

Contribution of Women in Mahad Satyagraha: A New Perspective

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Abstract: *The Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha was the first mass movement related to untouchables in India. During the Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha the leader, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the other Satyagraha Committee members played a very prominent role right from the inception of the Satyagraha up to the victory of the Mahad Chavdar tank Court Case in March 1937. The success of any Satyagraha depends on the hard work and genuine reason of the people participating in it and the right direction given to it by the leader. Dr. Ambedkar and other prominent leaders who participated in the Satyagraha decided to summon the conference of the Depressed Classes at Mahad on 19 and 20 March 1927. Around 3000 untouchables attended this conference. The reason why Dr. Ambedkar decided to perform the Satyagraha was to protect „Humanity“ in the Society.*

Keywords: *Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha was the first mass movement related to untouchables in India. During the Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha the leader, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the other Satyagraha Committee members played a very prominent role right from the inception of the Satyagraha up to the victory of the Mahad Chavdar tank Court Case in March 1937. The success of any Satyagraha depends on the hard work and genuine reason of the people participating in it and the right direction given to it by the leader. Dr. Ambedkar and other prominent leaders who participated in the Satyagraha decided to summon the conference of the Depressed Classes at Mahad on 19 and 20 March 1927. Around 3000 untouchables attended this conference. The reason why Dr. Ambedkar decided to perform the Satyagraha was to protect „Humanity“ in the Society.

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. Dr. Ambedkar wanted to illustrate that it was the human right to drink water from the public tank at least if not from the private water resources. Dr. Ambedkar fought for the right of the untouchables at Mahad who were forbidden to drink water from the Chavdar tank.

Dr. Ambedkar was very firm with the decision and called upon the conference to decide for the further action. Accordingly, the conference of “Depressed Classes” was held at Sir Cowasjee Jehangir Hall. Strong speeches were made at the conference condemning the attitude of the so-called higher castes at Mahad where the latter had belabored some “Depressed” classmen for having drawn water from a well.

The conference decided to launch a Satyagraha campaign to get the depressed class grievance removed and asked the Bombay Government to establish a separate department to deal with the grievances of the depressed classes.

There were many people who supported Dr. Ambedkar and worked hard day and night for the success of the conference. They organized the meetings at various places near Mahad village so that the untouchables in the surrounding villages could attend the conference. They also arranged for the meetings in Bombay so that the untouchables from Konkan could visit their villages and attend the conference. They collected fund, distributed pamphlets, arranged for food for two days and also arranged the hall for the conference. They were like a shadow with

Dr. Ambedkar. Mr. Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad, was the chairman of the reception committee. The other Satyagrahais were Mr. Gangadhar Nilkant, Mr. Pandurang Nathuram Rajbhoj, Mr. Ramchandra Babaji More, Mr. Shivram Gopal Jadhav, Mr. Dhondiram Narayan Gaikwad, Mr. Nivrutti Tulshiram Jadhav, Mr. Sitaram Namdev Shrivarkar, Mr. Balaram Ambedkar, Mr. Kondiram Shriram Kholavadikar, Subhedar Sawadkar, Mr. Shantaram Anaji Upshyam, Mr. Aardekar, Mr. Bhanudas Kamble and Mr. Ramchandra Shinde. Some of the upper caste Hindus also prominently participated in the Satyagraha committee. They were, Mr. G. N. Sahastrabudhe, Mr. Anant Vinayak Chitre, Mr. Shantaram Raghunath Potnis, Mr. Purusottam Joshi, Mr. Surendranath Govind Tipnis, Mr. Bapurao Joshi, Mr. Tulajabhai Mitha Sheth and Mr. Shankarbai Vitthal Dhariya.

The „Kolaba Zilha Bahishkrut Parishad“ of 19-20 March 1927 was organized by Bahishkrut Hitakarini Sabha. The Sabha had carefully selected leaders from those who had migrated to Bombay from the Konkan. They provided strong leadership in connection to the conference. These included Mr. A.V. Chitre, a CKP (Kayastha) activist of the Bahishkrut Hitakarini Sabha, Mr. G.N. Sahastrabudhe, a Brahman of the Social Service League, and Mr. Surendranath Tipnis, another CKP who was the president of the Mahad municipality. Mr. Chitre and Mr. Tipnis were later elected as MLAs in Dr. Ambedkar's Independent Labour Party, while Mr. Sahastrabudhe was given the responsibility of editing Dr. Ambedkar's weekly Janata. There were also many from the Mahar community. The Mahad Satyagraha which started with the drinking of water from the Chavdar tank in 1927 continued till the Court delivered its judgement in 1937. During this entire period these leaders continued their support

The Revolution or a Movement in the World no matter big or small is not possible to progress in a perfect direction without a leader. However, along with the leader, he has his co-members who played a very important role in the movement. When Dr. Ambedkar started the movement for the upliftment of his people who were known as Untouchables many prominent leaders played a significant role for the cause. One must not forget that before Dr. Ambedkar there were many who fought for the cause of the untouchables in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was one such prominent leader who fought for the upliftment of the downtrodden in Nineteenth Century. His work was remarkable and he had many followers who followed his work and thoughts. Shri. Gopal Baba Valangkar was the staunch follower of Mahatma Phule. Gopal Baba Valangkar contemporary of Mahatma Phule was the first untouchable leader to start the Dalit movement in Konkan. In nineteenth century too the untouchables suffered mentally and physically from the upper caste Hindus. Yet they and their leaders continued their struggle. Therefore it is important to study the Mahad Satyagraha and the role played by these leaders who supported Dr. Ambedkar in his every movement and made the event successful. It becomes important to first understand the working of Raobahadur S. K. Bole without whom the British Government could have not thought of passing the Municipal resolution of allowing the public to drink water at public water resources.

Contribution of Women

The exploitation of women in general began right from the later Vedic period. The norms and laws given by Manu in Manusmriti dictate the discrimination against women. This discrimination of women continued due to the Patriarchy system followed in Indian culture. Therefore, no matter whether the woman belonged to touchable caste or the untouchable caste facing the discrimination for her was right from her birth.

During the British period, the missionaries had established schools wherein they admitted girls and boys in their schools. They also introduced certain social reforms. The newly educated elite Indian class now started thinking about the various social problems prevailing in India. They realized the serious problems like Sati, Child marriage, Widow Remarriage, and other such problems faced by Indian women in general. Therefore, they started organizing various movements against these customs and traditions. It is noticeable that the condition of the untouchable women was different than that of the touchable women. The untouchable women were in a more difficult situation than the touchable women because they were economically, socially, politically and culturally downtrodden. Hence, during the renaissance period of India many social reformers fought for the cause of women in India. Amongst them, some fought for the Dalit Women in India.

In the beginning of the 19th century and in the early period of the 20th century there were many social reformers who fought for the problems of the lower castes namely Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Mr. Gopalbaba Valangkar, Maharaja

Sayagirao Gaikwad, Shri Shahu Maharaj, Mr. V. R. Shinde, Mr. S. J. Kamble, and in the later period Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. They learnt that the main cause for their problems was the existing caste system and the economic and political backwardness in their society. Many others still directly or indirectly contributed their fight for the cause of Dalit Women in India. Dr. Ambedkar entered into the political scenario of India in A. D. 1920. During this period, the struggle for the downtrodden had already started at different fronts like education, social, political, economical, and religious.

The British East India Company established in India, formed their military in India. The untouchables had joined the military services under the company. At this time, the company had made it compulsory for the military service people and their family members the education in the military school. Every person living in the camp should take admission in the military school and the one who failed in doing so will be fined was the rule of the Company. Therefore, every child, every girl and boy was taking education in these schools. Apart from these schools, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule started a school for untouchable girls in Pune. Therefore, education was imparted at least to the small section of untouchable people.

Yet the conditions were not so good because in those days there was not much difference in the condition of the untouchables living in the urban areas and the ones living in the rural area. All the untouchables lived in the outskirts of the villages. Those who were not having any source of earning started migrating from villages to cities in search of job. The Mahars had Watans in the villages. The ones who had watans worked for the villages. They used to cut wood for the funerals in the villages, and many other menial jobs. Moreover, if the men used to be out the village their women were supposed to do this work. In addition, in such cases no matter whether she was old, a small girl, or ill, or just delivered a child she was supposed to work on behalf of her family.

Dr. Ambedkar always encouraged the untouchable women to participate in the Movements through his writings and speeches. The contribution of the untouchable women in the Satyagraha was as important as the contribution of touchable women in it.

The Dalit Women Movement first began by just participating in the meetings as an audience. Eventually some very boldly started giving the speeches on the platform. Further, some educated women took pen in their hand and this is how they started expressing their sufferings.

The women who attended the Conference and showed their presence in the Mahad Satyagraha definitely did a great work though they were not educated. On 27 December 1927 Dr. Ambedkar took the separate conference of women in Mahad. Almost 5000 women delegates were present for the conference. He made them aware about their self-respect and made them realize their position in the family and society.³ However, some of the upper caste friends supported Dr. Ambedkar. They and their family members including the women in their family supported their family members and indirectly Dr. Ambedkar in the movement. Mr. Devrao Vishnu Naik and Mr. Gangadhar Nilkanth Sahastrabuddhe were very close to this movement. They were Brahmin by caste. Mr. D. V. Pradhan, Mr. B. V. Pradhan, Mr. Anantrao Chitre, Mr. Kamalakant Chitre, Mr. Surba Tipnis they all belonged to CKP caste of Hindu religion. IN 1927 Mr. Devrao Naik took the initiative to establish in the month of October under the Presidentship of Dr. Ambedkar the „Samaj Samata Sang“. This Sang had organized a dinner with all people disregarding the caste system. Mr. Sitaram Namdev Shivrarkar organized the programme in his house. It was also organize in the houses of Mr. Naik, Mr. Sahastrabuddhe, and Mr. Pradhan etc. On such occasions Mr. Devrao Naik's wife Mrs. Indirabai Naik, Mrs. Sahastrabuddhe, Mrs. Manoramabai Pradhan such upper caste women cooked food for the people who used to come to their houses and participate in the activities.⁴ Therefore, these women used to face lot of difficulties with maintaining relationship with their relatives. The other upper caste people did not allow them to dine together. It is noticeable that the contribution of the upper caste women is equally significant. Dr. Ambedkar through his writings always encouraged the untouchable women to participate and remain active in the movements. The reason was, according to him if the women participate in the movement, the men will automatically feel ashamed of themselves and they would support the struggle of the untouchables. The other members of the Satyagraha committee felt that the success of the Satyagraha was in the participation of women in it. They were the ones who roamed about in search of water for their family every time. More than men, they suffered the discrimination from the upper caste Hindus especially in drawing water from the water resources, no matter public or private.

His colleagues had feelings similar to Dr. Ambedkar regarding the participation of women in the movement. Mr. Balkrishna Januji Devrukhkar also had similar views. He said, "Due to disappointing economic condition of the untouchables the men of the untouchable society treat their women more like a slaver. They do not give any kind of freedom to them. House and Women has become a synonym. Is it a peaceful life? They do not have clothes to wear because of no money. They do not get medicine when they are sick. They do not get any kind of facility at the time of their delivery period. They cannot breathe peacefully, and do not get good food to eat. Therefore, the death rate of untouchable women is comparatively more. Due to lack of education they are unable to speak in front of their men."⁵ Such was the condition of the untouchable women rightly pointed by Mr. Devrukhkar. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar everytime preached that if women are educated she could change the entire house and educate every child in the house. Mrs. Urmila Pawar and Mrs. Meenakshi Moon in „AamihiItihasGhadavala“ mention about one Mrs. Shantabai Shinde-Bhalerao.⁶ She was very small when the event took place and just used to go to school. She was the only woman they could interview who had seen and experienced the Satyagraha.

It is difficult to mention every person's name that participated or contributed for the Mahad Chavdar Tank Satyagraha. Therefore, the contribution of every member and the delegate directly or indirectly was important. Mrs. Ramabai B. Ambedkar wife of Dr. Ambedkar's contribution was of indirect in nature. However, whatever she did for the society cannot be mentioned with few words because if it was not for her unequivocal support to Dr. Ambedkar in every possible way her husband could not have concentrated on his public endeavours. She deftly managed the responsibility of the children and the house which he placed on her in his absence.

There were some other people who contributed to the Mahad Satyagraha but came in the limelight later in the Dalit movement. To mention one amongst them was Advocate Chandrakant Adhikari. Advocate Adhikari belonged to the upper caste of Hindu religion. He participated in the Mahad Chavdar tank Satyagraha on 25th December 1927 as a volunteer.⁷ He later participated in the various struggles of the Dalits.

All these people together fought for the basic right of Human being. To remember their sacrifice all the Dalits convinced the Maharashtra State Government to declare the place where the Manusmriti was burnt as „Krantibhumi“. Therefore on 25 December 1986 when the event completed its fifty-nine years, in the afternoon at 3 p.m. the „Krantistambha“ was inaugurated by the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra Mr. Shankarraoji Chouhan.⁸

Active Participation

Women's active participation in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 marked a turning point in India's social reform movements^[1]. Under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, women from marginalized communities courageously joined men to assert their right to access public water tanks, particularly the Chavdar Tank in Mahad, Maharashtra. Their involvement was not merely symbolic—it demonstrated their determination to challenge centuries of caste- based discrimination and gender inequality. Despite facing social ostracism and threats, these women stood alongside men, breaking the barriers of untouchability and proving their equal stake in the struggle for dignity and justice. Their participation gave moral strength to the movement and inspired others to question oppressive customs. By stepping out of domestic confines and engaging in public protest, the women of Mahad redefined their role in society, showing that social liberation could not be achieved without the active inclusion of women.

Symbol of Social Equality

The participation of women in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 was a powerful symbol of social equality. By standing alongside men to demand access to public water sources, these women directly challenged the rigid caste hierarchy that had long oppressed them. Their involvement went beyond fighting untouchability; it also confronted deep-rooted gender inequality, as women of marginalized communities traditionally had little presence in public or political life. By participating in the Satyagraha, they demonstrated that social reform required the inclusion of women, highlighting their agency and strength. Their courage sent a clear message that the struggle for equality was not limited to men alone, and that women could play a central role in shaping social justice. This act became emblematic of the broader fight against discrimination in India, inspiring future generations to recognize that true social transformation must address both caste and gender oppression simultaneously.

Support to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

During the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, women from marginalized communities demonstrated unwavering support for Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's leadership, playing a crucial role in the success of the movement. They actively participated in protests, marches, and gatherings, standing shoulder to shoulder with men to demand equal access to public water sources, particularly the Chavdar Tank. Their involvement was a clear message that the struggle against caste discrimination required collective effort and could not be achieved without women's active engagement. Despite facing verbal abuse, threats, and social ostracism, these women remained steadfast, showing remarkable courage and resilience. Their moral and emotional support strengthened Ambedkar's leadership and inspired other participants to continue the fight against untouchability. By aligning themselves with Ambedkar's vision of social equality, they not only challenged oppressive caste norms but also paved the way for greater recognition of women's role in India's social reform and liberation movements.

Breaking Social Taboos

The Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 was a landmark event for Dalit women, many of whom participated in public political life for the first time. Traditionally confined to domestic spaces due to caste and gender-based restrictions, these women defied centuries-old social taboos by joining the movement to demand equal access to public water sources. Their participation challenged both societal norms and patriarchal expectations, demonstrating that women could take an active role in shaping social and political change. By stepping into public spaces alongside men, they asserted their right to dignity, equality, and visibility in the larger struggle against caste discrimination. This bold action not only empowered them personally but also inspired other women within marginalized communities to engage in activism. The courage displayed by these women highlighted the intersection of caste and gender oppression, reinforcing the idea that true social reform must include the liberation and active involvement of women.

Moral Strength and Motivation

Women's participation in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 provided vital moral and emotional support to the movement. By joining men in the demand for equal access to public water sources, their presence reinforced the determination of male participants and strengthened the collective resolve against caste-based discrimination. The courage and commitment displayed by women inspired confidence among protestors, showing that the struggle for social justice was a shared responsibility, not limited by gender. Their involvement also served as a constant reminder of the ethical imperative behind the movement, emphasizing that the fight for equality was rooted in human dignity and fairness. Facing social ostracism, abuse, and threats, women remained steadfast, demonstrating remarkable resilience. This unwavering support uplifted the spirits of all participants, helping sustain momentum in the face of adversity. Ultimately, women's moral strength and motivation became a cornerstone of the Mahad Satyagraha's success, symbolizing unity and collective courage.

Spreading Awareness

Women played a crucial role in spreading awareness about the Mahad Satyagraha and its objectives within their communities. By explaining the significance of equal access to public water sources and the broader struggle against caste discrimination, they educated fellow community members about their rights and the importance of social reform. Their efforts encouraged other women, many of whom had never participated in public or political activities, to join the movement, thereby increasing participation and strengthening the cause. Through conversations, gatherings, and personal example, these women helped challenge long-standing societal norms that restricted Dalit women to domestic roles. Their work in raising consciousness ensured that the Satyagraha was not limited to a single event but became a catalyst for ongoing social change. By inspiring others to engage in activism, women amplified the impact of Ambedkar's leadership and laid the groundwork for broader community mobilization for equality and justice.

Courage in Adversity

The Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 tested the courage and resilience of its participants, and Dalit women stood out for their remarkable bravery. Despite facing verbal abuse, threats, and the risk of social boycott from upper-caste communities, these women did not waver in their commitment to the cause. Their steadfastness in the face of adversity demonstrated immense personal courage and a collective determination to challenge oppressive societal norms. By participating in public protests and accessing the Chavdar Tank, they confronted centuries of caste-based discrimination and gender restrictions. Their actions not only strengthened the resolve of male participants but also inspired other women in marginalized communities to step forward and assert their rights. The courage displayed by these women highlighted the intersection of caste and gender struggles, showing that the fight for equality required confronting both simultaneously. Their bravery became a symbol of resilience, unity, and the transformative power of collective action.

Representation of Dalit Womanhood

The participation of women in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 served as a powerful representation of Dalit womanhood, bringing visibility to their unique struggles within the broader fight against caste oppression. Historically marginalized on both caste and gender grounds, Dalit women had been largely invisible in social and political movements. By actively joining the Satyagraha, they highlighted that social reform could not be achieved without addressing the specific challenges faced by women in their communities. Their involvement linked the issues of caste discrimination with gender inequality, demonstrating that the liberation of Dalits required the empowerment of Dalit women as well. Through their courage and determination, these women showcased resilience, agency, and leadership, inspiring both men and women to challenge oppressive norms. Their presence underscored the importance of including women in social justice movements and ensured that the voices and rights of Dalit women became an integral part of Ambedkar's vision for equality and dignity.

Inspiration for Future Movements

The courage and determination displayed by women during the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 became a lasting source of inspiration for subsequent social and political movements led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. By standing up against caste-based discrimination and asserting their rights to public resources, these women set a precedent for active female participation in social reform. Their bravery encouraged other women from marginalized communities to engage in public activism, challenging both gender and caste oppression. The example set at Mahad demonstrated that meaningful social change required the inclusion of women's voices and efforts, influencing Ambedkar's later campaigns for Dalit rights, education, and political representation. Additionally, their involvement motivated a broader recognition of women as agents of social transformation, inspiring participation in labor movements, education initiatives, and campaigns for gender equality. Ultimately, the legacy of these women strengthened the foundation for organized Dalit and women's rights movements, leaving an enduring impact on India's struggle for social justice.

Foundation for Gender Equality in Reform

The participation of women in the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for gender equality within the broader framework of social reform. By actively engaging in the struggle for access to public water sources, Dalit women challenged both caste-based oppression and patriarchal norms, demonstrating that true social justice could not be achieved without addressing gender disparities. Their involvement emphasized that the fight for caste equality and social reform must inherently include women's rights and empowerment. This principle became a central aspect of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision, as he consistently advocated for the intersection of caste and gender justice in India. The courage, resilience, and leadership displayed by these women set an enduring precedent, showing that social movements must be inclusive to be effective. Their contribution helped redefine reform as a holistic effort, ensuring that the liberation of marginalized communities included both men and women equally.

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