

Early Dalit Movements in Modern India and their Significance

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Abstract:

The Dalit initiated to form formal voluntary associations much along the lines of pressure groups, early in the 20th Century, existing in Indian politics. Calcutta, being the metropolis of the British Empire, was the greatest centre of commercial and Christian missionary activities in India. The people in this city were inspired by the example of the societies formed for the beneficial purposes by the Europeans in the town, like the Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784, the Calcutta School Book Society in 1817, the Calcutta School Society in 1818 and the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in India in 1820. The early associations founded in India were mere interest groups who put pressure on the British government to fulfill their demands in a very simple manner. In this series, the first interest group was founded in India with the name of the Landholders' Society at a public meeting held in the town hall of Calcutta on 19th March, 1838. This meeting was attended by over two hundred Zamindars and a few Anglo-Indians which rose to its gathering of about five thousand participants in its meeting held in the end of 1838, where a petition was drafted to submit to the British against the resumption of rent-free lands. It was the beginning of modern politics in India. The rapid spread of the English education also generated some new ideas of public spirit and patriotism. The young men left college with the ideas of the political degradation of the people of India and very ardent desires to raise themselves and their fellow-countrymen above their fallen state. Gradually, a few such political associations got a ground in Bengal which became significant in Indian politics during the late 19th and the early 20th Century.

Key Words: Dalit, Adi, Depressed Class, Ambedkarite

The Dalit consciousness had been brought about by various factors existing in the society which institutionalized and formed into a mass-based movement, reckoned with as a force. It was, however, necessary to form organizations for upward mobility of the group as a whole. In the caste-based society of India, the individual qualifications and achievements have little significance. The Dalit had to survive to elevate their collective status by forming organizations and raising the moral and material status of their brethren. In such circumstances, the struggle against imperialism and other similar issues were of secondary importance.¹ Under this impression, many Adi movements were formed in the different parts of the country. The Dalit initiated to form formal voluntary associations much along the lines of pressure groups, early in the 20th Century, existing in Indian politics. Calcutta, being the metropolis of the British Empire, was the greatest centre of commercial and Christian missionary activities in India. The people in

this city were inspired by the example of the societies formed for the beneficial purposes by the Europeans in the town, like the Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784, the Calcutta School Book Society in 1817, the Calcutta School Society in 1818 and the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in India in 1820. The early associations founded in India were mere interest groups who put pressure on the British government to fulfill their demands in a very simple manner. In this series, the first interest group was founded in India with the name of the Landholders' Society at a public meeting held in the town hall of Calcutta on 19th March, 1838.² This meeting was attended by over two hundred *Zamindars* and a few Anglo-Indians which rose to its gathering of about five thousand participants in its meeting held in the end of 1838, where a petition was drafted to submit to the British against the resumption of rent-free lands. It was the beginning of modern politics in India.³ The rapid spread of the English education also generated some new ideas of public spirit and patriotism. The young men

¹ Rajni Kothari, "Rise of the Dalits and the renewed debate on caste" in Partha Chatterjee (Ed.), **State Politics in India**, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 51.

² S. R., Mehrotra, **The Emergence of the Indian National Congress**, Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971, pp. 1-2.

³ S. R., Mehrotra, **The Emergence of the Indian National Congress**, Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971, pp. 12.

left college with the ideas of the political degradation of the people of India and very ardent desires to raise themselves and their fellow-countrymen above their fallen state.⁴ Gradually, a few such political associations got a ground in Bengal which became significant in Indian politics during the late 19th and the early 20th Century. With the passage of time, the Dalit also realized that it was necessary to form organizations to raise the upward mobility of the group as a whole because in the caste based society, the individual qualifications and achievement had no significance as such. They felt the need to start the struggle for temple entry, access to watering places and roads, educational institutions to spread education among themselves and the conferences to press their demands for employment in civil and military services.⁵ The awakened Dalit leaders started their work to mobilize the community by forming some organizations in various parts of the country.

In South India, a movement for the upliftment of the dalit had already started

under the banner of Adi Dravida in the leadership of M. C. Rajah. He was the chief spokesperson of the Madras untouchables in the legislative council 'the best known dalit in India'. The Adi Dravida Mahajan Sabha came into existence in 1890 and later on, got the name of Pariah Mahajan Sabha. This organization sent a petition to the contemporary Madras Government in 1890 requesting the agrarian concessions to the Pariahs. They requested the government to lower the standard of the qualifying test prescribed for admission to subordinate medical services. The government, however, conceded their demand in 1899. This Sabha appealed to the government to abandon their disgraceful name 'Pariah' and to give them the highly respectable name 'Adi Dravida', denoting the original inhabitants of Dravida land. The Sabha succeeded to get the resolution passed in the Provincial Legislative Council in 1922, in which the recommendation was made to give the name Adi Dravida to the Pariahs. They even demanded separate electorate for the Depressed Classes in the constitution while submitting a memorandum to the Indian Statuary Commission headed by Sir John

⁴ S. R., Mehrotra, **The Emergence of the Indian National Congress**, Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971, pp. 26.

⁵ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 69.

Simon.⁶ It was the first movement started in India to formulate the concept that the Scheduled Castes are the original inhabitants of India. The same idea was accepted and propagated by the Ad Dharm Mandal in Punjab.

The Adi Hindu Social Service league was founded by Bhagya Reddy Varma in 1911 at Hyderabad with the objectives to eradicate social evil of intemperance, to eradicate the system of animal sacrifice, to eradicate the custom of dedicating girls to deities, to prevent child marriages and to create friendly relations among all the untouchable castes and the people of the high castes. This organization also started English monthly namely '*The Panchama*' and, J. S. Muttiah was appointed as its editor. This organization, later on, also started pleading for the political demands of the Adi Hindus, like the separate representation of the dalit in various Legislative Assemblies in the differe4nt provinces.⁷

⁶R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 72.

⁷ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 71-72.

In East India, All Bengal Namasudra Association was founded by Mukunda Behari Mullick in 1912 at Calcutta. The organization gave a memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission in 1929 to make a provision of the franchise right for the Depressed Classes people who pay the *choukidari* tax of Re. 2/- or the Cess of Re. 1/- or Re. 1/- as Municipal tax. The organization also demanded for the reservation of about 17% seats in the provincial legislature in proportion to their population. This organization supported Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in his movement for the political rights of the Dalit in India.⁸

Another similar organization which came into existence in November 1917 was Adi Andhra Mahajan Sabha, at Vijayawada. The conference of this organization held under the leadership of Bhagya Reddy Varma of Hyderabad. The conference was convened by Guduru Ramachandra Rao. The organization, in its conference, passed the resolution to consider all the untouchables as 'Adi Andhra' in the Andhra region. They also requested the government to nominate Adi Andhras to the statutory

⁸ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 74-75.

bodies, to admit their children into common schools and to dig separate wells to provide them the water to drink. Very soon, it became a significant organization of the region and the government accepted the nomenclature of 'Adi Andhra' vide its order no. 817 of 25th March, 1922. The government also nominated N, Devendruru S. Venkayya and Gangadhar Sarma, to the then Madras Legislative Council. It was their significant victory as they were given recognition.⁹

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar founded 'Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha' to bring the socio-political awareness amongst the Dalit of India, on 20th July, 1924 at Bombay. The significant objectives of the Sabha were to promote the spread of education and culture among the Dalit, by opening libraries and social centers, to advance and improve the economic condition of the Dalit by starting industrial and agricultural schools and to represent their grievances before the government. He not only proposed all the objectives on papers, but he also opened schools and hostels for the Dalit. He launched the movement for equality of

rights all over India. He strongly pleaded the case of the Dalit in front of the Statutory Commission and worked for the franchise right to the Dalit. This organization worked very effectively for the social and political awareness amongst the Dalit of India.

Ad Dharm Mandal was founded in Punjab on 11th – 12th June, 1926 at village Muggowal in district Hoshiarpur with the efforts of Babu Mangoo Ram. It was an effort to make a common platform for the significant Dalit communities of Punjab. Very soon this Ad Dharm Mandal started following Dr. B R Ambedkar on all the significant political matters. In the course of Round Table Conferences, the leaders of Ad Dharm Mandal send telegrams to the British government to accept Dr. B R Ambedkar as the only nominee of the Dalit. This Mandal also contested the provincial elections of 1937 and even won seven seats out of eight they contested in the province. With the passage of time, this movement started concentrating on the religious issues of the community and majority of its political activists joined Scheduled Caste Federation for the political issues.

Samta Sainik Dal was also founded by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in March, 1927.

⁹ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 71-72.

This organization was formed to maintain discipline among the dalit generally and for the Mahad satyagraha particularly, however, it was formally organized at National level on 20th July, 1942 at Nagpur. It was an organization which helped Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar in all of his movements with full zeal. Even today, this organization is working in India very effectively. In Jalandhar (Punjab), this organization has a very strong hold.

In 1928, Babu Jagjivan Ram formed Ravidas Maha Sabha at Calcutta with a view to unite the dalit of India in one significant organization. Later on, he joined Indian National Congress and, in the annual session of the Ravidas Maha Sabha at Calcutta in 1934, he announced the formation of All India Depressed Classes League. A similar conference was summoned at Kanpur in 1935 by him, where the office bearers and executive members of the organization were elected unanimously. Rasiklal Biswas was elected as President and Babu Jagjivan Ram and P. N. Rajbhoj were elected its Secretaries. It became a pro-congress organization as Indian National Congress itself was considering the increasing

influence of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar a danger for the party.¹⁰

Another organization namely Depressed Classes Association was formed in 1928 with the efforts of M. C. Rajah. He became the President of this organization and started working for the Dalit. He appointed Ganesh Akhaji Gawal as its General Secretary and G. M. Thaware as its Joint Secretary. This organization was very active, particularly in the Vidarbha region. However, it could not become much popular due to its opposition towards the Ambedkarite organizations.¹¹

While studying all these organizations founded for the cause of the Dalit community, one may come to the conclusion that it was the sole contribution of these organizations which highlighted the actual problems faced by the Dalit in the different parts of the country. They laid down the foundation for the strong demand of social, political, religious and economic equality in the society which is still in waiting. The Dalit have a deep sense of

¹⁰ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 75.

¹¹ R. K., Kshirsagar, **Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders (1857-1956)**, New Delhi: M. D. Publications, 1994, pp. 87-88.

respect for these organizations because these organizations created an environment for the Dalit to fight for their valid and justified demands.

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