



SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT OF THE UNTOUCHABLES IN HARYANA (1940-47)

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In the Sanskrit literature, untouchables are known as *Chandala*, a term that designates, those who were not allowed to dwell in a town or a village but had to live in special quarters outside the village or town limits. The laws of Manu refer to the *chandales* as the past among men. The laws book stipulates that *Chandalas* must eat their food from broken vessels and avoid any contact with higher castes.¹ They could not enter any Hindu temple caste Hindu house, or other establishment or task water from the common village well.² The position of untouchables were very poor in society.

The untouchables were set apart outside and below the four main division of Hindu Society. In Vedic verna classification, the Hindu Society was divided into four rank, *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishayas* and *Shudra*.³ The top three were entitled to wear the “*Scared Thread*” which identified them as “Twice-born” meaning that in a symbolic second birth they have been admitted to the study of the Vedas or in effect recognized as more or less fully privileged Hindu.⁴ The *shudras* were present to serve the upper castes. Under the system of chaturvarana the *shudras* are not only placed at bottom of the gradation but it is subjected to innumerable ignominies and disability. So as to prevent him from sizing above the condition fixed for the him by law indeed unlit the fifth verna of the untouchables come into being.⁵

The Missionaries called such people out castes. These castes, tradition by called *Chamar* and *Chuhra* in the South East Punjab, they are the leather working and sweeper castes, in some areas of the South East Punjab. They constituted 15 to 25 per cent of the population.

In the nineteenth century, especially towards its closing years, a large number of factors and forces which were born out of the womb of the modern age transformed our society to a great deal. Like other marginalized people in the society, the untouchables also experienced this change in their life. A pertinent question may be posed here: how did this miracle, i.e., change in the lot of the untouchables, take place after all First, the modernizing forces which spread across the world, then, had their influence

on us also. Secondly, the Christian missionaries played some role:

- 1.) By uplifting the lower castes through Conversion to their faith; and
- 2.) By providing educational and other facilities to others.⁶

Next, Hindu social activists and their reform movement, e.g. the Satya Shodhak Samaj (1873) of Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), Arya Samaj (1875) of Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883),⁷ and many others took a leaf out of the missionaries' book and worked for their social and cultural upliftment. The national movement, especially after Gandhiji (1869-1948) took up its leadership in his hands, also played a vital role in the matter. And, so did Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) through his independent Labour Party (1936) and Untouchable in South East Punjab (1940-47).

Owing to the cumulative effect of all these efforts over the years, the lower castes began to inch towards the main-stream to acquire new source of living based on occupation, income, education and an egalitarian value system. But after some hard, often frustrating experiences, these castes came to realize that despite change in the attitude of the government and help of social reformers and political leaders, it was not an easy job to enter into the world dominated by high castes.⁸ Consequently, they devised a two-pronged strategy to achieve their goal. First, they mobilized their own castes by forming associations. As a result, a large number of caste associations mushroomed from the 1890s onwards, especially between 1905 and 1930 when rapid social and political changes took places. These associations worked:

1. to strengthen caste identities by mutual assistance;
2. to foster pride in caste tradition by employing modern techniques; and
3. to upgrade caste ranking by going for good education and professions.

They mobilized the castes to protest against injustice and deprivation and ask with a certain amount of strength for their due share in services, power and pelf.⁹

However, because of the extreme social backwardness, economic exploitation and lack of education, the untouchables in south East Punjab could not be benefited to any appreciable extent from the winds of change that were blowing across the country in the pre-1940's period.¹⁰ They continued to suffer as before. There was a little impact of the organization like the All India Depressed Classes League (1935), All India Scheduled Castes Federation (1942), Dalit Sewa Ashrama (1943), Independent Scheduled Castes Federation (1945), People's Education Society (1945), etc.¹¹ Astoundingly, even the following pieces of legislation which granted civil rights to the SCs, else did not stir any civil rights movement here.¹²

1. Mysore Removal of Social Disabilities Act, 1943 (XLII of 1943).
2. The Orissa Removal of Civil Disabilities Act, 1946 (X to 1946).
3. The Bihar Harijan (Removal of Civil Disabilities) Act, 1946.
4. The Bombay Harijan (Removal of Social Disabilities) Act, 1946.
5. The Central Provinces and Berar Scheduled Castes (Removal of Civil Disabilities) Act, 1947.
6. The United Provinces Removal of Social Disabilities Act, 1947.
7. The East Punjab (Removal of Religions and Social Disabilities) Act, 1948.

The situation in the economic sphere was not a bit different. The untouchables in South East Punjab as noted above, had no land there. Their share in trade and commerce was next to nil. The government jobs were not meant for them. In 1943, due to the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar, the Scheduled Castes got 8.33 per cent reservations in the government services. In June 1946, their percentage was raised from 8.33 to 12.1/2% corresponding to their rise in the percentage in the population. In August 1947, the percentage of posts on other than open competition was raised to 16.2/3 percent.¹³

Besides this, a bill related to the minimum wages was introduced in the Central Assembly on 11 April, 1946. It was passed on 9 February, 1948. The Act provided for fixing and revising, at suitable intervals, the minimum wages for workers in various scheduled industries, including agriculture.¹⁴

The untouchables were also allowed to enter the Army services in October, 1941, when the first battalion of the Mahar Regiment was raised at Nanawadi in Belgaum. The 2nd battalion was formed on 1 August, 1942 and the 3rd on 1 November, 1943. In October, 1943, the Central Assembly passed a resolution moved by Pyarelal Kuril Talib (SCF) for the removal of restrictions on the Lower Caste People in holding posts of officers in Military forces. About this very time, the mazhabis and *Ramdasis* Sikhs from Punjab were also recruited in the British Army.¹⁵ It is very depressing thing to note that none of these privileges came the way of the untouchables living in South East Punjab. The reasons for this were many, the chief ones were two:-

1. The extreme backwardness of the Lower Caste People and
2. The non-availability of leaders who could lead them to ask for their rights and privileges.

The Role of Arya Samaj

About this time, the Arya Samaj, which was a very strong socio-religious reform movement in South East Punjab, took up the cause of the sufferings of untouchables. Their leader, Bhagat Phool Singh of Rohtak, played an immensely important role in this respect. Phool Singh was born on 24 February, 1885 at Mahara District Rohtak. He joined Arya Samaj under the influence of a famous

ascetic, Brahamanand. Bhagat Phool Singh joined as a Patwari but he resigned from the service in 1917 and devoted himself whole hertedly to the Arya Samaj. His main interest was education and upliftment of the untouchables Bhagatji exhorted the Hindu masses to improve the lot of untouchables.¹⁶ But they did not pay any heed to the noble soul, at certain places. The lot of the Untouchable was the worst in their district. There, they denied even good drinking water. They were not permitted to dig their own wells.¹⁷

Bhagatji came to their rescue. He went to a village called moth and asked people to let the untouchable dig their well. The villagers refused. Bhagatji started a fast unto death. Well for untouchable or he would die. Then he went to village Dhani. Then Bhagatji reached Mada village and Ch. Sevagani helped him.¹⁸

On 8th September, 1940, he reached in Narnond village and gathered the people in chaupal and he told about his fast from 5th September. But the Hindus of Narnond were afraid of the Muslims Ranghad of the Moth village.¹⁹ When the news of Bhagat Phool Singh's fast was published in newspapers, then the people started pouring in moth from Haryana, Delhi and Punjab Jugal Kishore Birla reached there Mahatma Gandhi sent Viyogi Hari who was the president of Harijan Sevak Sangh. Then Swami Swatantratanand, a great Arya Samaj leader, came to see him with many others. Ch. Tika Ram, parliament Secretary, Punjab, reached there along with Ch. Suraj Mal, M.L.A. Seth Chajju Ram from Calcutta and Shri Chhotu Ram, minister sent telegrams showing their anxiety and this removed the Moth people. They agreed to Bhagatji's demand on 23rd September, 1940. The untouchable well as dug by the villagers themselves.²⁰

The Arya Samaj *pracharaks* also made substantial contribution to the cause of improving the lot the untouchables, Ishwar Singh Bedharak, Tej Singh, Swami Bhishma etc. played most significant part in this movement. What did they say? How did they make the masses move to change their attitude towards the untouchable? And with what result? A few excerpts from their inspiring songs would, I think answer these queries better than any other means.

In the following stanzas the untouchability has been ruthlessly attacked and people, hence, been asked to give it up, for it is a sin against god to consider his creations as untouchables and inferior:

*Partham to munushya jatti ek hi banai bhai,
kahe ko batavien mudh chhotaei badai bhai.
Aakaar main bhedh nahi kaise murkhtai bhai,
yahe behudi patti jane kisne padhei bhai.
Chhuaa-chhat jhagde ke yehe varth ki bhai,
khana-pina mail-jole datey bisrai bhai.
Padhne ka dhikar Nahi asi bhi duhai bhai*

*Kyon kar raheho mithya abhimaan,
aji-aeji desh main kyon faila hai agyaan.²¹*

Arya Samaj specially focused on the right to equality in the society. As per this stanza, it is being illustrated that Arya Samaj preached the message of brotherhood among the people, in the absence of caste classification. Arya Samaj emphasized equality only, neither it supported higher caste nor lower caste but just made efforts to remove prevailing untouchability from the society.

In yet another inspiring bhajana, the same message has been given by them a little differently.

*Chhuaa-chhaat ka rag bhada hai isne kaam bigadey hai,
jatti-patti jhajhant main funskar jiti baji hare hain.
Ishi ke funde aakar bharti sab nakare hain,
sangthan main badhak hain ye chhuaa-chhat ke mare²²*

Above lines points out that untouchability has almost blocked the nation's progress or development in all spheres of the society. And there is a danger of the division of the country due to castism.

Elsewhere, the poet advocates inter-caste marriages with the untouchables, as their fore-bears did. He cites examples from history to convince his audience:

*Chhuaa-chat mul se he aaj desh aarat huaa,
Raja Nip chhatr bade "kritvi" ko bhya liya.
Beti Shukracharya ki hamne toh suno saar,
Moudgil janan liya kul ka huaa vistar.
Moudglya gotra aaj brhaman hi kahalave yar,
Raja Nip ke hain potey dadi brhamani vichar.
Varan Shankar Hue nhi brhaman main hai shumbar,
kumba sara ek hi jutha jatti ka vichar.²³*

According to this stanza, Arya Samaj provides a solution to remove untouchability i.e, inter-caste marriage. As per example in these line, one such marriage uplifted a lower caste to uppercaste and it has been called later *Moudgil*, now this caste considers itself from Brahman. But actually it got upliftment through inter-caste marriage. So Arya Samaj stressed on inter-caste marriages as a solution of untouchability in the society.

They made a strong case for giving education to the untouchable children:

*Bin vida ish sansar main koi param gati paya naa,
chahe koi shudra hove chahe kai bhraman,
vida sabk chahiye koi jayeio bahakaya naa.*²⁴

These lines clearly indicates that the Arya Samaj wanted to eradicate the untouchability from the grass-root level hence they focused quality education in the society for all the *Vernas (Brahman, kshatriya, vaisheyes and shudras)*, specially to *sudhras*. They considered education as the weapon to remove castism and overall upliftment of the *sudhras*. Actually, Arya Samaj realized, education must be compulsory for all the sections of the society for the removal of all types of evils. And it is only method to bring back *shudras* in the main-stream of the society.

Pandit. Basti Ram, the famous poet, advocated the anti-untouchability and anti-caste processes "which", he said, "were necessary for the social well-being and happiness of one and all":²⁵

As a result of the efforts of the Arya Samaj and its Pracharkas, the general masses who were influenced by the Arya Samaj changed their attitude towards the untouchable. They opposed untouchability. The untouchable were allowed to attend their religious functions. They were allowed to interdine with Swarnas Hindus. The gates of Pathashalas and school were opened for untouchable children.²⁶

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

It is worth to note that, the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, Haryana, which worked under the inspiring leadership of religious leaders like Dindayal Vyakhanavaschaspati, Pt. Neki Ram Sharma, and Pt. Shivram Sharma also worked like Arya Samaj. They also preached against untoucability and supported the cause of the untouchables getting education in their institutions.²⁷

ROLE OF THE CONGRESS

The national movement which had become a mass movement now also had in its programme of the upliftment of the untouchable. As a result, the Congress leaders took up this work and made efforts to improve the lot of the untouchable by uplifting the evil of untouchability from their society. In consequences, things improved and so did the lot of the untouchables.²⁸

Finally, India became free on 15th August, 1947. Certainly, this had cast a great impact on the lives and the suffering of untouchables.

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