

MAHAD SATYAGRAHA: DR. B. R AMBEDKAR CREATING HISTORY AND ASSERTING EQUALITY

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Abstract

The Mahad Chawdar tank satyagraha was not aimed at mere access to water from public water resource but it had far-reaching effects on the entire social set-up of India. Dr. Ambedkar battled long and hard for establishing claim to equal civil rights for untouchables through it. Untouchability was a curse to Indian society and Mahad Satyagraha was the foundation stone of challenging it. The opposition faced by Dr. Ambedkar during this satyagraha further strengthened his resolve to continue his struggle for betterment of his fellow untouchables. There were many instances during the course of this movement which created history. It also stirred the Indian social fabric by the act of burning Manusmriti. Its impact was also felt on the future of India's socio-religious conditions. Its overall significance cannot be overshadowed by the fact that it was an event confined to a particular geographical region as it was a revolutionary and brave event.

Keywords: Mahad, Chawdar, untouchables, caste, history, equality.



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Introduction: Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar's life and work encompasses national, social, political, legal and humanitarian aspects. In spite of his versatile work in all these fields he is conspicuously regarded as a Dalit leader. No doubt being born as an untouchable and having fiercely fought this cruel practice of untouchability all his life he is highly revered and even worshiped as an incomparable leader of Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar's Mahad Chawdar Tank Satyagraha marks the initiation of social upliftment movement with the very first involvement of untouchable masses. The very fact that untouchables, who were outcaste, oppressed, depressed and surviving under highly deplorable conditions, rose to challenge the then existing inequality under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership makes the Mahad Satyagraha an epoch-making movement. It was a movement which led to self-realization and laid claim to civil, humanitarian rights by the untouchables. This paper is an attempt to understand the underlying social and religious impact the Mahad satyagraha made on the Indian society. It is also an effort to emphasize that this movement not only made history but also paved the way for shaping the history of Indian society with respect to untouchables in particular and the entire Hindu social order in general.

Understanding Untouchability: Mahad Satyagraha as a pioneer movement of untouchables for claiming civil humanitarian rights cannot be evaluated without understanding untouchability. The history of Indian society primarily revolves around the Varna/Caste system that made its presence in India during Vedic Age (1500 BC to 1000 BC). The caste system was based on 'Division of labour' and it governed all the social norms and values. Under this system the society was divided into four hierarchical strata viz. Priestly class (Brahmins) who were at the apex, followed by the ruling/warrior class (Kshatriyas). Below the Kshatriyas were ranked the class of merchants and farmers (Vaishyas) and the fourth position were the craftsmen, workers and labourers (Shudras). However there existed a fifth group of people i.e., the outcastes or untouchables in Indian society. These untouchables performed menial, derogatory tasks such as cremation and the handling of dead bodies, removal and skinning of dead animals, removal and cleaning of human bodily fluids and excreta (manual scavenging) and basket weaving. They were considered as impure and any contact or closeness to this class was termed as getting polluted (physical as well as ritual) by the caste Hindus. These untouchables had no civil or humanitarian rights and lived in pathetic conditions that too in areas beyond the boundary limits of villages. They were denied access to schools, temples and public places such as hotels, wells, water tanks, playgrounds etc. Even their shadow, let alone sight or proximity, was considered impure. They thrived on leftover, discarded or begged food. Thus, untouchables have been oppressed all through India's history.

Course of events of the Mahad Satyagraha:

Mahad Conference: Mahad is a small town in Raigad district (formerly called as Kolaba) of Maharashtra. What actually paved the way for organising Mahad Satyagraha by Dr. Ambedkar was a legal resolution passed in 1923 in Bombay Legislative Council moved by S. K. Bole and adopted by the Bombay Government. This resolution provided freedom of access to public utility resources to the untouchables. There was no written law except the age-old Hindu Shastras and Smritis (Manusmriti to be specific) which had forced inhumane practices as social norms on untouchables. As a result of the S. K. Bole resolution the Mahad Municipality had granted free access of Chawdar water tank to the untouchables in 1924. But the law was only on paper and no change could be seen in reality as the law was hardly implemented.

In order to alter the status quo with this regard Kolaba District Depressed Classes came to the forefront to organize a Conference to awaken the depressed classes. Surendranath Tipnis, Subhedar Savadkar and Anantrao Chitre were striving hard to make the Conference a success.

Elaborate preparations were made for months together to convene this two-day conference (19
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and 20 March 1927) and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was to preside over it. It witnessed presence of about ten thousand delegates consisting of leaders and workers of Depressed classes. Untouchables both men and women who were barely clad, ill fed and in deplorable state travelled for several miles to attend this Conference. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's presidential speech was full of inspiration and it urged the downtrodden to strive for their own betterment. He stated in his speech that, "*We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect, and gain self-knowledge.*" It instilled in the masses a kind of hope and they saw the path of their freedom from slavery under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership.

Many caste Hindus were also part of this conference. Out of many resolutions passed by the Conference one appealed to the Caste Hindus to help the Untouchables secure their civic rights. The resolution of marching in procession towards Chawdar tank and drinking its water was passed on 19 March 1927. In accordance to it the historic walk was held on 20 March 1927 wherein Dr. B. R. Ambedkar led a peaceful procession of thousands of untouchables for drinking water from Chawdar tank. He drank water from this tank and asserted equality and humanity for the untouchables. His act was reiterated by a huge lot of untouchables who followed his act and drank water from the tank. This is described as, "*momentous event, great in its magnitude and far-reaching in its consequences, was taking place. Anti-slavery, anti-caste, anti-priest.*" by Dr. Ambedkar. They all went back to the Conference pendal after this act but had hardly any idea of what was to follow. A rumour made rounds in Mahad, supposedly spread by some caste Hindus, that the untouchables were attempting to enter the nearby Veereshwar temple. This sparked attack on the Conference by caste Hindus within two hours of drinking water from the said tank. Havoc was laid loose in the pendal destroying property, food and beating the participant untouchables. It was not confined to the Conference site alone but many were thrashed on the way back to their villages. "*All orthodox Mahad was up in arms and the whole town at once became a surging mass of rowdies. They said that their religion was in danger, and strangely enough they clamoured that their God, too, was in danger of being polluted!*"

Resolve to launch a satyagraha: Dr. Ambedkar conjectured the violence that could happen if his untouchable followers were permitted to react to the attack inflicted on Conference by Caste Hindus. Hence, he urged his people not to retaliate. To add fuel to the fire, the upper caste Hindus of Mahad performed purification of Chawdar tank waters after the event of 20 March 1927. This clarified that the caste Hindus were only superficially supporting Dr. Ambedkar's endeavour of establishing social equality for untouchables. This led to the declaration of 26

June 1927 that a satyagraha would be launched at Mahad. Dr. Ambedkar urged the depressed class people who wanted to fight against the discrimination meted out to them as being polluting and impure to enlist themselves at the Bombay office of Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha. Meetings of the Sabha were held on 3 July 1927 and October 30 1927 at the Cowasji Jehangir Hall, Bombay and it was decided to hold a conference at Mahad on 25 December 1927 in order to establish their right of using water at the public tank and in the event of any prohibition to launch a Satyagraha movement. The caste Hindus were adamant and opposed the movement of untouchables. The Mahad District Magistrate tried to arbitrate between the two parties on 7 December 1927 but was unsuccessful. The orthodox Hindu leaders filed a suit against Dr. Ambedkar, Shivtarkar and Krishnaji S. Kadam and Ganya Malu Chambhar of Mahad— leaders of the Depressed Classes—on December 12, 1927, in the Civil Court at Mahad and asked for the issue of a temporary injunction. The temporary injunction was granted on the basis that Chawdar tank was a private property, as was claimed by the caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar had no recourse but to obey the injunction. However, the Conference was held at Mahad on 24 December 1927 amidst a huge gathering of fifteen thousand distressed yet hopeful people who were eagerly awaiting to hear their determined leader. His address impressed on the gathering that they ought to fight for social equality and that they were not seeking waters of Chawdar for being special but were seeking their humanitarian right which had been denied to them since times immemorial. Out of the many resolutions passed in the Conference it was decided to burn the Manusmriti on 25 December 1927 which laid down the most inhumane laws. The burning of Manusmriti was held in presence of the Collector, the Superintendent of Police and one hundred armed police. Dr. Ambedkar stated that, “*The bonfire of Manusmriti was quite intentional. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries.*” The injunction prevented Dr. Ambedkar from continuing the Mahad satyagraha but a procession was still held which peacefully walked around the Chawdar water tank and returned back to the conference on 25 December 1927.

Success after a decade long struggle: The case filed by orthodox Hindus against the depressed class leaders continued until a decade and finally justice was awarded in favour of the depressed class by a judgement of the Bombay High Court of 17th March 1937 which declared that Chawdar tank was not private but public property and hence every being irrespective of caste and religion has equal right to enjoy its waters.

This was the outcome of the long-drawn battle for equal social humanitarian right at Mahad which was peacefully and patiently fought by the depressed classes under Dr. Ambedkar's leadership.

Created History: Dr. B. R Ambedkar changed the entire course of Indian social history with the launching of first of its kind mass movement of untouchables with Mahad Satyagraha. Though he had very meagre faith in the method of Satyagraha it was pursued as an attempt to impress upon the minds of Hindus that humanity is an undeniable right which cannot be denied to untouchables for long as the times progress. The following aspects reflect how and what kind of historic significance was entailed through the Mahad satyagraha.

Exemplified by French Revolution: Dr. B. R. Ambedkar treated the Mahad Chawdar tank satyagraha with such significance as to be compared with the struggle for equal socio-economic political rights in feudal structure of France in 1789. His words emphasize the same. *"This Conference is held to unfurl the banner of Equality and thus may be likened to the National Assembly in France convened in 1789."* The Indian society though not feudal but was rife with immense levels of inequality inflicted by the orthodox caste system. This inequality was hardly questioned and challenged by the oppressed untouchables before this satyagraha. The fight for claiming equal social, civil, humanitarian rights by the untouchables under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar who himself was an outcaste through this movement was one of its kind Indian history had seen then. No wonder Dr. Ambedkar assigned it such high stature.

Organisation of untouchable masses to fight for their rights: Distressed, discriminated and oppressed untouchables whose lives were at the mercy of high castes could never even dream of questioning let alone challenging the control and hegemony of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar, who became such an educated, erudite untouchable and laid down his life for the upliftment of his fellowmen was itself historic. He not only fought against the unjust, inhumane treatment but also took up the herculean task of reaching out to the untouchables and making them realise that their plight can be improved. The entire class of downtrodden saw in him a saviour and were ready to lay their lives at one word of Dr. Ambedkar. These untouchables began to stay organized and collectively acted according to their leader. This fervour of organized, aware and hopeful group of untouchables who were not afraid of going against social norms had never been witnessed before the Mahad Satyagraha.

Involvement of untouchable Women: Untouchables were the most oppressed class and untouchable women were even more suppressed and discriminated as per the laws laid down in Hindu Scriptures. Untouchable women, who were ill clad, mistreated, had no say in any

matter too gathered in Mahad from nearby villages. Dr. Ambedkar took it as an opportunity and addressed the gathering of these women after the riots at Mahad. He urged them to be hygienic, dress well, give up eating carrion and fight for their betterment. He believed that the condition of women was a true representation of the society they were part of. In response to Dr. Ambedkar's call many untouchable women began wearing sarees which they were prohibited from doing so before. They also began to come out in support of Dr. Ambedkar as and when called for in the fight against untouchability. This was never seen before the event at Mahad in 1927.

Impact:

Challenged the Hindu religious order and its practices: The Hindu religion based on hierarchical, hereditary and endogamous caste system which continued the in equal stratified Indian social system without being questioned was challenged by Dr. Ambedkar's Mahad Satyagraha. Dr. Ambedkar clearly stated that the caste Hindus did not invite social transformation and upliftment of the downtrodden mainly to conserve the biased social order. They upper caste Hindus enjoyed superior rights and privileges which they were reluctant to give up. The acceptance of social equality for the outcastes and granting of civil basic humanitarian rights to them would have been a direct blow on the hegemony of the upper caste Hindus. The infallibility of Hindu religious texts was challenged through this satyagraha by pointing its barbaric and ruthless laws. The act of burning Manusmriti was so severe that it was highly intolerable to the Hindu religious sentiments. The most significant impact was the renunciation of Hinduism by Dr. Ambedkar in 1956 along with his fellow untouchables. Mahad satyagraha had laid the foundation stone of this huge step of religious conversion.

Transformation in lifestyle and thinking of untouchables: At the plea of their revered leader the untouchables had begun to give up disparaging practises like eating carrion, begging for leftover food, manual scavenging, deskinning and burying the dead cattle etc. Women too began to uplift themselves as mentioned before. They regained their lost consciences and understood the importance of self-respect. This instilled in a sense of hope which made them confident to struggle for their rights under the leadership of indomitable Dr. Ambedkar.

Paved the way for future movements of untouchables: The Mahad satyagraha though a long-lasting struggle for equality was instrumental in uniting the untouchables for fighting other injustices inflicted on them. The 1930 Kalaram temple entry movement at Nashik was undoubtedly guided and shaped by the Mahad satyagraha. Though Dr. Ambedkar did not resort

to the method of satyagraha after this but his struggle for upliftment of untouchables had refined a lot after the experience he had had during the Mahad satyagraha.

Conclusion: The inequalities existing in any society especially bearing wide gaps between different social groups cannot exist for a long time. Though complete bridging of this gap is difficult, the fight for acquiring equality by the oppressed is always painstaking. The Mahad satyagraha led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar laid the foundation of such struggle for acquiring social equality for the untouchables and it proved detrimental for future course of Dalit movements. The importance of this satyagraha can be gauged by the overall impact it had on the Indian social structure. It thus was an epoch-making event of Indian history with special connotation to the attempt of abolition of caste discrimination.

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