

Dalit Assertion in Punjab- AD-Dharm and Ravi Dasis Movement

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Dalits are the most deprived and poorest sections not only in Punjab but also in various other states of India. They constitute about 29% of the total population of the state of Punjab and it has been observed that this proportion is highest in India among the states. Further, it is to be mentioned categorically that the Punjab dalits are distinct from the dalits of other states. They are easily visible in the socio-cultural life of Punjab. One can't understand the Punjabi society by ignoring them. Various socio-religious reform movements took up the cause of the dalits, to improve their socio-economic conditions, but it has been analyzed that these movements wanted to achieve their objectives without bringing any change in the basic structure of the caste system.

"The anxiety about numbers among the neo-religious elite of the Hindus and Sikhs also had important implications for the Punjabi dalits. Through the newly launched social reform movements, the Hindu and the Sikh leaders began to work with dalits. The Arya Samaj in Punjab started the shudhi movement wherein they encouraged the "untouchables" to "purify" themselves and become part of the mainstream Hinduism. It also encouraged dalits to send their children to schools being run by the Samaj. Similarly the Sikh reformers began to decry the caste publicly and it was mainly through a claim to castelessness that they argued for a distinctiveness of Sikhs from the Hindus." (1)

In the beginning of the 20th century, Punjab became a hub of active dalit politics. The British colonial rule came to Punjab in the mid- nineteenth century after its annexation by the British. For the growth of agriculture, they set up canal colonies and also develop urban centers. For meeting their requirement of army personnel, they established military cantonment in Jullundhar. The army recruitment provided

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chances of jobs to the children of Punjab farmers and also provided spaces for the social mobility of the Chamars of the area whose main profession was to work with the leather. The demand of the leather goods by the Cantonment resulted in the movement of the dalit Chamars to move out of their village. They not only settled themselves in other parts of the country but even went to United States, Canada and England. The newly acquired social and economic strength of this section of the dalits prepared the ground for their political mobilization in the area. British colonial government and the Indian National Congress were in the search of new political alliances particularly with the dalits and Scheduled castes.

“The early twentieth century was a time of change throughout India as the colonial government, defensive in the face of rising anti British sentiment, was now open to new alliances from below. At the same time the emerging Indian National Congress desperately needed lower caste support. Both groups vied with each other to provide incentives for the untouchables, and new Scheduled Caste movements emerged throughout India in response.” (2)

During the initial decades of the 20th century colonial India, the existing circumstances created such an atmosphere favorable for the growth of Ad-dharm movements in many parts of the country. The governing policies of the British in India after the First World War provided new opportunities to the dalits of Punjab. The purpose of the dalits in British India was to put pressure on the Congress to include the removal of untouchability in its resolutions which were to be passed in the session of the Calcutta Congress in 1917.

By the provisions of the Government of India Act 1919, communal representations were provided which further prepared the ground for the set up of political organizations of the dalits. During 1923, a rumor was actively spread among the dalits that around 60 million Indian dalits would be divided between Hindus and Muslim religious communities for the purposes of census. This rumor played a role in strengthening the political unity among the dalits. (3)

The Ghadar movement was initiated by the upper castes in a major way and the dalits were not confident to get anything substantial by supporting it whereas they seemed more interested in joining other nationalist movements. The British Indian Government did not favor the idea that the dalits participate in struggle for independence considering their great numbers. (4)

Under these circumstances, the Ad-dharm movement emerged in Punjab. Though the efforts to set up this organization had been started in the early part of 1920s, but

the process was made actively after the arrival of Mangoo Ram. He was the son of an enterprising Chamar of the village Mangowal of Hoshiarpur district of Doaba region of Punjab. Many dalit families of this region started migrating to the Western countries. Owing to the efforts of his father, Mangoo Ram reached California, USA around 1909 and came under the influence of left wing ideas of Ghadar Party. Consequently, on his return to India, he was already a changed person. He set up a school for the children of the dalits with the assistance of Arya Samaj. After a short time, he made distance from the Samaj and joined other active members the dalit community who were keenly interested to start an autonomous identity movement.

The movement had its first meeting on June 11-12, 1926 and Mangoo Ram was elected as the President. In fact, the movement reflected the values and aspirations of Mangoo Ram to a great extent. He alongwith the other leaders of the Ad-dharm had their first aim to create a new religion and to prepare a system of religious ideas and symbols. They wanted that the dalits should think of themselves as a community similar to other communities of India. They considered themselves as the original people of India. Further they were of the view that their community had existed from the time immemorial.

“We are the original people of this country and our religion is Ad-dharm..... When the original sound from the conch was sounded, all the brothers came together.....to make their problems known.....Brothers the time has come: wake up, the government is listening to our cries. Centuries have passed, but we are asleep brothers....There was a time when we ruled India, brothers, and the land used to be ours.....Send members to the councils and start the quam anew. Come together to form a better life.” (5)

Mangoo Ram stated that the dalits were having three powers- communal pride (quamiat), religion (mazhab) and organization (majlis). (6)

The leaders of the movement claimed the superiority of the dalits and appealed for the support of the British Indian government and demanded upliftment of their castes.

“Liberally seasoned with appeals for quam unity, government support, caste uplift....it professed not only the antiquity of Untouchable quam but also its superiority over the upper caste quams who had later come on the scene. The early leaders of the Ad-dharm envisioned a pre-historic paradise, a place somewhere in North India where the original inhabitants of the subcontinent dwelt in amicable equality.” (7)

The leaders of the movement glorified their past when their civilization was considered

at the top and even the other civilizations had a sense of respect for it.

“Peoples of the world considered our land as the crown of success and paid tribute to us and our achievements. They respected and bowed down to our kings.....during this time of our great achievement.” (8)

Thus, the leaders of the Ad-dharm movement provided its followers with a new vision, a new religion and the character of a separate community. They created a new hope for the dalits but one should not ignore the fact that under those existing circumstances it was a challenge.

“Through several means, the Ad-dharm presented to its followers a vision of a world which both confirmed and transformed the rude experiences of Untouchables.And in doing so it implied that a different sort of world was coming into being, for the separate identity so defined signaled hope for a society in which social groups carried no inherent mark of judgement and in which the benefits of progress could be shared by all. But the ideology of the Ad-dharm was only a vision; it remained the task of the Ad-dharm as an organization to present that vision as something real, to give it force and cogency.” (9)

Mango Ram and other leaders made efforts to bring other dalit communities within the cover of the movement. Though the local Hindu organizations were against the Ad-dharm movement and its ideology but the colonial Census of 1931 recorded the status of Ad-dharmis as a separate religious community. The movement considered it as a victory when the Ad-dharm was recognized as a quam like Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

“We are not Hindus. We strongly request the government not to list us as such in the census. Our faith is not Hindu, but Ad-dharm. We are not a part of Hinduism and Hindus are not a part of us.” (10)

It was categorically mentioned in the Census Report of 1931 that the Census authorities had taken the action on the representations submitted to it by the leaders of the Ad-dharm Mandal.

“The Punjab Ad-dharm Mandal had petitioned the Punjab Government before the census operations started in 1930, representing that the depressed classes should be permitted to return Ad-dharm as their religion at the time of the census as they were the aborigines of India.....a clause was being provided in the Census Code requiring that persons returning their religion as Ad-dharm would be recorded as such.” (11)

The leaders of the Ad-dharm movement made efforts to ensure that more and more

members of the dalit communities declared Ad-dharm as their religion in Punjab. This action was considered objectionable by the Akali Sikhs. These Akali Sikhs resorted to rapes of dalit women, plundering and looting of dalit houses and not making their wages regularly. The movement acted like a threat for the Sikhs than the caste Hindus in Punjab. This further emboldened the enthusiasm of the dalits to report themselves as the Ad-dharmis in the Census of 1931 in which nearly 4,18,789 were included as Ad-dharmis. (12)

Thus the Ad-dharm movement proved its success in the mobilization of the dalits in the Doaba region and infused in them a sense of confidence. The Census of 1931 proved significant for them. It brought into open the potentiality of the dalits for their mobility and organizing capacity.

“With the Census of 1931, the Ad-dharm had carved out a niche for itself. In the public world of Punjab ...the Ad-dharm had made its mark. It had established a fact which previously had been unproved: that the Untouchable castes were capable of mobilizing for their own benefits and of organizing in ways that permitted them to compete under the conditions that governed the socio-political arena at large.”(13)

Congress expressed its opposition to the Communal Award in 1932 by which the dalits were provided representations and Gandhi went on a fast unto death. In the Poona Pact signed with another leader of the dalits, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, seats were reserved for the dalits in place of separate electorates. Ad-dharmis never supported the Poona Pact and pressed for their demand for more seats for the dalits of Punjab.

“The Ad-dharmis perceived that the Scheduled castes had lost much than they had gained in the Poona Pact.....Mangoo Ram broke his fast only after the government made the declaration of eight seats for Punjab dalits.” (14)

It has been observed that Ad-dharm movement could not continue with success any longer. The leaders of the movement contested the elections held in 1937 and won the Jullundhar seat and made an alliance with the Unionist Party. (15)

In the elections for Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1945-46, Ad-dharmis could not perform well. Muslim League emerged as the largest party. Resultantly, Jullundhar office of the movement was closed and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was conveyed that the name of the Ad-dharm Mandal had been changed as Ravi Das Mandal. Meanwhile the Ad-dharmis shifted their focus to issues of social and religious nature. It was decided that in order to strengthen their position as a separate community, they required their own religious system. Hence Guru Ravi Das appeared to them to be an obvious choice as a religious symbol for their community. Guru Ravi Das expressed

his radical ideas. He had a vision of an alternative society.

“He was a protagonist of equality, oneness of God, human rights and brotherhood. He was a suave socio-religious reformer, a thinker, a theosophist.....and above all a towering spiritual figure. He was a pioneer of socialistic thought...” (16)

His ideas were different from that of Gandhi and laid emphasis on the set up of a class less society.

“.....was the first to formulate an Indian version of utopia in his song “Begumpura”. ...it is a classless, casteless society; a modern society, one without a mention of temples; an urban society as contrasted with Gandhi’s village utopia of Ramrajya.....(17)

Ravi Das Dera at Ballan, Jullundhar was set up by Sant Pipal Das and remained under Sant Sarwan Das till 1972. With his efforts, foundation stone of Ravi Das temple was laid on 16th June 1965 in Varanasi, U.P. with the help of the followers of Dera Ballan. Dera Ballan became a centre of dalit political activity in Punjab. Its leaders used to meet at Dera and discussed political and cultural challenges.

Due to globalization in 1990s, mostly the Untouchables of Doaba region were migrated to Western countries. They faced caste prejudices when they tried to be a part of the local Punjabi community in diaspora. They also felt bias in the gurdwaras under the control of the Jats and upper caste Sikhs. But due to their numbers and position, they started setting up their own independent associations such as one in Birmingham and the other in Wolverhampton. The increasing facility of internet etc. proved advantageous for them to maintain contacts with their community.

Resultantly, when they came back, they donated large sums for the deras and this new wealth and diasporic energy proved to be significant for the growth of the movement. During the recent years alongwith Dera Ballan, various deras and temples were set up and dedicated to Guru Ravi Das particularly in the area of Doaba.

The emergence of dalit assertion and its contestation is an interesting phenomenon. The middle class of dalits wants to be equal partners in the conduct of the affairs of village Talhan in Jullundhar district in the year 2003 whereas the Jats wanted to use the social boycott as a weapon against dalit assertion. The dalits of Talhan were not dependent on the Jat landowners because of their better economic conditions.....The discourse of the shared religious place changed into the contestation at different levels. Each caste community now tends to conduct its religious past. (18)

Another two cases of dalit assertion in Punjab which gave birth to conflict between

the Jats and dalits are Meham in Jullundhar (2003) and Dargah Shah Fateh Ali in Nurmahal (1994). It has been observed that in both the cases, dalits have been organizing themselves and have become conscious of their rights. (19)

It is to be noted specifically that the dalits of Punjab proved to be successful in changing their conditions through measures such as education, organization and means of social equality. Even the State has also played a role through its programmes.

“The change in the objective conditions of the dalits of Punjab has also transformed their subjective conditions.From the twin objectives of social equality and castelessness through education, organized efforts and agitation, the dalit movement has shifted to identity assertion and acquisition of formal power.” (20)

On May 24, 2009, local militant Sikhs killed two visiting religious leaders of Ravi Dasis in Vienna which ignited violence in a number of towns in Punjab. The followers of Guru Ravi Das in Punjab have established their identity as an independent caste community which is the result of vibrant dalit identity movements in Punjab. This community has evolved its own symbols and practices of worship. This fact distinguish these dalits from the Sikhs of Punjab.

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