

## ORGANIZED DALIT POLITICS AND BOMBAY CITY IN THE 1920S

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the rise of political consciousness amongst Dalits in the city of Bombay in the decade of the 1920s. Historical writings on Dalit movement have largely laid their focus on the question pertaining to religion and civil rights in understanding the emergence of Dalit politics. As a result it has developed a tendency to avoid questions outside the realm of religious prejudice and social discrimination. This paper would try to explore the trajectory in which the organized Dalit politics took the new form in western India. It would try to illustrate as to how the city of Bombay, which was largely dominated by workers, helped to shape the movement. In doing so, this paper would investigate into the new form of activism that emerged in the 1920s and would argue that Bombay city played instrumental role in establishing new Dalit politics under Ambedkar's leadership.

**Keywords:** *Workers, Dalits, Ambedkar, Bombay, Mahad Satyagraha, Caste violence*

### Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the impact of political consciousness amongst Dalit workers of Bombay presidency in the decade of the 1920s. The 1920s and 30s were important decades for the organized Dalit politics, as it was for the first time, Dalits were massively mobilized in an organized way. In the mid 1920s Dalits began to organize themselves under the iconic leadership of B.R. Ambedkar. His leadership was immensely successful in extending its influence amongst Dalit workers and peasants of western India. The decade of the 1920s also witnessed the rise of radical working class movement in Bombay, largely under the Communist leadership. On the other hand, historical writings on Dalit movement have largely put their focus on the question of religion and civil rights in order to understand the organized nature of Dalit politics. This paper would try to provide a brief outline of Dalit activism in the 1920s, and simultaneously would try to illustrate why the city of Bombay became the prime hub of Dalit activism. There is an obvious

link between city's working class culture and the emergence of organized Dalit politics in western India.

### **Working Class Neighborhoods and the Organized Dalit Politics in the Post-Mahad Scenario:**

It was in 1927, Dalits of Western India waged a powerful struggle against differential treatment given to Dalits on the question of access to public resources. Mahad, a village situated in the district of Kolaba (now renamed, Raigad), became the symbol of that struggle. A powerful movement to exercise the right to access to public resources was started in March 1927. The mass mobilizations at Mahad were one of the first attempts under Ambedkar's leadership to organize Dalits, politically. The question of everyday structural violence against Dalits became the moot point of discussion in the public sphere. At the backdrop of the Mahad episode, Ambedkar had been arguing in his newspaper, the *Bahishkrut Bharat*, on how violence characterized the fundamental feature of Caste society. Thus, with the rise of the organized Dalit politics in western India, two concerns became the foundational aspects of its politics: First was regarding structural violence against Dalits by the caste-Hindu society; and second, the question of Dalit access to public resources, such as schools, temples, water tanks and public roads. The support for the autonomous Dalit politics grew subsequently after the successful agitations at Mahad.

The course of mass mobilizations that began at Mahad, started to extend its influence beyond Mahad. Many newspaper reports of the time suggest that many villages and towns of Bombay Presidency witnessed the rise of political activism among Dalits. Interestingly, it was Bombay city which was at the forefront of Dalit political activism that emerged immediately after the Mahad incident. Majority of the city's leading activists, associated with this movement were workers employed in the city based cotton textile mills and other industrial establishments. Hence, they were in a position to attract more Dalit workers in the newly born mass movement. On the other hand, from the late 1910s and the early 1920s, Bombay city has been witnessing emergence of powerful working class politics largely under the influence of Marxist-Socialist ideas. Thus, it was apparent that both Dalits and the Marxists had to take note of each other's presence. It led to many conflicts between them which had surfaced due to obvious clash of political interests; but it also helped both movements to shape their opinion on the questions of caste and class.

Majority of Dalit workers of the city resided in the working class neighborhoods of Naigaon, Parel, Mahim, Worli, Matunga, Agripada, Kamatipura, and Wadala. Workers migrated from Konkan region dominated the city's Dalit populace. In the aftermath of the Mahad agitations, these neighborhoods became the fortresses of nascent Dalit movement led by Ambedkar. Prior to the emergence of Dalit political activism, they have been obviously exposed to and associated with the then trade union activism and working class politics. Before the formation of *Girni Kamgar Union* [Textile Mill Workers Union] or GKU in 1928, we find quite a few number of Dalit workers being part of *Bombay Textile Labor Union* or BTLU (founded in 1925). Unlike GKU it was an organization which was established on an agenda of moderate trade unionism. Before Mahad agitations, political activism of Dalits was not confined to working class activism alone. Many Dalit caste Associations of Mahars and Chambhars had begun to crop out from the commencement of the twentieth century. They had mainly focused

their interest on promoting education among their castes. Some organizations like *Vakrutva Uttejak Mandal* were platforms to discuss the concerns related to social reforms.<sup>i</sup> One of the prominent leaders of pre-Ambedkar era, Shivram Janba Kamble's work also had been immensely influential to the city's Dalit activism in the 1910s and 1920s.

On the other hand, Gail Omvedt has also shown that Dalit workers of the city were actively involved in the activities of the *Bhajan Mandals* (prayer associations), established and operated by leading Dalit activists (mainly Mahars) of the city.<sup>ii</sup> The agenda of the Bhajan Mandals transcended beyond collective worship of God and were also deeply involved in politically sensitizing Dalit workers towards caste discrimination. These *Bhajan Mandals* were able to establish larger networks of local Dalit workers of different working class neighborhoods. Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad and Govind Adrekar, before joining with Ambedkar, were actively involved in the *Bhajan Mandals* situated at Saat-Rasta and Mahalakshmi. In the later decades, when Gaikwad joined Ambedkar's movement, he rose to become one of the leading lieutenants of Ambedkar. On the other hand, the neighborhood *Bhajan Mandals* of Kamathipura and Parel were led by another set of men, who also rose to become leading Dalit activists in the later period. They were Subedar Vishram G. Savadkar and Balaram Ambedkar. Savadkar, a retired soldier of the Indian army, became closely associated with Ambedkar from the 1920s. In the 1930s, he was considered as one of the most important leaders, in western India, of Ambedkar's party, Independent Labor Party. His premature death in the late 1930s was indeed a blow to the party. Balaram Ambedkar, apart from being an elder brother of B.R. Ambedkar, was a prominent Dalit activist of Bombay. He was a leading organizer of Dalits during and after the agitations at Mahad. Dhananjay Keer has described him as "a voracious reader and a charming speaker" with an "eventful career".<sup>iii</sup>

In 1926, Konkani migrant workers established *Mahar Samaj Seva Sangh*. It was established, according to the Sangh's *Report*, on the suggestion of Bhikaji Sambhaji Gaikwad, son of Sambhaji Tukaram Gaikwad, about whom I have mentioned in the earlier part of this paper.<sup>iv</sup> Sambhaji T. Gaikwad, R. B. More, and Govind Adrekar were the main pillars of the Mahar Samaj Seva Sangh. The main office of the Sangh was situated at Fort, in the buzzing midst of Bazar-gate Street Corner. According to Sangh's *Report*, published in 1931, the organization was involved in various activities which included establishing more than ten schools in the rural Konkan and around four night schools in the Bombay city.<sup>v</sup> In the context of Mahad agitation started in 1927, Sangh organized several public meetings in different working class neighborhoods and aggressively campaigned in favor of Mahad agitators. These meetings, according to newspaper reports, were held at Naigaon, Parel, Mahim, Bandra, and Saat Rasta. Sangh was also involved in spreading the wings of the Ambedkar led assertive movement in rural Konkan region by organizing campaigns against discriminatory caste practices faced by Dalits.

### **Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha and the Rise of Dalit Mass Activism**

Of all Dalit organizations based in the city during the 1920s and prior to that, *Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha* (also called Depressed Classes Institute) was the most influential organization. But it is important to understand the context in which *Sabha* rose to the prominence. *Satyashodhak Samaj*, founded in 1873 in Pune, by Jotiba Phule, created a strong platform to radically discuss caste question. Its impact was greatly felt in the city which attracted huge

following for the Satyashodhak Samaj, even in the early twentieth century. Satyashodhak Samaj set the tone for new kind of anti-caste politics which inspired many Bombay based Dalits to enter into the field of political activism. As a result, many Dalits began to actively participate in the then public sphere in the early twentieth century. Before the arrival of Ambedkar on public scene, the efforts made by Dalit organizations/groups/discussion forums, operating from the city played important role in politicizing the masses. Different neighborhood collectives like *Bhajan Mandals*, or the city based caste organizations/social reform associations, immensely contributed in providing a political exposure to the city based Dalits, on the question of untouchability and caste discrimination. The Satyashodhak rationality and Bhakti spirituality were fused, thereby creating entirely new notions of politics. It certainly facilitated Ambedkar and his untouchable movement of early 20<sup>th</sup> century to stand out uniquely from the hegemonizing discourse of nationalism and Hinduism.

The colonial context was also important factor in the development of the organized Dalit politics in India. Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State of Great Britain, made a historic declaration in the House of Commons, on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1917. The emphasis of the declaration was to announce British government's future plan to bring about political reforms in India. Eventually, the government of India Act, 1919, enacted by the British Parliament due to inevitable colonial compulsions, paved a way for greater participation of different caste-groups in the political power.<sup>vi</sup> These events greatly shaped the political and ideological orientation of Dalit activism in the city. Non Dalits like Vitthal Ramji Shinde and Narayanrao Chandavarkar, who were closely working with Bombay based Dalits in the early decades, were eventually sidelined from the leadership in the changed circumstances.

*Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha* was established by Ambedkar in July 1924 in Bombay. It was under *Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha*'s leadership, the Mahad agitation was launched in March 1927. The office bearers of the Sabha were also invited by the Simon Commission, in 1927-28, to deposit their evidence pertaining to the condition of untouchables of Bombay presidency. Before launching the Mahad agitation, *Sabha* was actively organizing Dalits on various issues, like, promotion of education, problem of Mahar Vatan, and Khoti question. It tried to expand its influence beyond Bombay city. Consequently, it was successful to expand beyond Bombay only after Mahad agitation. Its mass base transcended beyond caste and was not confined to Mahars alone. Majority of the office bearers and leading activists of the *Sabha* including Ambedkar, Sambhaji T. Gaikwad, Sitaram Shivtarkar, and Mahadev Ganpat Jadhav, were based in the working class neighborhoods of Bombay city.

In the aftermath of the first Mahad agitation, the *Sabha* was actively involved in canvassing support for the Mahad agitation in Bombay presidency. It was successful in mobilizing the support of the Dalit working classes of Bombay to further sharpen the protest at the backdrop of Mahad violence. Public meetings held at Elphinstone Road,<sup>vii</sup> Kavasji Jahangir Hall,<sup>viii</sup> Clark Road, and other working class neighborhoods of the city, reported in the *Bahishkrut Bharat* and other newspapers, illustrates that these neighborhoods were equally instrumental in mobilizing funds for further agitations. It clearly suggests that Dalit workers of Bombay city were not only at the forefront to support the new kind of Dalit agitations but they phenomenally shaped the contours of the early phase of the organized Dalit politics.

### **New Age of Dalit Activism and the city**

The 1920s brought fresh vigor to the discussions on social reforms and a new method to put the caste question at the fore. With the recently enacted constitutional reforms at the backdrop, there was palpable increase in the participation of Dalits in the then political sphere. There was also an evident growth in number of caste based welfare organizations of Mahars, Mangs, and Chambhars, as mentioned in the earlier section. Most of these organizations were established in Bombay. New public culture premised on organizing public meetings, passing resolutions which were pertaining to social and political matters, and public auditing of organizational finances, had already seeped into Dalit caste organizations from the early twentieth century. From the late 1910s onwards, they were increasingly used by the new generation of Dalit activists to delegitimize the older forms of patronizing leadership. As a result, leaders like Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Shivram Janba Kamble and Ganesh Akkaji Gavai lost their leadership to young Dalits like Ambedkar. Interestingly, this new form of Dalit activism not only required a literate leadership but also prerequisite skills to run public organizations.

Bombay became the new centre of Dalit activism by displacing Pune, which had been a radical stronghold of Non Brahmin Satyashodhak movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bombay's rise as a new centre was primarily possible due to its large migrant working class population. As compared to the rural countryside, the city based Dalit populace was in a better position to get acquainted to literacy and modern forms of institutions. On the other hand, Pune was not an industrial city, and therefore it did not attract as many migrants as Bombay did. However, till the onset of the 1920s, Pune and Bombay collectively dominated the landscape of Dalit activism. It was only under Ambedkar's leadership, who brought about new language to Dalit politics, Bombay became a dominant voice in the Dalit movement.

Under his leadership, Mahad agitations of 1927 unveiled a new phase in Dalit politics. Mobilizing Dalits against structural caste violence and demand for access to public resources became the defining agenda of the new Dalit politics. It led to unusual mobilization of Dalits. These two fold questions became the foundational concerns of the organized Dalits politics, on which it firmly established itself in the later decades. This new form of politics was staunchly supported by the Dalit working classes of Bombay city, which is why the caste question experienced a new turn. Bombay city was successful in keeping that momentum even after the end of Mahad agitation. They were able to transcend beyond caste and were mainly responsible to successfully foreground Dalits as a political community.

In the course of time, it is also important to understand the nature of relationship, particularly in the 1920s, between Congress and the new breed of Dalit politics. With the arrival of Gandhi at the helm of Congress organization, the domination of Tilak followers was eventually waning in western India. Gandhi was successful in attracting large number of Non Brahmin leaders and activists into Congress. He was also able gather support of majority of Bombay's Dalit working classes during the Non Cooperation movement. Ambedkar's *Bahishkrut Bharat* too saw Gandhi as a potential challenger to the mainstream nationalist discourse, which it believed was dominated by Brahmin nationalists. Till the end of the 1920s, the new Dalit leadership did not have major tussle with the Congress, except during the Simon Commission controversy.

Liberal newspapers like the *Bombay Chronicle*, which were ideologically closer to the Congress politics, had supported Ambedkar's leadership at Mahad. On the other hand, despite

having several reservations against Congress and Gandhi's politics, the second Mahad conference under Ambedkar's leadership, had kept Gandhi's lone portrait on the podium, which was clearly a mark of respect for him.<sup>ix</sup> It clearly suggests that there was indeed a scope for negotiations. But the discussions in the context of the Round Table Conferences (the first began in November 1930) soured the relationship between Congress and the new Dalit leadership led by Ambedkar. In the 1930s the organized Dalit politics took a firm stance against Congress, but it also faced immense difficulties to challenge the ideological hegemony of Congress. Gandhi's positions at the Round Table Conference were condemned by Dalits. This was possible only due to the emergence of new form of Dalit politics, which had laid foundations for assertive politics. In this debate Congress was unable to campaign for Dalit support beyond the rhetoric of 'Hindu unity'.

### Conclusion

The decade of the 1920s was instrumental in bringing about monumental changes in the contours of Dalit politics. It was transformative decade that changed the course of Dalit politics and history of western India. Uniqueness of this decade lay in its ability to translate Dalit grievances into an effective political and organizational language, which was mainly concerned in creating Dalits as a political community. On the other hand, the role played by the Dalits of Bombay city was immensely important in unveiling the new phase in the Dalit politics. Bombay which attracted large number of migrants provided a momentum to this new movement. Which is why, Ambedkar was able to bring about new language in Dalit politics that dealt with the concerns of violence and access to public resources.

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