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Two Variant Conceptions of 'Satyagraha': Ambedkar's Mahad & Gandhi's Dandi Satyagrahas

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Abstract: *This book review draws attention to Bojja Tharakam's posthumously published work, 'Mahad: The March That's Launched Every Day'. In this work, Tharakam has compared Ambedkar's Mahad march with Gandhi's Dandi march. By touching upon the broad themes explored in the work the book review draws attention to the methods deployed by Tharakam to bring to light a much neglected yet immensely significant event in the history of the Indian subcontinent.*

In 'Mahad: The March That's Launched Every Day', Bojja Tharakam has compared Mahad and Dandi marches led by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and M. K. Gandhi, respectively. Both Mahad and Dandi marches have been well recognised as expressions of Satyagraha by scholars. In his endeavour Tharakam has made use of a number of literary sources to discuss Ambedkar and Gandhi's roles and mechanisms in organizing and leading their movements. Through its course, the work establishes how Ambedkar's Mahad march can be considered as a substantive satyagraha when compared with Gandhi's Dandi march.

'Mahad: The March That's Launched Every Day' is a precise commentary introducing ways and dimensions on how to visualise Ambedkar and Gandhi's modes of leadership in the light of discussions around mass movements led by the two leaders. Mahad agitation was led by Dr B. R. Ambedkar in association with his followers denouncing the social ban against ex-Untouchables on drawing water from the public tank at Mahad in Maharashtra.

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The Mahad tank was also known as Chawadar Lake. Even though the then Bombay Presidency Legislature and the Mahad Municipality had given legal rights to the ex-Untouchables to draw water from the Mahad tank, due to a fear of possible backlash from the upper castes, ex-Untouchables hesitated to even approach the tank. To disrupt such a fearful atmosphere and to reclaim ex-Untouchables' rights and dignity, Ambedkar and his followers marched to the Chawadar Lake to draw water from the public tank. When the news of the ex-Untouchables' march to the Mahad tank area reached upper castes, primarily Brahmins, they started spreading rumours that the ex-Untouchables were marching to enter the Veereswar temple which would pollute Brahmin gods, and that it was their maiden duty to attack ex-Untouchables and prevent them from entering the Veereswar temple (Samel, 1999).

Even though no ex-Untouchable had entered the Veereswar temple, the Brahmins of Mahad area attacked them. Dr. Ambedkar and his followers maintained calm and did not counter-attack. The true spirit of Satyagraha was shown against the Brahmins by Ambedkar and his followers in two forms: first by drawing water from the Chawadar tank and later by not counter attacking Brahmins. The number of ex-untouchables marching to the Mahad water tank exceeded ten thousand and it was much more than the number of local Brahmin attackers. Had the ex-Untouchables decided to counter attack the Brahmins, their numeric strength would have served as a great advantage. However, the ex-Untouchables under Ambedkar's leadership maintained strict vigilance and discipline by not indulging in a counter-attack.

From the backdrop of Ambedkar and his followers' Mahad march, Tharakam visualised and reconstructed the agitation styles and modes of leadership dynamics. In the process, Tharakam presented a comparative perspective of Ambedkar's Mahad agitation and Gandhi's famous Dandi march. Both the demonstrations were historical watershed moments in Indian history, however, there is a great degree of variation in Indians' understanding of these two marches and respective roles of Ambedkar and Gandhi. While Ambedkar's Mahad agitation is cherished, recognised and memorialized by the lower castes, Gandhi's Dandi march has been made into a part of India's well documented national historic discourse. In other words, larger masses in India have been made aware of Gandhi's Dandi march as a historical incident in the fight against the British colonial forces than Ambedkar's role in leading the Mahad agitation. There is also a prime reason for the development of such a view – history as an academic discipline in India is mostly offered in nationalist and chronological perspective and a focus on analytical social history is almost absent from Indian academia. While Gandhi's political life figures under nationalist history discourse in India, Ambedkar's historical Mahad march for the emancipation of marginalised sections is not sufficiently discussed in Indian academia. However, Ambedkar's cherished legacy has been informally continuing in India due to the efforts by the marginalised sections like the Scheduled Castes, among other factors.

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Gandhi undertook the Dandi march in March 1930 whereas Mahad march's first phase was held in March 1927. The Mahad march lasted up to 1937 which includes the legal battle that was fought between the marchers and the upper castes of the Mahad region. After Ambedkar and his associates marched to Mahad and drew water by breaking socially imposed ban, the upper castes of Mahad area filed a private suit in the court saying that ex-untouchables could not draw water from the Mahad tank; they claimed that the Mahad tank was a private property. As a result of such legal hurdles, another phase and level of agitation to draw water from the Mahad tank was undertaken. However, following the court's orders Ambedkar withdrew the second march to the Mahad tank. This is telling of how Ambedkar stood for the legal procedure to take its course and fought the case for an entire decade.

Here interesting contrasts can be drawn between Ambedkar and Gandhi's mode of Satyagraha agitation. While Ambedkar respected the modern law and carried out Mahad Satyagraha, Gandhi stood for violation of the modern law. Gandhi favoured violating law whenever required. In that sense the Satyagraha conceptions of Ambedkar and Gandhi varied vastly. Ambedkar had a tremendous visionary expectation on the modern legal mechanism to reform Indian society. Ambedkar's modern legal approach to reform society can be traced to sources such as his educational training in legal studies, his writings and speeches which resulted in his role as the Law Minister to the Government of India (Moon, 2019). In fact, through the institutionalised legal mechanism, Ambedkar was able to achieve equality and justice for his people at Mahad. In other words, Ambedkar fought the Satyagraha battle in the judiciary and also won it. Professionally, both Ambedkar and Gandhi were well-qualified legal advocates; but while Ambedkar respected modern law, Gandhi stood for violation of the modern law under the pretext of 'Civil Disobedience'.

Ambedkar and Gandhi contained varied notions of 'equality and justice'. Though both fought to secure equality and justice, their conceptual understanding and its implementation varied to a large extent. While Ambedkar was claiming social, human and legal rights from the caste Hindus, caste Hindus were fighting to secure political independence from the British under Gandhi's leadership. Though the notions of equality and justice may be nominally accepted, prolonged agitations are needed to secure them in greater degree or even to the full extent. From this dimension, Ambedkar and Gandhi's Satyagraha marches, agitations and extended activism have been further analyzed. Great deal of negotiations and phased manner of mutual exchanges is a common political phenomenon when intense political dialogues are concerned. The same process can also be observed in Ambedkar and Gandhi's political life in their fight to realize their respective conceptualizations of equality and justice; be it with the British or the dialogue between Ambedkar and Gandhi over rights of the lower castes.

Since, the notions of equality and justice are dynamic in nature and their extended meanings vary with the passage of time, renewed modes of agitation may take place to realize these ideas. When

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seen from this perspective, Tharakam in 'Mahad: The March That's Launched Every Day' points out that the Ambedkarites and marginalized sections are not yet fully satisfied with the available degree of equality and justice to them. The title of the work attempts to highlight that in a metaphorical manner Ambedkar's Satyagraha started at Mahad is unfinished and its ultimate goal is still in the process of being achieved. The title was not just referring to the exact Mahad agitation, it symbolically highlights the continued contemporary discriminatory stances against the marginalized sections by caste Hindus.

Interestingly, for Dr. Ambedkar social liberation of marginalised sections like the depressed classes was the priority unlike Gandhi. As a response to the ongoing nationalist movement under Gandhi and the Indian National Congress; Ambedkar took a critical stance by demanding sanction of proper legal and constitutional guarantees for the protection of vulnerable sections like the depressed classes (Kumar, 2014) (Ambedkar, 2008) (Ambedkar, 2010) (Ambedkar, 2011). For Gandhi, it was the other way round: that first political independence from the British should be achieved and then they would focus on social reformation. Some of the researchers have observed that Gandhi too had a reformative social agenda. Gandhi's reformative list included elements like Satyagraha, dealing with issues of caste, religion, household manufacture of cloth using the spin wheel etcetera. Even then, Ambedkar and Gandhi differed significantly in their conceptions of social and political emancipation strategies. Similarly, both Ambedkar and Gandhi's vision of Satyagraha varied greatly (Aloysius, 2009) (Ambedkar, 2006) (Zelliot, 2004). In another sense, during Indian freedom movement itself, Satyagraha was variedly articulated, and divergent marches and agitations were led, accordingly. The same can be vividly observed from both the instances of Ambedkar and Gandhi's conceptualisation of Satyagraha; in view of Mahad and Dandi marches, primarily. While Gandhi was fighting for external political liberation from the British colonial forces; Ambedkar and his followers stood for social liberation from caste Hindus alongside other political battles.

Tharakam establishes that Gandhi's Dandi march was not successful in accomplishing the objectives it had set forth with as they failed to even manufacture salt, the very basis of the Dandi satyagraha. Dandi march's prime target was to break the salt manufacture law since the British Indian government levied exorbitant tax on manufacturing salt. Though Gandhi started the Dandi march amidst excited crowds and he also met enthusiastic welcome en-route; the fact remains that Gandhi failed to manufacture salt at Dandi. What Gandhi had done at Dandi was that he took a fistful of saline mud and his associates like Sarojini Naidu and others started to shout aloud and encouraged cheer among other surrounding followers that Gandhi broke salt law by manufacturing salt. Gandhi's capture of fistful saline mud was not photographed at Dandi. Tharakam's work informs that on his return journey from Dandi Gandhi was given crystal clear salt at a place called Bhimrad and it was there that the pictures with the salt were taken. The distance between Dandi and Bhimrad was 25 kilometers. However, at Bhimrad also Gandhi and his followers failed to manufacture salt. For salt manufacture, all the stages of manufacturing should have been

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completed, for which Gandhi and his associates should have resided at the same place for the required duration. However, this did not happen. In that respect Tharakam declared Dandi march as incomplete even though it became a much highlighted and celebrated incident in the nationalist history of India.

Tharakam was able to reconnect with the Mahad and Dandi marches based on his in-depth reading of both the events. Both the movements targeted to express ‘Satyagraha’ and fought to secure their respective rights. The term 'Satyagraha' has combined two words: 'Satya' and 'Agraha'. 'Satya' means truth and 'Agraha' means ‘insistence’ or ‘holding onto’. Thus, 'Satyagraha' means, 'holding on to truth'. Following this definition, it should be observed that while Gandhi expressed Satyagraha against the British misrule in India and aspired to secure political independence, Ambedkar waged Satyagraha against the prevalent unjust social order and the legal disorder. Legal disorder here meant that even after granting of legal rights to the ex-Untouchables to draw water from the Mahad tank by the then Bombay Presidency Legislature and Mahad Municipality, the ex-Untouchables were forced to wage a decade long legal battle under Ambedkar's leadership to achieve the same right. Thus, both the Satyagrahas in this respect present completely divergent and variant conceptions. Tharakam has been able to establish that though Gandhi is well remembered and cherished with the word ‘Satyagraha’, Ambedkar's vision of Satyagraha has not got its due share in the national politico-historical narratives.

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