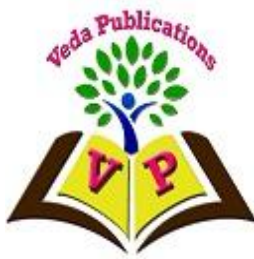


MAHAD SATYAGRAHA: DR. AMBEDKAR'S SPEECH TO ENLIGHTEN DALIT WOMEN ON SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Dr.B.Deepa

(Lecturer in Political Science,S.V.K.P. College, Markapur)

ABSTRACT



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar always made efforts to maintain a balance between thought and action. The social struggles launched by Ambedkar were aimed at counteracting the unequal treatment meted out to the untouchables by the caste Hindus. For the Indian women's movement, Ambedkar provides a powerful source of inspiration to formulate a feminist political agenda which simultaneously addresses the issues of class, caste and gender. In the "Women and Counter Revolution" and "The Riddle of Women" Ambedkar portrays the way in which Manu treated women. Ambedkar was keen to involve Dalit women in all struggles he took up. He was well aware that unless women take part in social movements, desired change could not be sustained. Many Dalit women participated in Mahad Satyagraha, Kalaram Temple Entry, Poona Pact Satyagraha and other agitations. In particular, his speeches at the time of the Mahad Satyagraha appear to have caused changes in their lives. The objective of this paper is to review Ambedkar teachings during the Mahad Staygraha about the rights of women and examine its impact on Dalit women social and cultural life.

Keywords: *Mahad, Chowdar Tank, Manusmriti, Human Rights, Dalit Women, Dr. Ambedkar*

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“Unity is meaningless without the accompaniment of women,
Education is fruitless without educated women, and
Agitation is incomplete without the strength of women”

-Dr.B.R.Ambedkar

Depressed classes(Dalits) have the lowest social status in Indian society.They were known as Untouchables, because their presence was considered to be so polluting that contact with them was to be avoided at all costs. They are made to live separately and often cannot share such common village amenities like roads, public wells or tanks.

Mahad is located in Raigad district of Maharashtra. This town situated on the bank of riverSavitri, has a Buddhist historical site. On August 1923, Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution that people from the depressed classes should be allowed to use places which were built and maintained by the Government. In January 1924, Mahad which was part of the Bombay Province passed the resolution in its Municipal Council to enforce the act. But it was failed to implement because of the protest from the caste Hindus.

Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha arranged a conference on 19-20 March 1927 in Mahad, in which more than thousand people gathered. At the end of the conference, they marched to the main tank of the town and they drank water from the tank.The Mahad Satyagraha for the right to water led by Dr. Ambedkar was one of the outstanding struggles of untouchables to win equal social rights. Ambedkar has no faith in satyagrahas, but it was one of the ways to educate the minds of the caste Hindus. He noted that:

“It is not that you can solve all your problems by Satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper-class Hindu mind. This Satyagraha movement is going to prove whether the Hindu mind treats human beings like human beings. This Satyagraha is to change the hearts of Hindus. This movement will decide whether Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age”.¹

At Mahad, a conference of untouchables on March 19 and 20, 1927 was attended by about 10,000 delegates. In his presidential address, Ambedkar addressed the meeting with these words:

“... no lasting progress can be achieved unless we put ourselves through a three-fold process of purification. We must improve the general tone of our demeanor, retone our pronunciations and revitalize our thoughts. I therefore ask you now to take a vow from this moment to renounce eating carrion. It is high time that we rooted out from our mind the ideas of highness and lowness among ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown out crumbs. We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help regain our self-respect and gain self-

¹W. N. Kuber., Ambedkar: A Critical Study, pp. 62-63

knowledge. There will be no difference between parents and animals if they will not desire to see their children in a better position than their own position”.²

After the conference all the delegates marched in a procession to the Chowdar tank to assert their right to drink and take water. The caste Hindus came into the pandal of the conference and attacked the delegates. Thus ended the first public attempt to assert civic rights.

Mahad agitation started in 1927, but the untouchables got access to the tank only in 1937 through a court order. A prolonged litigation about the use of the tank's water and Ambekdar won the case in Bombay High Court in 1937. The people of the high castes had managed a court order to ban the entry of “untouchables” into the tank on the grounds that it was a private tank. But Ambedkar fought through the courts and got justice in 1937, almost after 10 years.

Ambedkar was keen to involve Dalit women in all struggles he took up. In those days it was not easy to convince women to take part in the movement. Initially, many activists of the Ambedkar movement did not approve of their wives taking part who later got convinced. He was well aware that unless women take part in social movements, desired change could not be sustained. Realising the pitiable plight of the women, he initiated to instill confidence among them in their march towards the right to be human and then equal human along with their men.

Women participation was quite significant in the second Satyagraha at Mahad. Ambedkar's untouchable colleagues Gaikwad, Amrutrao Rankhamble, P.N.Rajbhoj, Shivtarkar and R.B.More, together with his caste Hindu supporters, Anantrao Chitre, Bhai Chitre, SurendraTipnis, Bapu Sahasrabuddhe and thousands of untouchable persons assembled as decided in Mahad on 25th December 1927. Women were present among them in large numbers. In response to the appeal by the district collector that the untouchables should not go to the Chowdar tank and touch the water while the case regarding whether the tank was public or private was being heard in court, some activists announced in their speeches that they were determined to undertake a Satyagraha. A girl called Shantabai was among those who spoke. Ambedkar appealed to the caste Hindus in fraternal terms;

“Unless the Chaturvarna system is destroyed, there is no hope for Hinduism, because this system hampers the development of the individual. So allow this social revolution that we are bringing about to unfold peacefully, do not oppose us, reject the Shastras and embrace justice”.³

At Mahad, a Satyagraha conference was again called on December 25, 1927. About 3000 Satyagrahis were ready; but the District Magistrate requested Ambedkar to postpone the proposed struggle. In that conference a resolution was passed to burn the Manusmriti,

² DhananjayKeer., Dr. BabasahabAmbedkar: Life and Mission, pp. 70-71

³Pawar and Moon., We also made History: Women in Ambedkarite Movement, p.120 .

which according to Ambedkar, perpetuated the social, economic, religious and political slavery of the untouchables. The Manusmriti was burnt on December 25, 1927. In this occasion Ambedkar, defending this collective act, asserted:

“The bonfire of 'Manusmriti' was quite intentional it was a very cautious and drastic step, but was taken with a view of forcing the attention of the caste Hindus. At intervals such drastic remedies are a necessity. If you do not knock at the door, none opens it. It is not that all the parts of 'Manusmriti' are condemnable, that it does not contain good principles and that *Manu* himself was not a sociologist and was a mere fool. We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries. Because of its teachings we have been ground down under despicable”.⁴

The day after the burning of the Manusmriti, a huge procession of satyagrahis marched round the lake and back to the assembly hall. Scores of women took part in this procession together with men. Some women came in the afternoon to get a glimpse of Ambedkar. In the night Ambedkar made speech before the women and this proved to be a revolutionary event in their lives. Towards the closing of the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar had addressed a crowd of 3000 women saying:

“Never regard yourself as untouchables. Live a clean life. Dress yourself like the touchable ladies. Never mind if your dress is full of patches, but see that it is clean. None can restrict your freedom in the choice of your garments and in the use of metal of your ornaments, Attend more to the cultivation of the mind and the spirit of self help. But do not feed in any case your spouse and sons if they are drunkards. Send your children to schools. Education is necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write there would be much progress. As you are, so your children will be. Mould their life in a virtuous way, for sons should be such as would make a mark in this world”.⁵

He emphasised the necessity of participation of women in their struggle for humanity. He said:

“I am extremely happy that you come to this meeting. Men and women together resolve the problems of everyday life. So must the problems of society be solved by men and women working together. If the men take up this work on their own, there is no doubt that they will take a long time to complete it. But if women take this work on themselves, I am sure they will soon succeed. Even if they are not able to take up this work (of social change) by themselves, they should take every chance to help those men

⁴M.S. Gore., The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought,p.109

⁵DhananjayKeer., Dr. BabasahabAmbedkar: Life and Mission, p.104

who are doing it. I therefore tell you that from now on you must always be present in our meetings”.

By raising their confidence, he keeps the onus of responsibility equally on women.

“To tell the truth, the task of removing untouchability belongs not to men, but to you women. You have given birth to us men. You know how other people consider us to be lower than animals. In some places even our shadow is not acceptable. Other people get respectable jobs in courts and offices, but the sons born of your wombs are held in such contempt that we cannot even get a job as a lowly peon in the police department. When you know all this, if someone asks you why you gave us birth, what answer will you give? What is the difference between us and the children born of the Kayasta and other Hindu women sitting in this meeting? You must think about this: there is as much virtue in you as in the Brahmin women. Just as much as Brahmin women are faithful to their husbands, so are you faithful. And Brahmin women do not have the mental courage, capability and spirit that you have. If this is the case then why the children born of Brahmin women should be treated with respect wherever they go, while your children face insults everywhere, why should they not even have the right to humane treatment? Have you ever thought about this? I feel that you have never thought about this. If you had thought about all this, you would have undertaken the Satyagraha even before the men. Because the only sin we have committed is to have been born from your wombs, and because of this sin we have to bear the punishment of untouchability. So you must reflect on this: why is it a sin to be born of your wombs, while it is a virtue to be born to other women? If you think about this, either you will have to stop bearing children, or you will have to wash of this stigma. You must do one or other of these things. You must make a pledge that from now on you will not lead such a stigmatised existence. Just as the men have resolved to bring about the progress in society, so must you”.

Initially women to taken social action, Ambedkar makes clear as to where to start the process of change.

“You must all give up your old and disgusting customs. The way you wear your saris is a sign of your being untouchable, you must wipe out that sign. You must begin the practice of wearing your saris in the same fashion that upper-caste women do, it will not cost you anything. In the same way, your habit of wearing heavy necklaces round your necks and bracelets and bangles and kathil on your arms up to the elbow, mark than one necklace. It is not as if your husband’s lives will be lengthened or that you will look beautiful because of neckful ornaments. Clothes rather than ornaments

make you look good. Rather than spending money on ornaments of silver or Kathil, you should spend it on good clothes. If you must wear ornaments, get gold ornaments made and wear them, or else you need not wear any. Also, you must take care to be clean in your person”.

Ambedkar wanted women to be confident as exhibit their pride of being in visible signs. He sought to make them understand that their lives are as important as others. So living honorably, even with their meager earnings is to be human. He then arouses them to take control of their houses and discipline their husbands.

“You are Laxmis in your homes; you must see to it that no untoward event takes place in your homes. It is a matter for rejoicing that, since last march, everyone has given up eating the flesh of dead animals. But if this has not happened in any single household, you must take on the responsibility yourselves. If anyone’s husband brings home the meat of a dead animal. You must tell him. This will not be tolerated in my house. And I am sure that, if you make up your minds on this, this inauspicious custom will be completely ended”.

Now, he turns them towards learning.

“Also, you must make sure that your daughters are educated. Knowledge and learning are not for men alone, they are essential for women too. Our ancestors were aware of this. If they had not been aware, the people serving in the platoons would not have educated their girls as they did. They say, as is the quarry so will be the stone, so you must remember that if you want to improve the next generation, you must not neglect to educate your daughters. I am hopeful that you will not go away and forget this speech I have given you. You cannot afford to delay in putting it into practice. So, before you return to your homes tomorrow morning, change your style of wearing your saris, show me and then go. Only then will I believe that what I have said has made an impact”⁶.

After hearing this speech, Shrimati Vithabai promised on behalf of the women present that they would do as Babasaheb had asked.

The speech that Ambedkar made before the women in the Mahad Satyagraha brought about a radical transformation in the women. This speech of Ambedkar proved to be unprecedented and unique and every sentence of this later became the basis for the work of untouchable women activists. This speech had a remarkable effect on the women. The untouchable women of the Konkan region, especially those from Thane, and Colaba districts, used to wear their saris so that their knees and even their things were exposed view. This would make it possible for anyone to know their caste. After listening to

⁶Pawar and Moon., *We Also Made History: Women in Ambedkarite Movement*, pp.121-23

Ambedkar's speech, the women who had come for the conference turned up the next day wearing their nine-yard saris around their ankles like Brahmin women. Mrs.Chitre and Mrs.Tipnis helped them to do this. Ambedkar was moved to see their loyalty, and he gave them each eight Annas to buy themselves blouses and bangles. Ambedkar's speech at the conference also had an impact on the men. They removed the rings and sticks from their ears and gave up eating the meat of carcasses. They stopped begging for morsels of food as part of their right of Watan. Some even resigned from their jobs as sweepers in the municipality. The credit for this victory goes as much as to the united strength and perseverance of the untouchable men and women as to Ambedkar's dynamic leadership.

The Mahad struggle had a far-reaching effect upon untouchables. Women's organisations were formed and women began to speak with vigor at meetings and conferences. They went on processions, and became active in the movement and its struggles. Dr.Ambedkar's liberal views on women were motivating force behind this transformation of untouchable women. After Ambedkar's speech a feeling of self-esteem was generated among the women. They were ready to even face prison with their babies in their arms. With the consciousness that they must themselves fight against the injustice inflicted on them and for their own rights, women began to organise meetings, conferences etc.

Ambedkar's speeches and thoughts have had a great impact on women in those days. The people who received influence by the teachings and activities of Dr.Ambedkar launched different social reformative activities. Throughout his life time, Ambedkar endeavored to bring women into public life in a new role, as builders of Democratic society.

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