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Dalit Movement in Vidarbha before Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar

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[Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar raised a massive movement for the social, political, economic and religious upliftment of Dalits. This movement is widely known as 'Ambedkarite Movement' in the present era. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar actively participated in the social movement since 1920. Thereafter, he fostered an organization by courageously agitating with discipline and organizational power. Dalits of Vidarbha region actively participated in the movement led by Dr. Ambedkar and gave impetus to the movement. Ambedkarite movement became more resistive for the justice and rights within short span in entire Vidarbha. The success of Ambedkarite movement in Vidarbha region lies in the movements that had taken place before Dr. Ambedkar. Some people strove hard to awaken the conscience of Dalits in Vidarbha region before Dr. Ambedkar. It can't be denied that the roots of Ambedkarite movement instantaneously strengthened in the Vidarbha prominently due to the consciousness about the rights and privileges during Pre-Ambedkarite era. So, it is necessary to creatively bring forth the local history by reviewing Dalit movement during Pre-Ambedkarite era in Vidarbha and it is the main motive behind present research paper.]

Some Mahar community's people strove hard for the upliftment of the untouchables since 1880. The hostels and schools for the untouchable girls and boys had been initiated by these people. Some people carried out this work at their own cost while few of them continued their work by collecting some contribution from the society and initiated the process of social upliftment. Some of them started newspapers and endeavored to aware the society. These all efforts were seen before Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's participation in the social movement in Vidarbha region. It had already provided background for the consciousness. So, Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts and active policies rapidly flourished in this region after his participation in the social movement. Vidarbha's Dalits cohesively stood with him. Present research paper endeavors to review the wave of consciousness before 1920.

British Government started the universalization of education after East India Company lost its administrative powers. Many Missionary schools were started in India. It benefitted untouchables to some extent. Many untouchables were deprived from the education as there was lack of the residential and mess facility at the place of education. Januji Khandare came forward for it in Akola. Though Janoji was illiterate, he was aware about the importance of education. So, he established hostels for the untouchables students of rural areas who couldn't afford education in the cities like Akola.[1] In 1884, Mr. Janoji Kacharu Khandare established this institution with the help of many people from Akola and other areas.[2] He also demanded for the land to start a technical school near to the hostel. In this way, he strove hard to provide such facilities to the untouchable students and fortified the path of their education.

Nagpur was the center of movement during that era. Mahar community's people were prohibited from entering at the Ambala Lake in Ramtek which is near to Nagpur. Mr. Gopalrao Bhide lawyer, an activist from Gourakshan Sabha, instructed Mahar community's people not to eat the beef by organizing a meeting at Ambala in 1892. He allowed them to take bath in Ambala Lake after pledging not eat the flesh.[3] Thereafter, Gourakshan Committee instructed its workers and peons to sit on the bank of the lake and they were

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extorting religious fund and money for shaving. Mahar community's devotees expected that the religious fund that had been collected by the committee members should be utilized for generating facilities for the devotees. But, these Gorakshan Committees never considered human beings superior than the cows.[4] Moreover, no other facilities were provided at the Ambala Lake. In 1903-04, Gourakshan Committee's people prohibited Mahar community's people from taking bath at the Ambala Lake during pilgrimage. Mr. Vithoba Moon Pande strove hard to open Ambala Lake for the untouchables at that time. Mahar community's people were desecrated as they were eating beef and the flesh of died animals. So, Mr. Vithoba Moon Pande organized meetings of Mahar community's people at many villages and instructed them to promise they would not to eat the beef.[5] In 1903, he obtained a verdict for Raghuji Bhosale Maharaj regarding not to prohibit Mahar community's people from taking bath at the lake. He also sought the permission for building the wharf in 1905.[6] Thereafter, Mr. Vithoba started to build the wharf but the land near to the lake was not legally belonged to the committee. So, he purchased that land from Rajeshri Gopal Ganesh Fadanvis Malgujar, Ramtek. He established Shivapind and completed the work of wharf.[7] In this way, Ambala Wharf opened for Mahar community's people for bathing and other religious rituals. The whole credit goes to the endless efforts of Mr. Vithoba Moon Pande.

Mr. Kisan F. Bansode was the second most important person in Nagpur. He established an institution namely 'Sanmarg Bodh Asprushya Samaj' at the age of 22 in 1901.[8] He flourished this movement throughout Maharashtra. He incessantly worked for spreading awareness and education among the people for 20 years through this organization.[9] Then, he became the part of Bramho Society in 1909.[10] He was a journalist by blood. He gave voice to the plight of untouchables by starting 'Vital Vidhwansak' in 1910, 'Nirashrit Hind Nagarik' in 1910, 'Manjur Patrika' in 1918, and 'Chokhamela' in 1936.[11] He continued his movement of social awareness through these newsletters. In December 1921, a religious conference was organized in Nagpur. Mr. Kisan Fagu delivered an influential talk in this conference. In his speech, he said, "…our religion is Democratic. So, Dharmadhikari must behave as per people's inclination. Many public movements or agitations take place at many villages. Untouchables are absent in these movements. Yet, you people termed it as the public movement. Untouchables never stand with you because you never treat them with dignity. All the people fetch the water from public wells. The touch of beef eaters is allowed there. But, why are these people not allowing us to fetch water though we are still stick with Hinduism without adopting Christianity or Islam? You say we are untouchables. People will not forcibly share food with you if the tag of untouchables has been removed. Prohibiting entrance in the homes and not sharing the food are the matter of personal consent. Public places are for everyone. Every person has right over it. Is there any question about choices? God is one. What is detrimental in opening the doors of the temples for Mahar community's people? There is not a political motive in it. Religious power is the power of people. It is in your hands. Supreme Power should open the doors of temples for everyone. He should eradicate untouchability. Untouchability is detrimental in work of nation building. These things should not be neglected. So, you should prominently focus on the issue of eradication of untouchability by sidelining other factors…"[12] But these efforts were useless. In the public meeting of Mahar community's people at Warora, Dist. Chandrapur, he stoutheartedly said that untouchables should courageously fight for their right with so-called upper caste people.[13] Mr. Kisan F. Bansode established 'Central Province and Warhad Mahar Council' with the help of his colleagues. This council's 9th Session was organized on 7th February 1920 at Chikhali of Buldhana district. Mr. Kisan F. Bansode was the Guest of Honour of this conference.[14] He

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elaborated the comprehensiveness of the Mahar Council in this conference and appealed the untouchables to unifiedly fight for their rights. In 1906, he established 'Mahar Sabha' in Nagpur. As per the printed report of Mahar Sabha, Mr. Vithoba Raoji Moonpande was the chairperson of the Mahar Sabha in 1913 while Mr. Rewaram Kawade was the Founding Member of Mahar Sabha.[15]

Mr. Rewaram Kawade's journey was started from the social inequality, untouchability, poverty and unemployment. Mill workers were surviving on the low wages during that period. Their service could be terminated any time. Amidst these circumstances, Mr. Rewaram Kawade organized first ever strike for the demands of the laborers in the Empress Mill in 1919.[16] He played key role and successfully continued the strike for two days and he succeeded in fulfilling the demands of the laborers. It was his remarkable deed. Thereafter, he was widely known as the leader of laborers.

Mr. Kalicharan Nandagawali was a prominent leader from Gondia-Bhandara district. He was the foremost leader of the movement of untouchables in Vidarbha region. He was a key leader in this movement. He was less educated but was a landlord. He whole-heartedly helped for Dalit movement and paved the way for their upliftment. In 1911, he started 'Putri' school for Dalit girls in Gondia and spent 3000 rupees of it.[17] This school was started with the help of his other companions in 1914, Mr. Nandagawali became the member of Gondia Municipal Corporation. Thereafter, he soon became the Chairperson of the Municipal Corporation in 1916. He established 'Bharatiya Mahar Panchayat' in 1914 and organized a huge conference for the abolition of the untouchability in 1916.[19] He unceasingly endeavored to awaken the conscience in the untouchable community regarding their rights. In this way, Mr. Nandagawali was rich landlord who always financially helped untouchable community's movements and kept it burning.

Mr. V. D. Makesar was an important leader in Berar Province (Varhad). He took initiative for the betterment of Mahar community before the establishment of All India Depressed Classes Association and Depressed India Association. In 1910, 'Mahar Sudhar Mandal had been established in Amravati. Mr. Makesar became a member of this organization. This organization held meetings in the villages and passed various resolutions regarding ban on liquor, interpretation of sub-castes, and education to their children etc. These all passed resolutions were put forward to the government by this organization and tried to eradicate the miseries of Dalits.[20] Thereafter, he started his work in Yeotmal.

Mr. Ganesh Gawai was the resident of Thugaon in Amravati district. He started his social work from his village. He started 'Mahar Library' at Thugaon to create interest of reading among people. He strove hard to connect Mahar community's people with reading. Mr. Ganesh Gawai rendered his service to Prarthana Samaj by adhering to it in 1910 in Mumbai. Thereafter, Karmaveer Shinde handover the work of Depressed Classes Mission to Mr. Gawai to flourish it in Maharashtra and Karnataka.[21] Though Mr. Gawai was the member of 'Depressed Classes Mission' established by Karmaveer Shinde, he established 'The Depressed India Association' means 'Bahishkrit Bharat Samaj' as a representative organization in Nagpur in 1918 and Mr. Ganesh Gawai was the real director of the organization at that time.22 Entire untouchable community was perplexed about the role of Depressed Classes Mission regarding the nominations of the representative of untouchables. In 1914, he started a fortnightly entitled 'Bahishkrut Bharat'.[23] Then this fortnightly closed but his efforts were significant. Dr. Ambedkar also started a fortnightly entitled 'Bahishkrit Bharat' but it was already started by Mr. Gawai to give the voice to the issues of Dalits. Apart from this, Mr. Gawai also established 'Bhajan Samaj' as a part of religious reformation movement.[24] Most of the youngsters were the participants in this Bhajan Samaj. Mr. Gawai

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obtained government land for this community by incessantly following-up to the government. Many reformations had been taken place through it. Many villages were reformed deriving the inspiration from him. In this way, the work of Dalit consciousness had begun during Pre-Ambedkar era in Vidarbha.

Conclusion

Many Dalit people had undertaken the work of social consciousness among untouchable community before the emergence of Dr. Ambedkar. Their deeds spread awareness about the rights among Dalit people in Vidarbha region. The works of Dalit leaders had taken the form of organized movement for the rights of untouchables till 1920. Thereafter, Dr. Ambedkar started the movement for the rights and justice of Dalits. This movement gradually flourished in extensively. Vidarbha's Dalits people were working in organized form. Dr. Ambedkar led movement was the movement for the emancipation of human beings and it is reflected in the passive resistance of Mahad. So, Vidarbha's people participated in the struggle started by Dr. Ambedkar. Ambedkarite movement stood on the strong base in Vidarbha region. The whole credit should be given to the movements emerged during Pre-Ambedkar era.

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