

Emergence of Marathi Dalit Periodicals: A Brief Survey

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Abstract

In the pre-independence era, the transformation of Hindustan into Bharat had led to the revolution in society. The contribution of the periodicals in this revolutionary phase is noteworthy. Similarly, in Maharashtra, Dalit periodicals emerged to deal with the issues and challenges faced by the untouchables. This research paper aims to study the reasons behind the emergence of Dalit periodicals and also to examine the early phase of the Dalit periodicals. The paper also discusses the contribution made by various journalists to this movement. In order to systematize the study, the early phase of the Dalit periodicals is divided into two parts viz. 'Before 1920' and 'After 1920'. In the first part, journalists like Gopal Baba Walangkar, Shivram Janba Kamble and Kisan Fagu Bandsode are discussed. In the second part, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his journalism is discussed.

Keywords: Dalit, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Hindu, Marathi periodicals, untouchables

British rule and influence of Western culture gave rise to the process of transformation of Hindustan into Bharat, which ultimately led to revolution in society. The emergence of periodicals can be said to be a part of this process. Initially the main objective of the periodicals was to educate the common man. Similarly, in Maharashtra, Marathi periodicals were dedicated to the welfare of people. As Brahmins ran most of these periodicals, there was no scope for the discussion of the issues and challenges of people belonging to other castes. This led to the emergence of Dalit periodicals, where Dalits began speaking for themselves.

Before 1920

Gopal Baba Walangkar (1840-1900) is generally considered to be the pioneer of the movement of the emergence of Dalit periodicals. He was greatly influenced by Jyotirao Phule. The Aryan invasion theory, since discredited, was in vogue at that time. Walangkar extended Phule's version of this racial theory, that the untouchable people of India were the indigenous inhabitants and that the Brahmin people were descended from Aryans who had invaded the country.

Walangkar, an ex-army man, held not only that untouchables were the original inhabitants of India, but that high-caste people from the south were "Australian-Semitic non-Aryans" and African negroes, that Chitipavan Brahmans were "Barbary Jews", and that the high-caste Marathas' forebears were "Turks" (Zelliot, 2004, p. 43). In 1888, Walangkar began publishing a monthly journal titled *Vital-Vidhvansak* (Destroyer of Brahmanical or Ceremonial Pollution), which was the first to have the untouchables as its target audience. He also wrote articles for Marathi-language newspapers such as *Sudharak* and *Deenbandhu*, as well as composed couplets in Marathi that were intended to inspire the people.

Shivram Janba Kamble was another journalist who was dedicated to the betterment of his fellow untouchables. He was inspired by the writings of Mahatma Phule and Baba Padmanji. Shivram Janba Kamble based his views on the intellectual views of the populists that the Vedas are not created by God and the view by Gopal Baba Walangkar that untouchability has got no basis in Hinduism. During the years 1908-1910, he ran the periodical named *Somvanshiy Mitra* (The friend of the depressed classes). Along with this, he also wrote in contemporaneous reputed periodicals and helped in the growth of social awareness. He slammed the then educated graduates and the so-called thinkers and those who looked down on the untouchable liberation movement, saying that the nation should not be wounded by embracing old superstitions and norms. He also criticized the egoistic central attitude. He expressed the clear view that if Hindu society is to be rebuilt, the upper castes should take the initiative. Acquainting people with early history was one of the strategies used by Kamble. He tried to cultivate a new realization about the forefathers of untouchables and their achievements in the minds of the people. He believed that history gives man a power and also a hope to live life with dignity:

Vaidik kaal...hya kaalat, hya deshāt aamche poorvāj rajya karat hote...aata majhya warishtha bandhawanna ase sangavayache aāhe ki, tumcha-amcha ha ladhaa hazaro warshancha aāhe. Tumchya aani amchya poorvajanchya maramarya deshāsathi jhalya aāhet, aani hach sood ugavanyasathi tumhi aamchyāwar asprushyāta he bhayankar shastra ugaarale aāhe. Engrāji ek mhan āshi aāhe ki "kaal āni vėl kunāsathihi thāmbat nāhi". Hee mhan jar khari āsel tar aamhihi 'gulām' mhanun rāhu āse mālā wātāt nāhi. Aātā tumhi āni āmhi hātāt hāt ghālun rāshtrākāryā karūyā. Ase kele tar aamchya deshāchā bhāgyōday jāwāl ālā āse me sāmjen. (Pantawane, 1976, pp. 46-47).

In the above paragraph, Kamble intended to convey a message to the upper castes that the forefathers of the untouchables had ruled the upper castes in the Vedic times. So, the fight between them was present for thousands of years and that their forefathers fought for the province. To avenge that, the upper castes used this weapon called 'untouchability'. Kamble referred to the saying, 'Time and tide waits for none' and communicated that if the saying was true then the Dalits would not remain slaves forever. Kamble further suggested that both these groups should work together for the nation and if that happened then he would consider that the golden days of the country were not far away. This shows that Kamble was sure of the petition system in democracy.

Kisan Fagu Bandsode (1879–1946) was another leader of the Dalit movement in pre-independence India. He was aware of the key role of the press in raising awareness among the Dalit community. He started his own press in 1910 and published the journals *Nirashrit Hind Nagarik* (1910), *Vital Vidhwansak* (1913), *Majur Patrika* (1918) and *Chokhamela* (1931-1936). *Nirashrit Hind Nagarik* discussed social and religious questions. *Majur Patrika* was centred on the issues of labourers. Bandsode used to write not only in his own periodicals but also in the periodicals other than the Dalit ones, where he used to write about the Dalit issues, like *Kesari*, *Kaal*, *Dnyanprakash*, *Mumbai Vaibhav*, *Deshsevak*, *Deenbandhu*, *Subodhpatrika*, etc. He used to criticize the malpractices and superstitions prevalent in the Dalit community. According to Bandsode, if untouchables are being kept away from justice and human rights; then they must fight for the justice and equality as no power can be gained without struggle. He always tried to establish conversation among various castes and sub castes so that the threads of unity get stronger.

After 1920

A difference with respect to the quality can be seen in the periodicals published before and after 1920. This is because of the entry of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in the field of journalism. He started the periodical *Mooknayak*, which brought a new transformation in the area of Dalit periodicals. Dr. Ambedkar was highly educated and so he had a revolutionary vision of newspapers. He had realized the importance of a periodical that would be devoted to the issues and challenges of the untouchables and would lead them to the path of progress. This realization itself was the reason for the birth of *Mooknayak*.

The title 'Mooknayak' is very meaningful. It suggests a leader ('nayak') who would give voice to the voiceless ('mook'). On the cover page of *Mooknayak* on January 31, 1920, Dr. Ambedkar has quoted these lines from Sant Tukaram's Abhang:

*Kay karu aata dharunia bheed, Nishank he tond vaajvile
Nahe jagi koni mukiyancha jaan Sarthak laajun nahe hit*

(Ambedkar, 1990, p. 345).

(Why should I feel shy?
I have laid aside hesitation and opened my mouth.
Here, on earth, no notice is taken of a dumb creature,
No real good can be secured by over-modesty.)

These lines express the very soul of the voiceless society.

In the first issue, Dr. Ambedkar clarifies his role by saying how this platform is necessary in order to explore the ways for the betterment of the excluded society. He mentions other periodicals where the questions of the excluded are dealt with, but not with much focus, e.g. *Deenmitra*, *Jagruk*, *Deccanrayat*, *Vijayimaratha*, *Dnyanprakash*, *Induprakash*, *Subodhpatrika*, etc. This clarifies his point of the need for an independent periodical dedicated solely to the issues of the excluded.

After Dr. Ambedkar went abroad for education, the management did not take good care of *Mooknayak*, which led to its decline. Finally, *Mooknayak* was discontinued in 1923. Despite its short life, *Mooknayak* laid the foundations of an assertive and organized Dalit politics. It announced the arrival of a newer generation of anti-caste politics that broke the confines of region, language and political boundaries and coincided with the larger developments on the nationalist scene. According to Dr. Gangadhar Pantawane, the birth of *Mooknayak* was a panacea that gave

a new life to the freedom struggle of the untouchables in Hindustan.

After Dr. Ambedkar returned to India, he started another periodical in 1927, *Bahishkrut Bharat*. *Bahishkrut Bharat* literally means Excluded India. From the second issue of *Bahishkrut Bharat*, the following lines from *Dnyaneshwari* were used as watchword:

*Aata kodand gheuni haati, aarudh payiye rathi.
Dei aalingan veerorutti, samadhane.
Jagi keerti rudhavi, swadharmacha maanu wadhavi.
Iya bhara pasoni sodavi, medini he.
Aata Partha nishanku hovo, ya sangrama chitt devo.
Eth he wachuni kahi, bolo naye, aata kewal sangram.
Sangramashivay dusre kahihi nahi.* (Ambedkar, 1990, p. 11).

Dr. Ambedkar instilled such a fighting spirit in the untouchables.

He always thought of the condition of the nation. While thinking about the nation's unpleasant condition, he became more contemplative about the nation's history than the nation's geography. The reason behind any country's survival was a more contemplative kind of a subject. And thus, while considering Hindustan, in one of the issues of *Bahishkrut Bharat* (December 21, 1928), in the article titled *Hinduche Dharmashastra: Tyache Kshetra Ani Tyache Adhikari*, he writes:

Amhi jaglo yache karan amhi shaastrapramane waglo he nasun aamhas aamchya shatrunki thar marle nahi hech hoy. (Ambedkar, 1990, p. 208).

Here, Dr. Ambedkar writes about the survival of the untouchables in Hindustan. He says that they survived not because they followed the rules of religion but because that their enemies did not kill them.

By displaying this truth, Dr. Ambedkar protests the mentality that celebrates the history in vain. He neither supported unreasonable glorification of the history nor agreed to the unrepresentable condemnation of the past. This is evident in his deliberation regarding religion and society. In the issue of *Bahishkrut Bharat* (March 15, 1929), in the article titled *Hindudharmala Notice*, he writes:

Hindu dharm va Hindu samaj yancho parsparanshi agdi nikat sambandh ahe, evadhech navhe tar te ekjeev aahet. Itar dharm samajik bakteet asha prakare dhawaladhawal karit nahit, parantu samajik bakteet dhawaladhawal karne, samajik vicharache niyantran karne ha Hindu dharmacha vishesh ahe. Khave kay, pyave kay, uthave kase, basave kase, nijave kase ashya goshtit suddha dharmache niyam aahet. Ishwar va manushya yanchyamadhil sambandh ani itar thokal neetiniyam itkya purtech itar dharmapramane Hindu dharmane aaple karyakshetra maryadit

kelele nahi. Hindi dharmapramane dusrya kontyahi dharmat itke samajik nirbandh nahit (Ambedkar, 1990, p. 243).

(The Hindu religion and Hindu society are closely related to each other; rather they are fused. Other religions do not interfere with social issues; but interfering with social issues and controlling social thinking is the speciality of the Hindu religion. There are rules of the religion even in issues like what to eat, what to drink, how to get up, how to sit, how to sleep. Hindu religion has not kept its area limited to the relationship between God and man and other prominent policies. There are no such social limitations in any other religion as are present in the Hindu religion.)

Here, Dr. Ambedkar clarifies the characteristic features of the Hindu religion and how that affects individual freedom.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar handled all the responsibilities of the periodical single-handedly. Due to the adverse economic conditions, he could not hire an assistant and that led him to write the 24 columns in the paper on his own. This led to the discontinuity in the release of issues. In such adversity too, Dr. Ambedkar continued his work just for the sake of social awareness. He never intended to earn money through the paper. Somehow, he continued *Bahishkrut Bharat* for two years.

A year after *Bahishkrut Bharat* was discontinued; the first issue of *Janta* (The People) got published on November 24, 1930. Dr. Ambedkar appointed Deorao Vishnu Naik as the editor. *Janta*, initially, a fortnightly magazine, turned into a weekly from October 31, 1931. In the later issues, these lines used to be written at the top—*Gulamala tu gulam aahes ase sanga mhanje to band karun uthel*, which means—‘Tell the slave that he is a slave and he will rebel.’ Freedom from mental slavery was the first step towards the liberation of untouchables, according to Dr. Ambedkar.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was very well aware of the power of the periodicals and so he always wanted them to stay. Therefore, he always took time from his busy schedule to write for *Janta*. Along with social and educational issues, he presented the fundamental and versatile thoughts regarding the conversion of religion in *Janta*. *Janta* got its new name—*Prabuddha Bharat* on February 4, 1956. After the death of Dr. Ambedkar on December 6, 1956, a board of editors was appointed to look after *Prabuddha Bharat*. Yashwantrao Ambedkar, Mukundrao Ambedkar, D.T. Rupawate, Shankarrao Kharat and B.R. Kadrekar held the responsibility

as editors. When the Republican Party of India was formed on October 3, 1957, *Prabuddha Bharat* became the mouthpiece of the Republican Party. Later on, this periodical was discontinued in 1961.

Conclusion

The Dalit periodicals came into existence for the redemption of the untouchables. Though the initial Dalit journalists were not highly educated; their work shows how they made sure that they study the religion that was responsible for their unpleasant condition. Through this study, they got acquainted with the customs and conventions in the Hindu religion that were responsible for the lowliness of the untouchables. They wanted to spread this newfound knowledge within their community for which they took the help of the medium of periodicals. These periodicals were mainly meant to provide a social and religious thought. It is also seen that, through these periodicals, the journalists have made requests to the Hindu community and to the British government for the redemption of untouchables, from time to time.

The establishment of *Mooknayak* in 1920 reflected the conspicuous shift in the socio-political discourse on caste and untouchability in India. It helped to inaugurate new politics of assertion that challenged the dominant social diseases. Dr. Ambedkar's thoughts were communicated to the untouchables, preparing them for the battle to reclaim human personality and social identity, which was lost under the cruel reign of 'untouchability'. It can be said that, with *Mooknayak*, the silence of the untouchables was broken. *Bahishkrut Bharat* played a pivotal role in mobilizing the opinion against caste violence in the late 1920s. Many important editorials written by Dr. Ambedkar in the *Bahishkrut Bharat* were read publicly at the Dalit gatherings. His skills as an editor and an effective communicator were clearly demonstrated.

A contrast in the approach can be seen when it comes to the Dalit periodicals launched before and after 1920. Earlier periodicals conveyed their messages in the form of requests, with modesty. But, in the later periodicals, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar conveyed that over-modesty was fruitless and that the untouchables should build a fighting spirit in them and get ready for the battle. The journey from *Mooknayak* to *Prabuddha Bharat* is in fact the journey of Dr. Ambedkar's social, cultural and political life. This journey is of utmost importance in the history

of the Dalit movement. Dr. Ambedkar had started all these periodicals seeing the need of the time. This early phase of Dalit periodicals inspired further work in the field. Undoubtedly, these periodicals provided the untouchables, who were destined to the darkness, with a guiding light.

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