot the caste system we must annihilate the system itself.

With the progression of his speech, Ambedkar brings forth certain analogies to further exemplify the evils of casteist politics. First, he refers to caste based Hindu society as a venomous snake, where the venom lies in the discriminatory practice. This snake must be killed by striking its head, and not its tail. In order to eradicate the system completely, the head, or the ban on intermarriage must be completely crushed, so as to establish social equality.

He further develops an analogy by stating that "An attack must be made on the knowledge of the enemy's vital weaknesses" (Dangle 263). In the epic the *Mahabharata*, Duryodhana could only be killed when Bhima struck at his thigh, the former's most vulnerable spot with his mace. The analogy drawn is that, the untouchables have to strike at the root cause of this powerful caste system and the inequality resulted due to it. Further, the symbolic significance of Duryodhana's thigh is the ban on inter marriage, which has been troubling Ambedkar since the beginning.

The third comparison is drawn with a situation when the world is the tight grasp of a global pandemic. Such a situation shows, how the doctors are unsure as to which particular

medicine will cure the patients completely. In a similar vein, Babasaheb addresses his followers, "One finds many instances of a physician's efforts to remove a malady proving fruitless because he has not perceived fully what will get rid of the disease; similar instances of failure to root out a social disease because it is not fully diagnosed are rarely recorded in history; and so, one does not often become aware of them" (Dangle 263). He further elaborates, Dalits are probably unable to find out the real cause of their suffering. This caste-based discrimination is a social disease leading to social exclusion. So, if they think, small reforms like social drinking and social intercourse will help to get rid of this, then they are probably residing in the fool's paradise.

Successively, our concentration is drawn towards the discriminatory practice that prevailed in ancient Rome, similar to the caste-based distinction in Indian society. The major conflict alluded to here is between Patricians (upper class) and Plebians (lower class), in terms of claims of power and individual rise. The latter used to serve the former when they enjoyed all power and privileges. Plebians waged a rebellion demanding equality. When Patricians sensed danger, they granted some freedom to the Plebians. So, some laws were made equal, but the law enforcers were the powerful lot, which questioned the enforcement of law.

Babasaheb, in *Annihilation of Caste*, puts forth the story of the Oracle of Delphi, when the Patricians and Plebians decided to hold separate tribunes (unit of governance) for each. The priest, a representative Patrician, is the manipulator who would never let the tribune be passed in favour of Plebians. With no representation in Delphi, the Plebians could never achieve equality. They were unable to find out the real cause of discrimination, similar to the untouchables in India. They were contented with partial freedom they received and never enquired beyond it. Ambedkar compares the Brahmins to these Priests who would never willingly give away their sovereign position. They will never allow the removal of the ban on intermarriage because it would subvert their caste-based supremacy. Furthermore, towards

the end of his speech on "Mahad Satyagraha", Ambedkar draws an analogy between the Samurais of Japan and the Brahmins of Indian Subcontinent, as the Brahmins enjoyed highest privilege in Hindu society, so also, the Samurais enjoyed highest privilege in the Japanese society. However, they were great patriots who had sacrificed for their motherland unlike the Brahmins with their selfish motives.

In his works, Ambedkar continuously expresses his concern that Hindu society is in crisis. When he delivered his speech in December 1927, he was very much a part of the Hindu society and had not yet acknowledged his conversion to Buddhism. Gradually, having a first-hand experience of the pangs of untouchability and marginalization, he wanted to unify all the outcastes and fight for the cause of their upliftment, with his infamous slogan, "To unite, to educate, to agitate!" He strongly advocated that people with no privileges should be given opportunities to develop inherent qualities. To substantiate his argument, he puts forth the example of Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 enforced by the British, when they tagged the forest tribes as criminals, unable to control them. On this note, Babasaheb remarks that slaves will remain slaves for generations, if the upper caste people do not come forward to lend a helping hand. Also, if such a stigmatization continues for generations, then, they would never be able to find windows of opportunities for the blossoming of their qualities and merit.

When such inequality is ingrained in the society the progress of the nation as a whole is hampered. To overcome this situation, in "Mahad Satyagraha" he stresses on uprooting of the four-fold caste system and 'untouchability' progressing to eventual programming of the society on the basis of a single caste. He believed it to be the only way to achieve social equality, in order to bring about a social revolution, which would eventually be centred around equal distribution of privilege on the basis of merit, rather than the basis of birth. He criticizes the people, who ridicule the idea of social equality citing examples of natural inequalities. He further remarks that inequality exists in nature for the sole sake of identification, for distinctive nature of species, and for thought identifying characteristics of

an individual. But social inequality is man-made, for the sole satisfaction of their selfish motives.

Babasaheb was still hopeful in December 1927 when he advocated the idea of a single caste, as opposed to his idea of a culturally unified society as would be mentioned later in *Annihilation of Caste*. Nevertheless, he soon realized such a concept was utopian and idealistic, with issues of nomenclature or identity of the single caste being at stake. Therefore, he went on to emphasize the establishment of an ideal society based on the ideas of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, where social division would not involve discrimination on the basis of birth. "An ideal society," he contended, "should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there should be social endosmosis" (*"Annihilation of Caste"* 57).

In his works Babasaheb Ambedkar perfectly demonstrates the evils of untouchability in Indian society as faced by the Dalits almost at every stage of their lives. So, he gives a clarion call for social revolution and for absolute removal of untouchability. He was well aware of the fact that the course of people's revolution is determined by the people in power. He consciously developed a medium of dialogue, discussion and assistance, so that the resolution could be peaceful and silently successful. But, even today when our country has reached sky heights of success, some of the evils still are ingrained in Hindu society, with hostility still being meted out to the lower castes in some provinces, thereby causing a hindrance to the emancipation of the society for the greater good.

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