

CHAPTER - IV

SAVARNA - ASAVARNA CONFLICT - A BRIEF REPORT

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## CHAPTER - IV

### SAVARNA - ASAVARNA CONFLICT - A BRIEF REPORT

Inter-caste relations in a small village community can be studied in different ways. Our attempt here is to understand the causes, nature and consequences of social tensions and conflict among the two easily distinguishable sections in the community viz. the 'Savarna' and 'Asavarna'. It must be pointed out at the outset that these groups are not cohesive or homogeneous groups. For example the so-called Asavarna or scheduled castes have their own hierarchical arrangement, and the same is the case with the 'Savarna' or 'Upper' castes. - Generally the main problem area in the village at present is the somewhat antagonistic relations between the 'Savarna' and 'Asavarna'. But in case Malikwad, as we shall see, the main divisions are those of Mahars on the one hand and all other people in the village on the other.

#### 1. BACKGROUND:

In the present chapter we shall briefly narrate the incidents directly responsible for the conflict referred to above. Water is traditionally regarded as a naturally pollutable factor and hence the upper caste people have

always prohibited the lower castes to fetch water from the sources belonging to the farmer. Scarcity of water has, thus, remained a perennial problem for the lower caste. In recent years this problem is being solved in either of the two ways- 1) Providing a separate well, or asking the lower castes to fetch water at a lower course of the water stream; 2) Educating villagers about the human equality and bring all the villagers together to use the water of a common source. Dr. Baba Adhav, in recent years, is attempting to bring about this type of awareness. (Dr. Adhav has described his experiences in his famous book." एक गाव : एक पाणवठा " .

Taking into consideration the need of drinking water of the 'Asavarna' people in the village 'Malikwad' about 25 years ago, a lingayat farmer named Shri. Narasinga Khot gave a half acre piece of land for the purpose of digging a well. The Mahars worked there and dug a well for their community in 1963 and thus their problem appeared to be solved. However in 1972 due to famine like situation water became a scarcity. The Mahars, then requested the village panchayat office to make arrangement of water for them. Their expectation was that the 'Savarna' people would not take any objection and allow them to draw water from the public well in the village. But it was not to happen, on the other hand, it became difficult for them to draw water even from the well in the plot given by Shri. Khot. After the death of Narasinga Khot, his son Chandrakant Khot,

who became the legitimate heir to the later's property, did not regard the piece of land and the well therein as belonging to the Mahar community as such. He presumed that it was his right to use the land as per his will. He thus started falling down some of the trees on the land. Some of the 'Mahar' youths also cut down a few trees. This action enraged Chandrakant who planned to retaliate and to teach permanent lesson to the Mahars.

Chandrakant was serving in the Indian army and as such was supposed to be the protector of the Nation. However he turned to be an enemy of the helpless people. On one day in April, 1976 Chandrakant stealthily poured some poisonous liquid in the well which the Mahars were using. A Mahar youth overheard Chandrakant speaking under the influence of alcohol that he would kill all Mahar people by poisoning the water of the well. Early in the morning on the next day the same youth went to the well and saw a thick layer of oily substance on the surface of the water. He took the sample of the water which had an unusual smell. Later on it was found out that the water was poisoned. Thus the alertness of that youth saved the lives of all Mahar people.

The news spread in the village. There was a demand of 'panchanama' of the sample of the water from the well. The Police party arrived from 'Sadalaga' Police Station and arrested Chandrakant. But in the evening Chandrakant got

himself freed on bail and began to move about in the village. The Mahars were not only ~~only~~ disappointed but were afraid of further consequences. They urged upon the police authorities to make arrangements for the supply of water and also for the protection of their lives. The Police Sub-Inspector of Sadalaga accordingly gave necessary instructions to the sarpanch to protect the interest of the downtrodden people. He held a meeting in 'Maharwada' at night and communicated the decisions of the Police Sub-Inspector. He informed them the P.S.I. would personally come tomorrow and would arrange for the supply of water to Mahars. He also passingly warned them about the consequences if they themselves draw water from the well. The older people were actually suggesting some compromise by accepting their inferior position. But the younger people, oriented towards new values and determined to seek equality of status, did not yield to the pressure of the elders.

## 2. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SERIES OF INCIDENTS:

It was but natural that the conflict between the Savarna and Asavarna, mentioned above created long lasting tensions in the village. On Wednesday 13th July, 1977 the Mahars openly fetched water from the public well in the village in the presence of the police authorities and the village 'Sarpanch'. This was not tolerable to the savarna people. But they could not prevent the Maharas in using the public well. The course which they followed in this

situation led to further tensions. The Savarnas decided to socially boycott the Mahars. The 'Sarpanch' tried to bring peace by suggesting the Mahars to use the well which they were using earlier. But Mahars wanted to establish equality of status with the help of governmental agencies.

As if to threaten the Asvarna people, some of the Savarna leaders started moving about in the village, with sticks, axes and even with rifle in the hands of a Lingayat Youth. This patrolling was said to be for protecting the Savarnas. On the first night itself ( 13/7/1977 ). The patrolling party was seen moving in the vicinity of the hut of a Mahar family. The purpose was not disclosed even after enquiry on the next day.

On the next day i.e. 14/7/1977 the son a maratha youth saw that a sheep of a Mahar widow was grazing on the road, the youth, with enough hatred imbibed in mind, got hold of the children of the widow, slapped them and brought the animal to the a Lingayat landlord. The police intervened and the animal was set free.

The Savarna leaders were strongly against the common use of the public well by the two groups. Hence they dug another common well for their exclusive use. To celebrate this occasion they arranged a procession on 14th August, 1977. The procession deliberately - halted for some time

near 'Maharwada'. The leader of the procession definitely abused the Mahars and challenged them to come forward if they could dare to face him. The participants were also shouting . Slogans invoking to burn the cottages of the Mahars and to kill them ("Maharana Petwoon Kadha, Thar Mara"). There were lethal weapons in the hand of the people in the procession. These things happened inspite of the presence of the police. The atmosphere was tense the presence of the police, however avoided the further mishaps.

On the every next day i.e. 15th August,1977 a Mahar was performing the wedding ceremony of his son. The practice of untouchability including the restrictions of inter dining prevented the upper caste to participate in the ceremonies of the lower castes. Hence there was a practice to present food-grains with some uncooked eatable like fruits (together called 'shidha') to the heads in the village and take their blessings. As per this tradition the Mahars went to the police Patil and sarpanch with 'Shidha'. But it was not accepted.

On the contrary the hatred increased and the savarna people collectively took an 'oath' that, they would set fire to the 'Maharwada'.

On 28th August,1977, an agricultural labour working on daily wages was on work in the land of (Thalu Sanadi) a **Mahar** leader. This was seen by the Savarnas who threatened the

worker of dire consequences. Consequently the worker left the job and went back to his village. Such incidents widened the rift. The poor Mahar families did not get any work in the farms of the savarnas and the problem of their bread became severe.

On 10th September, 1977 Shri. P.P. Hegare the then M.L.A. visited the village and requested the savarna people to give jobs to the Mahars. But the savarnas did not comply with this request. On Saturday, the 17th September, 1977 a savarna youth was seen to approach the Maharwada. He entered the cottage of a Mahar and dropped the kindled match-stick. He was caught red-handed and a complaint was lodged by the Mahars with the police. He was then arrested by the Police.

A delegation consisting of leading persons including Shri. Ram Apate, the President of the Belgaum District Janata Party D.B. Chougule, S.S. Ghatti and Shri. Kulkarni (all advocates) visited the village on 9th October, 1977 and tried to bring about a compromise. The Mahars were not ready to give any written statement and hence this attempt was unsuccessful.

The peculiar situation in this conflict was that only Mahars were united against the savarnas. All other - Asavarnas including 'Mangs' did not join hands with 'Mahars'. 'Mangs' had the feeling that they are superior to Mahars



there was an exception however one - Mr. Ghate ( a Mang ) was however supporting the Mahars. The Savarnas lodged a complaint of theft against him and thus was harrassed for being sided with the Mahars. His fellow castemen did not come to his help because of the caste rivalry between the Mangs and Mahars the former regarding themselves as superior to the latter.

On Wednesday the 3rd May,1978. Some Asavarna boys were taking bath in the river. A few savarna youth appeared on the scene and started beating the Asavarna boys. This was also reported to the police station and the action was taken. The Asavarna locality was provided with armed policemen for its protection.

A seperate Borewell was sanctioned by the Taluka Development Board for the benefit of Maharwada and the work started on Saturday the 16th September,1978. Fortunately Water was struck. Traditional religious rites were being performed to celebrate the happy occassion. But when some Asavarna youths went to draw the water of the borewell, the savarna people objected them threw away their pitchers and beat them. They abused the Asavarnas by using devogatory words mentioning their caste. Again a complaint was lodged with the police station by Mahars. All the concerned were arrested and presented before the magistrate who released them on bail.

Thus the series of incidents helped in increasing the rivalry. There was no possibility of bringing the two sections together. Only thing of consolation was that the direct clashes were averted because of the timely intervention of the police.

### 3. NEW AWARENESS AMONG THE MAHARS IN THE VILLAGE:

Eventhough the immediate cause of the conflict between Mahars on one hand and almost all the other sections in the village on the other was the acute scarcity of water, we can see this struggle as a result of the gradual awareness of equality of status among the Mahars. The leading role was played by the younger generation in the community. The Mahar youths had already formed an organization to carry out certain socio-cultural activities such as celebrating the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar at such functions social workers from the near by towns of Nipani and Chikodi used to address the gathering and to try imbibe the new value of social equality. The importance of education, the fundamental rights given by the constitution to every citizen of India and the special facility available to the backward sections in the society to improve their socio-economic status were some of the important themes explained in such addresses. Because of the spread of education and constant communication with Urban progressive and reformist organizations, the Mahars in general and the younger sections in particular became aware of the changing atmosphere in the nation.



In the Balutedari system Mahars were expected to do certain jobs which actually degraded their status. We do not enter into the controversy whether the very low status of the Mahars and their residential area on, the outskirts of the village were the causes or the result of their specific duties. But it is the true that they had to carryout such works as sweeping the roads, carrying out the dead animals digging the earth for the burials of the dead bodies of the upper castes people and the others. In return of such works they use to get some food grains which were not enough for their livelihood hence they had also to work on the lands of the landlords. Thus the Economic dependency persisted side by side with the socially degraded position.

Newly created opportunities for earning livelihood was the only wayout from the Economic dependence of the backward classes in villages like 'Malikwad'. But these opportunities must be made known to the backward classes and urge for self development must be created among them. This was done by the formal education and the outside agencies like "Nipani bhagyuvak Sanghatana". This awareness enabled the Mahar youths to bring all the sections in their community together and to give a united fight against the traditional social dominance and oppression of the upper caste people. This is revealed by the fact that the struggle continued for as long as nine years, but the community remained united. This is especially noteworthy in the circumstance of direct or indirect

opposition of all the other backward communities.

#### 4. INTER-CASTE RIVALRIES AMONG THE BACKWARD CASTES:

We have seen in chapter three that there are three castes in the village which are regarded as untouchables. They are 1) Mahar, 2) Mang, 3) Chambhar. The numerical strength of the Mahars is much larger than the two others. There are 57 families of Mahar, while the number of families of Mangs and Chambhars is 12 and 8 respectively. In the traditional caste hierarchy Mahars, come at the lowest stratum. Mangs - considered themselves superior to the Mahars - and do not take cooked food in the house of a Mahar. Chambhars have still higher position and do not interdine with both the Mahars and Mangs. All of these are however untouchables to the remaining castes. But in the conflict narrated above, both Mangs and Chambhars have sided, not with the Mahars but, with the upper caste majority. The Mangs and Chambhars are not prepared to accept the equal status of the Mahars. They accept the superior position of the other castes and atleast at present accept their own inferior status and the traditional duties towards the upper castes. This particular situation makes the problem of the savarna Asavarna conflict much more complex. At present the struggle appears to be between Mahars and all the other castes. Thus the single handed struggle of the Mahars to improve their status is really not worthy.

##### 5. THE IMMEDIATE RESULTS OF THE CONFLICTS:

As the struggle initiated by the problem of scarcity of water resulted into almost a struggle between two sections in the village, the problem of daily bread became serious for the Mahars. They had almost negligible land of their own. They were not prepared to surrender to, and work in the lands of the landlords. It was not possible to go out of the village and seek the jobs elsewhere. As they had income in the form of 'Baluta' - was stopped. In this situation the youth organizations in Nipani and Chikodi and the M.L.A. from that constituency came to their help. Of course the initiative was taken and the matter was persuaded by the Mahar leaders like Shri. Sanadi and others of the village itself with the persistent effort of all concerned, the Government of Karnataka took a decision to give agricultural land to all the Mahar families in the village. The necessary formalities were completed - within a short period of two years. It was decided by the government that the Mahars in the village be given outright ownership of 104 acres of land.

6th May, 1979, happened to be the birth anniversary day of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Mahars in the village were jubilant because of the governmental decision. It was decided to celebrate the anniversary day on a large scale. A big procession of the Mahars with the portrait of

Dr. Ambedkar in the forefront took place. A public meeting was arranged. The event was so significant that social workers like Baba Adhav and office bearers like the president of T.D.B, Tahasildar, B.D.O., and others took interest and attended the meeting. Youth leaders from Nipani and Chikodi addressed the gathering. The Assistant Commissioner himself distributed the papers granting ownership rights of the land to the Mahar families. Thus the Mahars could get possession of means of livelihood. This was the symbolic event severing the traditional bonds of Balutedari and making them economically independent. This does not mean that any fundamental change in the economic structure of the village as a whole took place. But at least the traditional hierarchical relations and dependency got a blow upon them.

#### 6. PROBLEM OF SECURITY:

Malikwad is a small village having no police station or even an outpost. We have seen above that whenever clashes take place between two sections or whenever the situation becomes tense the police Patil has to rush from the nearly small town of Sadalaga. Even though the incidents of direct clashes have ceased to occur since 1979 minor incidents to take place from time to time. Whenever the Mahars, who are in minority, suspect of any untoward incident, they approach the police authorities in Sadalaga who take the necessary

precautionary measures. But at the overall atmosphere has remained to be tense, and as the Mahars have almost cut off the contacts with remaining people in the village, we cannot say that direct clashes will not take place in future. The unity of the village has already become a historical past. It is not possible to bring back the earlier type of Unity. But the present situation of unrest is also not conducive to healthy social relations. It is true that conflict brings about change. We can not predict the future course of change but we can analyse the changes which have taken place.