

Water Justice and Caste Exclusion: Understanding Mahad Satyagraha and its Contemporary Implications

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Abstract

Water is one of the most basic necessities of humans as well as other living beings, and it's awful to know that it was denied to a section of society based on caste. Mahad Satyagraha was not just about access to water but assertion of their rights as humans. This paper aims to understand the revolutionary Mahad Satyagraha which was able to break the shackles of restrictions that Caste Hindus put on untouchables. Though it was just a step towards liberation but the road of liberation was still in the doldrums. The untouchables were barred from drinking or even touching water. This movement was all about the assertion of the rights of untouchables as humans. Further, this paper deals with the role of Dr Ambedkar in transforming Caste as a political issue which was considered to be a divine structure. This paper also brings out the contemporary incidents of caste conflict and the denial of water to the untouchable even today.

Keywords: Water, untouchables, Mahad satyagraha, Rights.

1. Introduction

Mahad Satyagraha is considered to be a historic event and a revolutionary step towards breaking the barriers of the caste system. Water is a basic need for the survival of every living being, yet a particular group of people were debarred from drinking water from public resources due to their caste identity. To end the long isolation of untouchables by the upper caste Hindus, Ambedkar took a path-breaking step with thousands of other untouchables at Mahad, a town in Konkan. This was a major event as every other religious group and even animals could drink water from the tank but untouchables were not allowed. The origin of it lies in the Bole Resolution, which was a resolution moved by S.K Bole, a social reformer in the Bombay Legislative Council. This resolution was adopted and passed by the Bombay

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government in 1923. With this Mahad Municipality granted rights to untouchables to drink water from Chavadar Tank and also allowed access to other public places like roads, schools, ponds etc. The Bole Resolution was an effective and progressive step as many anti-caste reforms were initiated. This resolution was however unacceptable by the upper caste Hindus and due to this, untouchables did not assert their right. The reason behind the hostility of upper caste Hindus to not allow untouchables to drink water is that they do not consider them equal and do not wish to acknowledge them as human. After this, Kolaba district Depressed Classes holds a Conference at Mahad on 19 and 20 March 1927. Ambedkar was also invited for the Conference and his fiery, confident speech had awakened the depressed class who were present there.

2. A Tale of Assertion

The participation of Ambedkar as a torchbearer of Mahad Satyagraha had a significant role in the formation of caste discrimination as a political issue and not just limited to social issues. This uprising of Dalits for assertion of their rights is historic as before 1927 there was no such huge movement held ever. The learning from this satyagraha is immense for the depressed class. It provided a boost to the Dalits to fight for their existence. The very existence of the caste system and its offspring, the practice of untouchability was challenged for the first time on a large scale.

3. Untouchability and the Contemporary India

It's been more than 90 years since the Mahad satyagraha but the oppression against the untouchables and practice of untouchability continues. Many such caste conflicts, murders, and rapes are carried out systematically by the upper caste Hindus to assert their domination in the name of caste pride. The most essential part of Mahad was the access to water, not much has changed till now. Due to climate change and global warming, the scarcity of water is real and Dalits are facing the worst consequences of water scarcity. It is reported that Dalits are not allowed to touch the water tanker services provided by upper caste in Bundelkhand and this place is hard hit by severe drought (India Water Portal, 2020).

Another recent incident was from Rajasthan in Jaipur, a 9-year-old boy was thrashed and beaten to death by a teacher for drinking water from a pot meant for the Upper caste. The boy was naïve and innocent and had no idea about the pot being used by the upper caste. Similarly, another 46-year-old Dalit man was killed by three men in Rajasthan's Soorsagar for filling water from a handpump at night.

Climate change and its adverse effects have marginalized the Dalits further. In 2016, in the drought-hit village of Vidarbha, Washim district had to dig his own well in order to fulfill the need of water for his family. The struggle of Dalits for a drop of water is still consistent. There is one image where Dalits have made progress,

by defying the clutches of the caste system and the other image where Dalits are still fighting for basic rights.

4. Conclusion

The most essential part of Mahad was the access to water, not much has changed till now. Due to climate change and global warming, the scarcity of water is real and Dalits are facing the worst consequences of water scarcity. It is reported that Dalits are not allowed to touch the water tanker services provided by upper caste in Bundelkhand and this place is hard hit by severe drought (India Water Portal, 2020). They are also not allowed to touch the public wells and functional handpumps, forced to cover large distances for water or left with poor quality of water for their survival. In the era of environmental crisis, people at the margins face the impacts of climate change, especially Dalits. A report by India Today says that the handpumps, and wells are shielded by lathi-wielding men to track down people (implying to Dalits) who steal water.

This puts the question that why a public resource like water needs to be shielded from one particular group just on the basis of caste. What is the role of the state and its apparatus like the police in protecting the Dalits? It is horrific to know how police remain onlookers to an incident in Gujarat where a Dalit activist was thrashed with spears, and lathis and brutally murdered (Janata Weekly). The violent crime against Dalit women is not unusual in India. Rapes, and murders, are frequently reported.

Although the atrocities still continue, one of the most successful outcomes of the Dalit movement is their appearance in the political sphere which provided them with more opportunities. The provision of affirmative action has ensured the representation of depressed classes and tribes. But the goal is still unachieved and more is required to be done. As Ambedkar says “Lost rights are never gained by begging, and by appeals to the conscience of the usurpers, but by relentless struggles”.

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