

Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha and Congress: A Parallel Movement During Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

The Indian National Congress was the first political party in India during the freedom struggle movement. There were some of the parallel movements that were noteworthy, like peasants' movements, tribals' movements and untouchables' movements. However, Congress's support for such movements was almost meagre or often people were more focused towards the mainstream. The present article studies the approach of the Indian National Congress towards the first Human Rights movements of untouchables in Maharashtra.

Introduction:

Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar began on 19th and 20th March 1927. This was the first movement of its kind of the Untouchables in Maharashtra. The Untouchables in all over India were not allowed to drink water even from common water resources. However, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar decided to launch the Satyagraha against this inhuman treatment given to the Untouchables in Maharashtra by the upper caste Hindus. The concept of Satyagraha was first widely used in India by Mahatma Gandhi. However, the concept was not alien to the Indians. Later this term was used by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the first time during the organization of Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha in 1927. Present research paper is an attempt to study the role of Congress in Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha which was fought for one decade i.e., from March 1927 to March 1937.

Indian National Congress was the first political platform for the Indians to fight for their political rights. The Congress in their constructive programme gave importance to not only the political but also the social upliftment of the people of India.¹ In the initial stage of the Congress i.e., during the Moderates Period there were no strong efforts taken by the Congress to eradicate Untouchability from the Indian society. It was Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade and few other Congress leaders were taking up this cause, but their efforts did not show much effect on the society or the Untouchable people. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his speech during the Satyagraha mentioned that “Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandali” in Bombay region were the first to fight for the cause of Untouchables in Maharashtra.² In 1873, the British Government decided to discontinue the Mahars military services. At this time, this organization, under the leadership of Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, wrote an application to the Government. This shows

¹ Sadangi, H. C., *Emancipation of Dalits and Freedom Struggle*, pub. Isha Books, Delhi, 2008, p. 204

² *Maharashtra Shasan, Maharashtra Rajya Gazetteer, Raigad Zilla* (Marathi), (edited) K. K. Choudhari, Published by Karyakari Sampadak Va Sachiv, Darshnika Vibhag, Maharashtra Shasan, Mumbai, 1993, p.161.

that the organization had an advisory committee consisting of high standard for people especially from every stratum of the society including Untouchables. In 1897, the organization sent the questionnaire to Congress. The government also gave the recognition to this organization. This shows the positive approach of work of this organization.

It was only after the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the political arena of the National Movement there came the slight change in the views of the people of India regarding the problems of Untouchables in India. Mahatma Gandhi called the Untouchables as 'Harijans'. According to him they were the children of god and therefore the term used 'Harijan'. However, this did not solve the problems of Untouchables in India. What was required was firm actions and motivations through the system i.e., the, then government and the upper caste people of India.

There was another notable proclamation made by the Indian National Congress regarding the Depressed Classes at the end of the year 1923. Mahatma Gandhi at this time encouraged Mr. Maulana Mahomed Ali for the unity of the Indian Muslims with special reference to their rights of the Khilafat. Mr. Maulana Mahomed Ali showed his secular approach to all National problems and expected to divide the Hindu untouchables equally between the Muslims and the Hindus. Mr. Yakub Hussein once openly stated that it was the duty of the Muslims of converting all the untouchables in India to Islam.³

In January 1924, Mr. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was released from the Andaman Jail. Mahatma Gandhi was released on February 11, 1924, on health grounds from the same jail. Mahatma Gandhi had to face jail life for two years after the dissolution of his Khilafat Swaraj Movement. Mr. Savarkar started his work in April 1924 for the consolidation of Hindu society. His work was known as Hindu Sanghatan, and it worked for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes for whose welfare and rights he had been fighting ever since his transportation to the Andaman jail. Mahatma Gandhi also applied his methods and phenomenal energy for the upliftment of the depressed classes.

The then British Government of India was neutral regarding the problems of Untouchables in India. Therefore, the social reformers and the leaders who fought for the cause of the Untouchables had hopes from the Indian National Congress to support and help in eradicating untouchability from the Indian society.

Where there was positive experience of some of the Congress leaders for untouchables there was negative too. 'Kesari' started by Lokmanya Tilak was the then leading newspaper during the freedom struggle. Dr. Ambedkar before starting 'Mooknayak' in 1919 had requested 'Kesari' to give an advertisement of his new newspaper in 'Kesari' by excusing the charges. However, this request was ignored by 'Kesari'. Then Dr. Ambedkar showed his readiness to pay for it and for this 'Kesari' answered there is no space and further no acknowledgement was given nor did Dr. Ambedkar was given the appointment to meet the 'Kesari' people.⁴ 'Kesari' after Mahad Satyagraha along with other contemporary newspapers had to change its attitude towards the problems of Untouchables in India. Dr. Ambedkar analyses two reasons for this one they found it difficult to stay firm in between the Muslims in India, and secondly their demand for 'Swarajya' could have stigma if they did not show their support to untouchables.⁵

³ *Young India*, 8 September 1920.

⁴ Vasant Moon, (edited), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Yanche Bahishkrut Bharat Aani Muknayak*, (Marathi), Published by Main Sachiv, Higher and Technical Education Department, Maharashtra Government, Mantralay, Mumbai, 2008, p.32(2).

⁵ *Ibid*.

Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha took place on 19th and 20th March 1927 as mentioned earlier. After the untouchables were beaten black and blue on 20th March when they were going back to their villages this news was highlighted by many of the then newspapers in their own way like 'Bhala', 'Kolaba Samachar. and similarly, in 'Kesari'. But where other newspapers had given 3 to 4 columns in their paper 'Kesari' gave only 50 lines with the end, "*Zhala ha prakar atyanta gahaniya zhala*".⁶ This showed that they had no prompt feelings for the Untouchables who were beaten by the upper caste Hindus. Later in their 3rd May 1927 edition they gave the news of Mahad satyagraha by spending a column or so in their paper but based on the information given by Mate Master of 'Asprushayata Nivarak Mandal' and Mr. Date of 'Hindu Mahasabha'.

Unfortunately, 'Kesari' still had the upper hand towards the upper caste than the untouchables. In the same column 'Kesari' also writes that it was because of the 'Shetjibhatji' the untouchables were protected, and the upper caste were beaten. Therefore Dr. Ambedkar clarified by answering that no 'Shetjibhatji' was beaten, and 'Kesari' should gather the information's on their own instead on depending on others.

Dr. Ambedkar in 'Bahishkrut Bharat' dated 1st July 1927 pointed on some of the prominent leaders of Indian National Congress who did not practice what they preached about the untouchables in their personal life. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya was one such prominent leader of Congress who was remarkably close to Mahatma Gandhi. It so happened that after the event of 20th March 1927 at Mahad the media gave lot of attention to all the leaders of National Freedom Struggle. During these days Pandit Malviya had some health problems. Therefore, he decided to stay in Bengaluru (Bengaluru (Bengaluru (Bengaluru (Bangalore)))) for some days. On his way he stayed for some days at Mysuru (Mysore) for few days. There he met some old Shastripanidits. In an argument with them regarding the untouchables Pandit Malviya was able to defeat them. The contemporary newspapers highlighted this news, and Mr. Malviya was praised for the same. However, later his own daughters-in-law father Mr. Laxmikant Bhat disclosed that Pandit Malviya was not having any relation with him because he got married his second daughter to a person who was not from their caste but lower to them.⁷

Lala Lajpat Rai who was extremist in his social as well his political thoughts commented in his 'Peoples' newspaper that if whatever was expressed by Mr. Bhat was the truth than Mr. Malviya should discontinue his relations Hindu Mahasabha.⁸ Dr. Ambedkar although appreciated the attitude of Lala Lajpat Rai regarding his views about Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya yet he pointed that this demand could have been done when Swami Shraddhanand resigned from Hindu Mahasabha because Swami Shraddhanand supported the untouchables in this movement.⁹

Dr. Ambedkar's speeches at the Round Table conference show his immense and in-depth knowledge. His speeches forced the British Government in India to see reason and understand the conditions of the Depressed Classes who for centuries were socially segregated, politically deprived, economically destitute, and perpetually subjugated.¹⁰ Dr. Ambedkar's thought of Separate Electorate was opposed by Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. Ambedkar argued that the Hindus representatives were against the interest of Depressed Classes, to Muslims and Sikhs. He vigorously impressed upon the conference to recognize

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p. 47(1)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

the fact that Depressed Classes were not a part of Hindu society and hence deserved Separate Electorates and due share in power for their political advancement.

With all his work and hardship for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes the Communal Award was given to him by J. Ramsay Mac Donald, the then Prime Minister of Great Britain, because he conceded that Separate Electorates to the Depressed Classes were crowning glory of the splendid work done by Dr. Ambedkar at the Round table Conference. Although he was praised by the Depressed Classes for his work, but he was cursed by the other Indians for opposing the Separate Electorates granted by the Communal Award which were withdrawn, and the method of Joint Electorate was introduced with the principle of reservation in the Central as well as the Provincial Assemblies.¹¹ The Poona Pact in 1935 was an agreement made by Dr. Ambedkar to save the life of Mahatma Gandhi.

However, the Satyagraha committee decided to relaunch the Satyagraha at Mahad. The Bombay Chronicle further reported that the Satyagraha Committee was going to meet shortly.¹² They were going to announce the exact date of the Satyagraha. The leading newspapers felt that the Satyagraha would be cosmopolitan in character. Because the Satyagraha simply did not take place to open the tank for public use but was a movement with manifold activities.¹³ It was directly moving its way for the evolution of the national movement and for asserting the ordinary privileges of citizenship.

Dr. Ambedkar announced his intention to open Khadi centers for the untouchables and thus help the great constructive programme started by Mahatma Gandhi with the view of Khaddar on the body and Satyagraha in mind against all ends. The town of Mahad has been quiet since 20 March and the boycott of the depressed classes by shopkeepers and other higher caste people, which was at first threatened, had been abandoned.

Dr. Ambedkar started a Newspaper *Janata*. Mr. Anant Chitre was one of the founding members of this newspaper. He also worked as an editor of *Janata* for a short period. In 1929, he joined Congress and left it in 1931.¹⁴ There is no source available for why he joined the Congress party.

Conclusion:

However, one can analyze that the Mahad Chavdar Taank Satyagraha was partly supported by the Congress, but it did not show its active participation in the Mahad Satyagraha. If at all Indian National Congress would have taken this parallel movement on their agenda at priority basis it would have not been continued for one decade and the Untouchables support to the Congress would have been the strong support to the party.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. XIX.

¹² *The Bombay Chronicle*, date, 2 March 1928

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*