

Untouchability and Reforms in Jammu and Kashmir State (till 1947)

Mrs. Deepika Sharma

Ph.D Scholar, Department of History, University of Jammu, Jammu, India

Abstract: Untouchability was considered as an offshoot of the distorted form of caste system in India. It had little of religious sanction behind it and the conservatism of the Hindus was believed to have kept it alive. The untouchables were condemned to permanent social degradation, denied elementary civic rights and excluded all public places. It was, however, in the sub-montane districts of the Jammu province where the Hindu elements preponderated that the distinction between the higher and the lower caste was acute and the idea of pollution by touch was prominent. Moreover, the caste rigidity and social exclusiveness regarding inter-dinning and inter-marriage had the forces of religious law here, and therefore, the untouchables were regarded as a distinct community of inferior status, debarred from free intercourse with the superior Hindu castes on term of equality.

Keywords: Arya Samaj Movement, Education, Harijans, Reforms, Scholarships, Untouchability Act.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Hindu society had been divided into the caste and subcastes based on type of work and birth. The fourth caste, Shudras, began to be maltreated by the interested people to dominate them for their selfish interests. This treatment of superiority created the 'inferior class' who adopted the menial professions to serve their feudalist masters. Afterwards they began to be called and treated as "untouchables". The untouchables were condemned to permanent social degeneration, denied elementary civic rights and excluded from all public places. The castes which were treated as untouchables in the State of Jammu and Kashmir included Megh, Doom, Chamiar, Chura, Watal, Batwal, Ratal, Saryara, Jolaha, Koli, Barwala, Basith, Mussali, Halalkor, Dhyar, Gardi, Nochi, Bawaria, Bazigar and Ghrit. None of the Untouchables was allowed to enter the courtyard of a Hindu temple and they lived outside the city or village. Moreover, they had to give warning of their approach to or keep out of the way of the high class Hindus. They could not sit on the charpai before high caste people and could not burn their dead bodies in the cremation ground of high caste Hindus. The extent of this discriminatory attitude could be found in the educational institutions where a Rajput or Brahman boy objected to sitting beside a Chamiar or Megh student. Thus there was one separate school for the education of depressed classes in Jammu. Only 1.5 percent of the population of this community was literate in the whole state as late as in 1941.

II. BODY OF THE ARTICLE

In comparison to the Jammu Province no lower classes existed in Kashmir. Among the Buddhists of Ladakh, no distinction of this kind was recognised. Not only did they inter-marry and eat freely with all the classes among themselves, but they did so with the musalmans also. However, in the northern provinces of Ladakh, numerous clans called Boni, which included all the dancing women, and their attendant musicians, all smiths, carpenters and in fact handicraftsmen of every kind were regarded as low.¹

During the period of the rule of Maharaja Gulab Singh, the low caste Meghs, Dums, Dhyars etc. were not recognised as Hindus at all, and were kept to do all the filthy jobs like the sweeping and work of a similar kind. Some of them earned a scanty living by such employment as brick making and charcoal burning. Besides, they were liable to be called upon at any time by the authorities for work that no others would do. As a result of this, they were rendered utterly unclean and anything they touched was considered to be polluted.

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As already said, in Jammu province where the Hindu element predominated, the social system had perfected the dominated, the social system had perfected the domination of the Rajputs and the priestly class. Here the depressed classes were subjected to humiliating treatment by the high caste Hindus in almost every field.² There were a number of wells in the Jammu city, but the untouchables were not permitted to draw water from the wells or tanks. They had their own wells and tanks to take water from. Having been debarred from free social intercourse and denied the basic civic human rights, the depressed classes were forced to live a poor precarious and isolated existence. Attempts had been made in the past by social and religious reformers like Buddha, Guru Nanak, Kabir and others to annihilate all such distinctions between man and man by admitting freely into their fold, member of all communities. But, the myopia of the higher castes did not yield to this treatment in the past, and it was in the later half of the 20th century, politicians and the social reformers laboured hard to bring about changes in the status of untouchability in India.

So far as the State of Jammu and Kashmir was concerned, Maharaja Gulab Singh did tried to improve the position of lower castes by engaging some hundred of them as sepoy for the work of sapping and mining. This step, says Frederic Drew, acquired some consideration. In turn, these people behaved bravely in time of war so as to gain respect and to show that in courage they were equal with the higher castes, and in endurance they could surpass them. Nothing more substantial was, however, done by the government to provide these classes with those basic social rights which were due to all human beings. In fact, no significant step was taken by Gulab Singh to raise these depressed classes from their fallen conditions.

The question of untouchability first attracted the attention of Maharaja Ranbir Singh. He called upon the Pandits of Kashi to examine the shastras and pronounce upon it. His sympathies were partially with those who advocated the re-admission of those who had left Hinduism or had been turned out of it for one reason or the other.³ As the result of the researches made under the orders of the Maharaja, a book called Ranbir Prakash was published, which collected all the authorities in support of the re-admission of the outcastes to Hinduism. But the Arya Samajists associated with the cause of the removal of untouchability argued that it was a corollary of the position conceded by the Pandits of Kashi at the instance of Maharaja Ranbir Singh that the outcastes and others similarly situated depressed classes should have chances of bettering their position and rising in the social scale.

In spite of the pronouncement made by the Pandits of Kashi, no follow up action was taken by the government to give practical shape to the purposed reform. However, Maharaja Ranbir Singh admitted the students of the fourth caste-the Shudras, in his Pathshala system to study scriptures and other knowledge, including that of science, in the company of other students. This measure should not be taken as the admittance of all depressed classes to the state schools. The Dogra Saddar committee urged Pratap Singh on behalf of depressed classes, particularly, the Meghs, to provide education chiefly of industrial nature. Such measure, the committee added, would bring laurels for the Maharaja's government. The committee in fact asked the Maharaja to establish a primary school for them for teaching of 3 R's with arrangement for training in some industrial work. Pratap Singh expressed his approval of starting such a school for the Meghs. He issued formal orders for the opening of the school as demanded by the Dogra Saddar Committee only after he obtained from the Education Minister, Dr. A. Mitra, a definite commitment that "a little education of the elementary kind given to such depressed classes will certainly not entitle them to be freed from such social ostracism by which they are debarred from privileges of higher classes. They can, therefore, never hope of being employed as clerks or munshis". He also told the Maharaja that the education that would be given to them would be of primary nature which would enable them to carry on their avocation of life in an intelligent manner. After much hesitation Pratap Singh ordered setting up of an industrial school for Meghs in Jammu.

From nineteenth century onwards, movement for the elevation of depressed classes was gaining strength in British India. The Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj had adopted the amelioration of the lot of depressed classes as one of their most important planks. Both these organisations had advocated reforms of most revolutionary character in social field. They denounced child marriage, encourage widow re-marriage etc. Both regarded untouchability as double ill of our society as it created inequality and divided people. In order to fight the evil of untouchability, the Arya Samajists made vigorous efforts to reclaim the converts back into Hinduism and enlist untouchables as Higher caste Hindus thereby trying to restore equilibrium in the Hindu society.⁴

Such an attempt was made by the Arya Samajists of Punjab. Profoundly influenced by the reclamation centres of the Punjab (Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Hari Sewak Sangh of Punjab and All India Shuddhi Sabha) a Section of the people established a branch of Arya Samaj in Jammu in 1902. Moreover, a large number of depressed classes like Meghs,

Dooms, Chamias were deeply moved by the ideologies of the Samaj. The other two organisations which were active in Jammu city in this regard and gained much success were the Arya Samaj of Purani Mandi and the Arya Samaj, Dayanand Marg. During 1911-1921, these organisations were working actively in the Jammu District, especially in its tehsil of Ranbirsinghpura, in proselytizing low castes.⁵

The Arya Samajists were also engaged in imparting education to the pupils of the depressed classes. It started primary schools for boys and girls of depressed class at Jammu, Akhnoor and Chhamb. In these school, student belonging to all castes were admitted. Outside the Arya Samaj, nothing much was done for their cause, except a few newspapers, including 'The Ranbir', voiced the concern of the depressed classes and advocated the abolition of untouchability. Nevertheless, these oppressed classes were still denied the basic civil amenities and other rights till as late as 1930.

Having been debarred from free social intercourse and denied the basic civic human rights, the depressed classes were forced to live a poor precarious and isolated existence. Attempts had been made in the past by social and religious reformers in India but the high caste Hindus were there to oppose all such reforms that sought to break the wall between the caste Hindus and the downtrodden.⁶ It was no wonder then that the task of removing untouchability from the society had to be taken up in the right earnest by persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Viveka Nanda, Mahatma Phuley, B.R.Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. There was a strong movement for the abolition of untouchability in the Jammu region and the most significant bodies were the Arya Samaj and the Christian Missionaries. The greatest stimulus to the movement had emanated from Mahatma Gandhi, who projected this social evil as a blot on our face and aroused the public opinion against it to such extent that the cause of reforms had gained in months what perhaps it might have taken years to accomplish. Gandhi called untouchables the 'Harijans' or the children of God.

Under the influence of Arya Samaj movement, however, the condition of depressed classes improved to a considerable extent. Apart from the efforts of the reform bodies in uplifting their fallen brethren, the depressed classes themselves also realized their fallen condition and demanded the basic human rights from the government. They submitted for the first time a representation to Maharaja Hari Singh in 1932 in which they requested him that a law should be enacted to remove the curse of untouchability, social inequalities and religious disabilities and demanded equal status and opportunities in all departments and professions. Besides this, they demanded share in Government services, liberal scholarships to students of depressed classes and permission to use wells and tanks and enter temples.

Hari Singh himself was against all kinds of disabilities. He was one of the very few Indian rulers who took steps for the amelioration of the lot of the depressed classes.⁷ He was in full accord with the demands put forth by the memorialists. He issued orders declaring that, 'every community should have a fair representation in Government services.' Accordingly instructions were issued to all the ministers and the civil services recruitment board that no discrimination should be made between man and man on the ground of caste or creed. The first major step that he took in this regard was in 1931 when orders were passed for throwing open all public educational institutions and well to the untouchables. An announcement was made to the effect that the ban on the entry of the depressed classes into public services and places be removed. Teachers in government schools were ordered not to raise any objection to teach children of the depressed classes along with the boys of the other castes and to extend them equal teaching facilities, including those of board and lodging. Special scholarships were sanctioned for the student of these communities. The amount provided for the special scholarship in the budget per annum from 1932 to 1938 was Rs.6,400 in addition to Rs 960 allotted by the Dharmarth Department. In spite of the best efforts on the part of Government, this community remained illiterate. This fact becomes amply clear when we find that there were only 3 and 2 Harijan students in the Prince of Wales College during 1936-37 and 1938-39 respectively.⁸

However, it cannot be denied that the measures that were being contemplated in British India for the amelioration of the lot of the depressed classes were also contemplated in the State to achieve the same objective. But the most difficult problem the Maharaja had to face was with regard to temple entry for the untouchables as he apprehended bitter opposition of orthodox priesthood to a decision to this effect. Thus, the Maharaja, in October 31, 1932, issued a proclamation "throwing open all the State temples to the depressed classes for Darshan and prayers".⁹ However, this proclamation was openly opposed by a section of priestly class and the Head Pujari of Shri Raghunath temple in Jammu. In fact, in protest, the head pujari resigned from his office. Maharaja, who had a special regard for him as he was his family priest, tried to dissuade him from resigning but the Head Pujari persisted in his refusal. Ultimately, Hari Singh determined as he was to remove this particular inequality accepted his resignation. This decision of Hari Singh earned for him the unprecedented credit of being the first ruler in India to take such a bold step for the emancipation of the depressed

classes, even before Mahatma Gandhi had launched his Harijan movement in British India. Though not satisfied with the mere removal of social handicaps from which the untouchables suffered, material support in the form of scholarship were granted to Harijan students which increased in 1944 from Rs 6000 to 10,000 per year. Besides, the Government issued orders for giving preferential treatment to the children of the depressed classes for recruitment to various state services. Seats were also reserved for their representatives in the local bodies as well as in the State legislature, called Praja Sabha. These orders were given effect to when a Megh named Ram Rakha Mal, was nominated to the Praja Sabha.¹⁰ Thus we find that the common disabilities from which this community had been suffering since time immemorial were abolished legally, and, henceforth, schools, temples, wells, were thrown open to them. In practice, it was believed that some of the disabilities still persisted though in a much less prominent form. With a view to removing such disabilities, Hari Singh proclaimed untouchability to be an offence in 1940. As untouchability was retarding the progress and welfare of the Harijan community, a regulation, called the Removal of Untouchability of Harijan Act of 1940, was passed by the State Government. The act provided that "any person who avoids physical contact with Harijans or shows hate and contempt to him or regards him a low breed, talks contemptuously of him thereby causing him injury shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to one hundred rupees or with both". The offence under this act was non-cognizable, bailable with the permission of the court and compoundable and triable by any magistrate.¹¹ It is thus clear that during the decade 1930-40, the lot of untouchables improved partly by the activities of various socio-religious reform societies and partly by Government's endeavours which brought forth various legislations to abolish the stigma of untouchability from our society. Thus, as in case of other social evils, this evil also gradually lessened with the advancement of modern times and enlightenment of masses.

III. CONCLUSION

Untouchables were considered the fourth caste of the Hindu society. They were denied elementary civic rights, condemned to permanent social degradation and excluded from all public places. In the State of Jammu and Kashmir, where in Jammu province untouchability existed at its peak, on the other hand, in Kashmir, no such caste distinction existed. Similarly, it was less prevalent among the Buddhists of Ladakh, except in their northern provinces. The State was ruled by the Maharajas till 1947. Every Maharaja tried its best to improve the condition of the depressed in one way or the other, but could not eradicate the evil completely from the State. It was only Maharaja Hari Singh, the last ruler of the State, with whose efforts this evil came under control to a large extent. Similarly, the Arya Samaj Movement had its great impact in improving the conditions of these lower caste people. Like the rest of India, the movement to clean the polluted mind of man gained momentum in Jammu and Kashmir State too. Maharaja Hari Singh's government tried to ameliorate the filthy condition of the depressed by providing scholarships and government services to their students and people respectively. Maharaja proclaimed untouchability an offence by passing a regulation called the Removal of Untouchability of Harijan Act of 1940. With this act the condition of the people improved and the impact of this evil lessened with time and enlightenment of common masses.

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