

## CHAPTER - I

### INTRODUCTORY : CONDITION OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

Untouchability which is abolished by the Indian Constitution in 1950, was an evil practice which was observed in Hindu society since many years. In addition, the Untouchability (Offences) Act was also passed in 1955, by which anyone observing untouchability in any way; can be imprisoned upto 6 months or fined Rs. 500/- or more. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891 - 1956) spent his whole life for the liberation of untouchables from the yoke of Hindu dominant society.

The story of the life of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was therefore, the struggle of a champion for human rights. It passed before the eyes of the people as the condolence meeting were being held all over the country. All agreed that he was a fighter for the dignity of man and the saviour of a suppressed people. No man in this country or perhaps in any other country, could equal Ambedkar in his career which was exciting, varying, romantic and wonderful. He was an educationalist, economist, author, professor, lawyer, leader, fighter, law-giver, law-maker, leveller and liberator. Untouchability is abolishing due to the attempts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to whom history

never forgets. Ambedkar has played the part of destiny in the liberation of suppressed humanity in India.

Under Dr. B. R. Ambedkar untouchables liberation movement took a stormy form but this liberation movement had a background. Prior to Ambedkarian era untouchables liberation movement was going on in a small scale. This process was also slow. There were some early social reformers like Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj, V. R. Shinde and few others, who rendered great service for the eradication of untouchability from Hindu society. For this cause the British rule in India was also helpful, who for the first time introduced the rule of law, education to all, equal opportunities to all irrespective of caste, creed and sex. Therefore, here an attempt is made to study the untouchables, liberation movement in pre-Ambedkarian era in the Bombay Presidency (1818-1927) with the help of original and secondary sources available to us.

#### BOMBAY PRESIDENCY :

Generally Geography influences the course of history. So here to see the Geographical situation of Bombay Presidency is not out of place. Bombay Presidency was created by the East India Company and a permanent Governor was appointed to look the administration of this province. After the fall of Peshwa Bajirao II in 1818, the whole Maratha country became the part and parcel

of Bombay Presidency. This Bombay Presidency of British India, was divided into four revenue divisions and twenty five districts. It also included numerous Native States. The territory thus composed extended from  $13^{\circ} 53'$  to  $28^{\circ} 29'$  N and from  $66^{\circ} 44'$  to  $76^{\circ} 32'$  E.<sup>1</sup> The British Districts, including Sind contain a total area of 122,9 + square miles, and a total population (according to the census of 1901) of 18,515,587, the native states under the Bombay Government covered an additional area estimated at 65,761 square miles, with a population of 6,908,648; total area 188,745 square miles; total population 25,424,235.<sup>2</sup> In the geographical limits of the Presidency are included the Portuguese possessions of Goa, Daman and Diu with an aggregate area of 1,470 square miles and a population, 25,424,235. In the geographical limits of the Presidency were included the Portuguese possessions of Goa, Daman and Diu, with an aggregate area of 1,470 square miles and a population (1900) of 531798; also the State of Baroda, with an area of 8,099 square miles and a population of 1952,692 which was under the political control of the Government of India. The outlying settlement of Aden had an area of 80 square miles with a population of 43,974. The capital of the Presidency, to which

it had given its name was Bombay city situated on an island on the shore of the Arabian Sea in 18° 55'N and 72° 54'E.

The Presidency was bounded on the North-West North, and North-East by Baluchistan, the British Province of the Panjab, and the Native States of Rajputana; on the East by the Native States of the Central India Agency, the Central Provinces Berar and the Dominions of the Nizam of Hyderabad; on the South by the Presidency of Madras and the State of Mysore; and on the west by the Arabian Sea.<sup>3</sup>

SOCIAL CONDITION IN 1818 :

Bajirao II's reign was neither brilliant in political field nor glorious in social. Bajirao II was defeated by the hands of English and the company Rule was established over whole Maharashtra. To understand the background it is essential to see the social condition of Bombay Presidency at the fall of Maratha Power (1818). It is said that the period of Bajirao (1796 - 1818) was an age of moral decline. It was an era of selfishness, a narrow prejudices and colossal cowardice. Bajirao II's loose behaviour invited anarchy in Maharashtra.<sup>4</sup> Most of the historians expressed their firm opinion that he was not at all a capable ruler and

lacked totally in all those abilities as a ruler. The political condition of Maratha nation under Bajirao II was precarious and Bajirao didn't possess any political wisdom or foresight. Therefore, Bajirao II was defeated by the Britisher in 1818 and English became the master of this territory. This transfer of power is marked by a social awakening among the Maratha people as well as the other natives of India.

THE BRAHMIN SUPREMACY :

Traditionally Brahmins were holding a superior position in the caste system of Hindu. The caste system in India is unique in having a permanent hierarchy<sup>5</sup> in which the Brahmins are always at the top. The castes in India are determined by birth and, therefore, the status accorded by caste to a person remains fixed life-long. Even if, a man happens to choose another vocation he remain a casteman all the same. Certain civil and religious facilities were also bestowed on Brahmins because they belonged to that caste. For example, in Peshwa regime, the Brahmin clerks obtained the privilege of their goods being exempted from certain duties and their imported corn being carried to them without any ferry charges. The Brahmins were also exempted from capital punishment, and when confined were more -

liberally treated than other classes. In religious matters also a Brahmin was considered as very high.<sup>6</sup> Brahmins alone had the right of priesthood. In - religious texts their position was almost non-challengeable. But it appears that because of their secure place in hierarchy the Brahmins neglected their original quest of knowledge, expected of them and many vices crept in them which gave rise to new thought currents in Marathi speaking society at large; after the advent of the English people in India.<sup>7</sup>

The Brahmins were the most privileged of the castes enjoying privilege in all walks of life. The two dominant groups of Brahmins in Maharashtra of Peshwa period were the Konkanasthas or Chitpavans and the Deshasthas.<sup>8</sup> They studied the Shastras, acted as temple-worshippers, and preached the traditional religion to the masses by reading puranas and holding religious discourses, popularly known as Kirtans and Bhajans. These Kirtans expounded the philosophy of Hinduism and of Varnashrame Dharma.<sup>9</sup> Brahmins were experts specially in clerical branch, because of the illiteracy of the general masses. Important administrative posts at all level viz. village accountants and district accountants

and also ministerial posts were in the hands of Brahmins. And all these posts were hereditary.<sup>10</sup>

The Brahmins were thus an important factor in the society who no doubt, tried to maintain their monopoly of the sacred word and their aloofness from other castes as a sort of spiritual aristocracy.<sup>11</sup>

THE CONDITION OF UNTOUCHABLES :

The caste system of the Hindus is unique in having a section of them as untouchables or unapproachables. The lowest stratum of the Hindu society was composed of these people. The origin of untouchability is an enigma to modern history. But it is generally held that it is a perverted outcome of the caste system. The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called outcastes, untouchables, pariahs, panchamas, Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyajas and Namashudras. Their social disabilities were specific and serve and numerous. Their touch, shadow and even voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, the touch of a member of any caste lower than one's own defiles a person of the higher caste but in actual practice this rule was not strictly observed,<sup>13</sup>

but in case of the untouchables this rule was most zealously observed. Thus, in Maharashtra the shadow of an untouchable was sufficient, if it fall on a member of higher caste, to pollute him.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the untouchable castes were supported to stay on the outskirts of a village. Engaged mostly in menial duties, the lower castes had to live almost a sub-human life. This institutionally degraded position of the untouchables was believed to be due to divine sanction.

These untouchable Hindus were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to school attended by the caste Hindu children. Though they worshipped the gods of Hindus, observed the same festival, the Hindu temples were closed to them. Barbers and washerman refused to render them service. The last in the social scale was the member of the Mahar caste. Mangs, Dhors and Chambhars also occupy lowest position with Mahars as untouchables.<sup>15</sup> The Hindu society in Maharashtra was divided into four castes. Any social contact with member outside the caste was prohibited.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, writes<sup>17</sup> as follows :-

" The Indian village is not a single social unit. It consists of castes. But for our purposes, it is enough to say -

I) The population in the village is divided into two sections :-

- i) Touchables, and
- ii) Untouchables.

II) The Touchables form the major community and the Untouchables a minor community.

III) The Touchables live inside the village and the Untouchables live outside the village in separate - quarters.

IV) Economically, the Touchables form a strong and powerful community, while the Untouchables are a poor and a dependent community.

V) Socially, the Touchables occupy the position of a ruling race, while the Untouchables occupy the position of a subject race of hereditary bondsmen.

What are the terms of associated life on which the Touchables and Untouchables live in an Indian - village ?

In every village the Touchables have a code which the Untouchables are required to follow. This code lays down the acts of omissions and commissions which the Touchables treat as offences. The following is the list of such offences.

1. The Untouchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the Untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation.

2. The quarters of the Untouchables must be located towards the South, since the South is the most inauspicious of the four directions.

A breach of this rule shall be deemed to be an offence.

3. The untouchables must observe the rule of distance pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be. It is an offence to break the rule.

4. It is an offence for a members of the untouchable community to acquire wealth, such as land or cattle.

5. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to build a house with tiled roof.

6. It is an offence for a member of an untouchable community to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments.

7. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to give high sounding names to their children. Their names be such as to indicate contempt.

8. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu.

9. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village.

10. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to take a procession of untouchables through the village.

11. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community not to salute a Hindu.

12. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to speak a cultured language.

13. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community, if he happens to come into the village on a sacred day which the Hindus treat as they day of fast and

at or about the time of the breaking of fast, to go about speaking, on the ground that their breath is held to foul the air and the food of the Hindus.

14. It is an offence for an untouchable to wear the outward marks of a Touchable and pass himself as a Touchable.

15. An Untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as -

- a) having a contemptible name.
- b) not wearing clean clothes.
- c) not having tiled roof.
- d) notwearing silver and gold ornaments.

A contravention of any of these rules is an offence. Next come the duties which the code requires members of the Untouchable community to perform for the Touchables. Under this head the following may be mentioned.

1. A member of an untouchable community must carry a message of any event in the house of a Hindu such as death or marriage to his relatives living in other village no matter how distant these villages may be.

2. An untouchable must work at the house of a Hindu when a marriage is taking place, such as breaking fuel, and going on errands.

3. An untouchable must accompany a Hindu girl when she is going from her parents' house to her husband's village no matter how distant it is.

4. When the whole village community is engaged in celebrating a general festivity such as Holi or a Dasara, the untouchables must perform all menial acts which are preliminary to the main observance.

5. On certain festivities, the untouchables must submit their women to members of the village community to be made the subject of indecent fun.

These duties have to be performed without remuneration.

Thus the social position of untouchables was very deplorable and miserable. The untouchables had no rights against the Touchables. For them there was no equal right, no justice. The Untouchables must not insist on rights. They should pray for mercy and favour and rest content with what was offered.

This established order was a hereditary order both in status as well as in function. Once a Touchable, always a Touchable. Once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable.

In short, they were born in debt and perished in debt. They were born Untouchables, they lived as Untouchables and they died as Untouchables.

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