



Two Triads: 'Touching' Patronage for Untouchables

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Brahmanic Hinduism had crossed all possible limits of savage behaviour while treating Dalits unequally. It was rather outcome of well-planned conspiracy act. The untouchables especially had lived a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice and atrocities, all those moves could only stem from the individual with condescending mentality. Arjun Dangle records it rightly,

"The most perverted practice of untouchability was that which at one time compelled the untouchables to tie an earthen pot around their necks so that their sputum should not fall to the earth and pollute it. Another was the compulsion to tie a broom behind them so that their footprints would be erased before others set their eyes on them." (Dangle, 1992/ 1994: 236).

This short recording of mistreatment given to untouchables equals the besetting of the social consciousness and spirit of protest behind the Dalit social and literary movements in India.

It was only in the British Regime that the royal protection to Hinduism was discontinued and caste system was challenged. The Social Disabilities Act of 1850 and the Queens Proclamation of 1857, on the one hand, assured non-interference in the religious matters of the Hindus and it, on the other, guaranteed both the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins job opportunities on the basis of educational attainments (passim, Nalawade, 2001:44). Thus, Britishers' legislative politics and the radical efforts made by local



leaders of the time on social scale gave decisive stroke to the practice of untouchability.

In the present context, it becomes important to see how the spirit of resistance got shaped in the course of time in Maharashtra and who led it first. Here come the two triads who essentially hail from other than outcaste communities: (I) 1. Mahatma Jotiba Phule (1827 - 1890), Raj. Chh. Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur (1874 - 1922) and Sayajirao Gaikwad of Baroda (1863 - 1939), and (II) 2. Maharshi Vitthal Ramaji Shinde (1873 - 1944), Padmabhushan Dr. Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil (1887 - 1959) and Sant Gadage Maharaj (1876 - 1956).

Right from the beginning, non-Dalit reformers came forward to lead the reformative movement: from Vedic and Upanishadic to the colonial period the earliest major protagonist who challenged the Hindu social order fundamentally was a shudra (peasant) caste social reformer from western India, Mahatma Jotiba Phule. He determined to eradicate caste system and establish social equality in the Indian society. His was the constructive and systematic approach. He opened schools and started teaching those who were prohibited from taking education for ages. He also opened special schools for the untouchables of Pune in 1851. Simultaneously, he worked for the awakening of the masses and social reforms. He is the first among the non-Brahmins in India who started the social reform movement known as the "Satya Shodhak Samaj" (Truth Seeking Society) on Sept. 23, 1879 in Pune, Maharashtra. He wrote books like *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), *Shetkaryancha Aasud* (Cultivator's Whipcord), *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (Universal True Religion) in the interest of masses. He is the harbinger of the non-Brahmin and Dalit writings in the sense that he discarded the orders and practices of *Manusmiti*, the nucleus scripture of Brahmanical Hinduism in older times, through his writings and deeds. Anupama Rao rightly justifies Phule's broad canvas thus:

"The power of Phule's narrative lay not only in the refusal of Brahminical hegemony but also in the claim to self-



representation by the *bahujan samaj* (majority community) of the downtrodden and toiling castes, now valued as key political actors against alien interlopers. They were the *Rakshasas*, the protectors of the land, who, once vanquished, appeared in Hindu mythology as *asuras*, or demons. (Rao, 2009: 48).

The first member in the second triad Maharshi V. R. Shinde was a Maratha and the leading among the caste Hindu reformers of the time. He helped building social consciousness among untouchables. He began his "Nirashrit Sahayyak Mandal" (Depressed Classes Mission; DCM) in Pune in 1906, an organization to educate thousands of untouchables. "By 1908, Shinde's DCM ran fifteen day schools, six Sunday schools, and four industrial schools in Bombay, Poona, and Ahmednagar. By 1909, the DCM had even reached into Dapoli. In 1916, of 1,600 Depressed Class students, 500 were enrolled in Shinde's schools. Though they were spurred by the failure of government schools to include Dalit students, separate schooling defined a powerful strategy for refashioning the Dalit self." (Rao, 2009: 73 -74). It was second harbinger task in Maharashtra after Phule for untouchables' uplifting. His book on untouchability *Bharatiya Asprusyatecha Prashna* (1933) argued for a distinctive historical identity for the untouchable communities.

The other two Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil and Sant Gadage Baba were contemporary to Dr. Ambedkar. Bhaurao Patil established an educational institution Rayat Shikshan Sanstha at Kale, a village in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1919. It was an outstanding attempt at large scale after Phule to take education to the threshold of those who never ever got a chance of learning since the ancient times. Moreover, his was unique maiden contribution that he could succeed in making the pupils hail from different castes and communities stay in the hostel he built on his own expenses and common people's also. His institution has been now deep rooted in Maharashtra and working as one of the leading educational institutions in Asia. Sant Gadage Baba has been revered and called as 'Sant' i. e. saint by people. He was as if a university



in himself who propagated progressive and scientific thoughts amongst the common populace of Maharashtra of the time in his own unique way: he used to wear clothes stitched with his own hands by collecting pieces of cloth from here and there. Thus, his appearance was shabby or 'patchy'. It was his conscious act; he wanted to keep himself unwanted and neglected. He used to enter any particular village early in the morning and start cleaning garbage from every side and eat left-overs by begging. He declared, if asked, his identity as untouchable intentionally. People used to react violently because if had he told them that he belonged to untouchables they had not had 'touched' him or 'helped' him with left-overs. The whole scene would become clear only in the evening when, as he kept on conveying them all the day that some great baba was going to deliver speech in the main big space in the village, he himself stood up and started communicating with all the villagers gathered. His was the method of dialogue. He, through this dialogue, used to make them convinced with irrationality, illogicality and inhuman tradition of untouchability and being non-vegetarian. He also used to preach them to send their children to schools, do not treat their in-laws in inhuman way, etc.

Thus, the 'touching' patronage of these triads, not belonging to untouchables by birth, paved right way for outcastes' movements: Dalit and other subalterns, in times to come forever.

References -

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