

Rao. S. K. Bole: A Pioneer of Human Rights in Maharashtra

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Abstract

Rao Bahadur S. K. Bole was one of the great social reformers in Maharashtra. He fought for the human rights of the untouchables in Maharashtra and was one of the close friends of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He was the one who passed the resolution and passed the Act, at the Mahad Municipal Corporation, Raigad district, Maharashtra, in the year 1923 and allowed all the public water resources to be open to the lower castes open to drink the water. When this Act remained only on paper till 1927, Dr. Ambedkar organised the first conference of the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha at Mahad, and the Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha took place. The present article studies the life and contribution of Rao Bahadur S. K. Bole towards the upliftment of the Dalits in India, and became the pioneer of implementing the Human Rights on paper in Maharashtra.

Introduction:

Human rights defined by United Nations Organization as “those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings.”¹ Although UNO was established after World War II, yet this definition of Human Rights has deep meaning that studies human being worldwide. It talks about those rights of every human being precisely from his basic rights of food clothing and shelter to his dignity and self-respect. To drink water is such a basic right of every living organism on this earth that one accedes to this right from birth naturally. However, India is one country where this right of human being was forbidden, and cattle’s or other animals enjoyed this right. They were ‘Untouchables’ the lower caste people in Hindu religion, who were not allowed to drink water even from public water resources for centuries wherein even the animals were taken to drink water. Present research paper is a study of Raobahadur Sitaram Keshav Bole who according to the study of the downtrodden people in India was the first social reformer who not only thought of these human rights but also brought it on the papers of our legislation in 1923.

Early life of Rao. S. K. Bole:

Mr. Sitaram Keshav Bole was born on 29 June 1869 in Ratnagiri District, Taluka Guhagar, village Palshet. His mother was his inspiration. He completed his primary education from Girgaon in ‘Prabhu Seminary School’. In 1889 he passed his Matriculation exam from Wilson High school. As a student, he was interested and actively participated in social movements. His social mind did not allow him to continue in any government service. He was born in a Bhandari Samaj one of the lower castes in Hindu

¹ *Human Rights Questions and Answers*, United Nations, New York, 1987

religion. Though their condition was better than untouchables, they faced almost similar problems to those of untouchables in the society. The reason was that, that their Samaj (society) was illiterate. To eradicate illiteracy and spread awareness in his society, he established Bhandari Samaj Caste Organizations at various places. In 1912 he organized a conference called 'Bhandari Sikshan Parishad'. Mr. Sitaram Bole also fought for the mill workers and fixed the working hours of the workers. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar passed his Matric examination in 1907. He was the first untouchable student to pass Matric examination. Therefore, his teacher Keluskar Guruji decided to felicitate him. Mr. Sitaram Bole was the Chairman of this function. Since then, Bole and Ambedkar have had a friendly relation with each other.²

Contribution Of S.K. Bole as a social reformer:

Mr. Sitaram Bole helped people in their Government work and helped Governments help to solve the problems of people. The then government was impressed with his work and awarded him with the title of 'Justice of the Peace' (J.P.) in 1911. In 1918 he established an organization called 'People's Union'. In 1920 he got elected in Mumbai legislature. Till 1926 he was government elected member of the legislature. In 1923 he forced the government to pass the resolution and through it forced the government to keep all the public water resources all over Bombay presidency open for the untouchables.³ Before 1923 Dr. Ambedkar had asked Mr. Bole to take a survey and to find the condition and the problems of the Depressed Classes. Dr. Ambedkar had asked one of the teachers to accompany him. At this time Mr. Bole took the survey of Nasik District and realized that nowhere the untouchables had good water resource for drinking water.⁴ Accordingly he forced the government to pass the resolution allowing the untouchables to use the public water resources on 4 August 1923.

Mr. S. K. Bole and Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha:

Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha took place on 19 and 20 March 1927. It is one of the significant Satyagraha led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar for the Untouchables in India. The Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha was significant because nowhere in the History of World we find human beings having to fight and start a Satyagraha for their basic human right of drinking water both from public and private water resources.

Many scholars studying Dalit Movement in India compare American Revolution, French Revolution and Russian Revolution with Mahad Choudar tank Satyagraha. They feel that the Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha was as significant for the Untouchables in India as these revolutions were important for the Americans, the French, and the Russians.⁵ The untouchables revolted and achieved their social rights without any bloodshed. It forced the touch to think about humanity they had forgotten for centuries. Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha brought self-respect and equality in the Indian society.

Mr. Ratnakar Ganaveer in his book *Mahad Samata Sangar* has rightly pointed that the year 1927 was a revolutionary year. He says that this year was revolutionary because of two reasons. One the moving pictures in the theater had no sound until then but because of the advancement in technology in that year, people could hear the dialogues of the actors in the picture. Second, the untouchables who were like deaf

² Bhagwan Dhande, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Aani Bahujan Netrutwa*, Kaushalya Prakashan, Aurangabad, 2005, p.17.

³ *Ibid.*, p.18

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ratnakar Ganveer, *Mahad Samata Sangar*, (Marathi), Ratnamitra Prakashan, Jalgaon, 1981, p. 1.

and dumb for so many years had voiced their social problems through Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha. He compares this invention with Mahad Satyagraha, saying that just as how the actor's feelings were analyzed through their expressions and voice in the same way the conditions of the Untouchables became outspoken through the Satyagraha. Now they both could speak.⁶

After the long discussions and study of the psychology of his people and the Government laws, Dr. Ambedkar decided to launch the Satyagraha at Mahad. He started the battle of the upliftment of his people from his own homeland i.e., Mahad.

People on the eve of 20th Century believed that the touchable and the untouchables were the part of Hindu religion; therefore, they never said that the untouchables were not Hindus.⁷ Instead, they considered them as a part of Hindu Society and therefore downtrodden. In 1910 while recording the census records, some of the Muslims spread the rumors that the untouchables are not counted in Hindus. At that time not only untouchable leaders but also the orthodox Hindus claimed that untouchables were Hindus.⁸ Yet the question remained why the untouchables were treated unequally, if the above-mentioned sources prove that the untouchables in the 20th century were part of Hindu religion? The answer to this question was that, that there was an unbelievable fact in Hindu religion. The touchable Hindus while treating the untouchables inhumanly considered them as the part of Hindu religion and therefore followed the norms of Hindu religion very strictly. They believed in purity and impurity and treated them accordingly. However, if an untouchable person converted himself to the Muslim or Christian religion, the person would not remain in Hinduism and treated as touchable and therefore equal.⁹

During the British rule, the British had neutral opinion in the case of untouchables. There was an impact of western thoughts on India in late 19th century, and it was the beginning of Renaissance and Reformation in India.¹⁰ Most of the social norms and religious rituals became flexible during this period. These changes were taking place at one side and on the other side the British were busy making their strong hold on India. Therefore, their treatment in the social uprising was of no importance. Though the British Government in India introduced education, telegram, railway, and many other facilities but they were not trying to bring reforms in the Indian society as far as the question of untouchables or religion was concerned. However, the fact remains that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the outcome of the education system introduced by the British.¹¹ Therefore, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar remarks that before the British, the untouchables were in a loathsome condition due to their Untouchability. However, now the Mahars attempted to gain religious and social rights by using the Gandhian technique of Satyagraha and mass action without violence.¹² While the events of 1920 represented the beginning of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, the decisive step that made it a liberation struggle was the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha. This established Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as a leader of a growing movement.

⁶ Ganveer, *op. cit.* pp. 1-2.

⁷ C. B. Khairmode, Dr. *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar*, Vol. 3, Pratap Prakashan, Bombay, 1978, p. 109

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 109.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 112.

¹⁰ Ganveer, *op. cit.* p. 2

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.2

¹² Michael. Mahar, *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, 1972, p. 82.

The Untouchables had to go through various civil disabilities since later Vedic period i.e., difficulty in getting water to drink, food to eat, and settling in the villages. They could not own the land and had to work on other people's land. Not only that there were restrictions on what kind of clothes they should wear, which metals of ornaments they should wear etc. The women were not allowed to cover the upper portion of their body. The men also wore loin clothes. Their houses were worse than huts. They ate stale food. They removed the skin of the dead animals. They did every menial job in the villages. Their condition was worse than animals in every possible way.

The origin of Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha is in the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council moved by Mr. S.K. Bole. In 1923, this resolution was passed regarding the use of public water resources and the same was reaffirmed with some changes in 1926. The resolution debated in the Legislative Council reads as "The council recommends that the untouchable classes be allowed to use all public watering places, wells, and dharmashalas (which are built and maintained by the government or created by the state)." It was because of this resolution that the Mahad Municipality had thrown open the Choudar Tank to the untouchables in Mahad. However, the untouchables were unable to exercise their right, because of the hostility of the upper caste Hindus.

Part I

First Resolution Part I

- First Resolution
- When the depressed class people show their rights at public places and water resources and implement their citizenship then the upper caste people isolate them in every kind of business and oppose them through ignorance. Instead, the upper caste people should positively help the depressed class people.

Part II

First Resolution

Mr. S. K. Bole had passed the resolution in the Legislative Council regarding the public wells and Tanks should be kept open for the untouchables.¹³ The Government should implement on this and should have placards at these places and if necessary Cri. Pro. Code Section 144 should be brought into practice, and the local leaders can be brought into practice, and the local leaders can be the witness for the rights of the untouchables. Mr. S. K. Bole's first resolution was passed on 4 August 1923 and for the second time on 5 August 1926.¹⁴ The conference therefore requests the Government to implement the resolution and put up the boards at such places.

Second Resolution

This conference would like to request the government that, in villages and at many other places the untouchables are facing a lot of problem regarding drinking water. The government should try to solve this problem.

Mahad Municipality had accepted the Bole resolution on 5 January 1924.

The Kolaba District Magistrate, Mr. J. R. Hood in his report to the Secretary to Government writes, "It may be noted that the Municipality's resolution of January, 1924 was apparently a mere gesture, resulting from a Resolution in the legislative Council and subsequent orders of Government, and had

¹³ Home Department Special File, No. 355 (64) II, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, p. 2.

¹⁴ Bahishkrut Bharat, date 3 April 1927.

never been given effect to.”¹⁵ Otherwise, the use of Tank water would have been kept open for the untouchable’s right since 1924. He wanted to show that it was a basic human right to drink water from the public Tank.

Mr. S. K. Bole was successful in passing the resolution of 11 September 1923, which was the root cause of the conference that was held on 19 and 20 March 1927. As per the resolution passed by the Municipality, the Council recommended the right of the untouchable classes and allowed to use all public watering places, wells, and dharmashalas which were built and maintained by the government or created by the state.¹⁶

Mr. S. K. Bole became very furious after learning that the untouchables were beaten on 20 March 1927 he it. He defended the untouchables for their tolerance and spoke against the touchable on their cruel act in a meeting of the untouchables that was called on 9 April 1927 at Parel in his speech.¹⁷ Mr. Bole was close to Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar fought the Mahad Choudar Tank Court Case successfully. Once when he was going to the court of Mahad from Mumbai, Dr. Ambedkar was unable to reach the court because he got stuck in the flood. When Dr. Ambedkar came back home he was so depressed that he sat in one room and was not ready to open the door. It was at this time that Mr. Bole was able to convince him and give him the word of courage and Dr. Ambedkar opened the door.¹⁸

He always represented himself as a people’s elected member. He worked on several Bills like Eradicating Untouchability bills, Khoti Bill, Devadasi Bill, and Abolishing Watan Bill. Open entry for untouchables in any of the government built and run organizations. These bills supported most of the social movements. He was the first person to demand for Konkan Railway in legislature. On 16 February 1925 he started *Navyug* a weekly. Through this he tried to bring social awareness amongst the people. There were disputes on the issue of allowing untouchables to participate in Ganesh Puja at Dadar. Mr. Bole fought for the untouchables along with Dr. Ambedkar and Prabodhankar Thackeray. And they were successful in achieving the right for the untouchables to perform the Ganesh Puja.¹⁹ The government appreciated his work by awarding him the title ‘Rao Bahadur’.

His own ‘Bhandari’ Samaj people tried to keep him away from Dr. Ambedkar’s movement. But he continued his social work. He remained the working member of ‘People’s Education Society’ established by Dr. Ambedkar. He died on 14 January 1961 at the age of 93 years.

Conclusion:

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar the architect of Indian Constitution while submitting the constitution on 26th January 1950 said, “we are going to enter life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality while in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man, one vote, one value. Our social and economic structure, however, will continue to deny the principle of one man, one value.”²⁰

¹⁵ Home Department Special File No. 355 (64) II, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai, p. 2.

¹⁶ Bombay Legislative Council Debate 4 August 1923.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Dhananjay Keer, *Lokhitkarte Babasaheb Bole*, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 1978, p. 205.

¹⁹ Bhagwan Dhande, *op.cit.*, p.22.

²⁰ Prasad, R.N., *Human Rights In India, An Analytical Perspectives*, Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 170-171

Since then, the downtrodden in India came in the reserved category as SC, ST, NT, DT etc. However, the problems remain. According to the latest report published in Times of India, July 13, 2007, the Panchayat in Balangir district has barred 16 Dalit families from drinking tap water on grounds of untouchability. A similar report has also been received from Andhra Pradesh.²¹

²¹ Ibid. p.198