

## **Emergence of Anti-caste Movement and Everyday Resistance in Colonial Berar**

SANTOSH SURADKAR

Assistant Professor

Gondwana University, Gadchiroli

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The 1920s marked a crucial period in the history of Dalit movements in India, particularly in the regions of the Bombay Presidency and Nagpur (Vidarbha). It was a time of social upheaval, political mobilization, and the consolidation of Dalit identity as a distinct and powerful force. The period witnessed both mass struggles and ideological shifts that would shape the trajectory of Dalit politics and social reforms for years to come.

One of the central figures in this movement was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who is often associated with the assertion of Dalit autonomy and the demand for self-respect. According to historian Gail Omvedt, Ambedkar's approach to the Dalit question emphasized the rejection of traditional Hindu social structures and the quest for an autonomous identity. This was particularly relevant in Vidarbha, where Dalits, particularly the Mahar community, enjoyed a degree of economic improvement that allowed them to challenge their historical oppression. The relatively better economic conditions, combined with the region's socio-political dynamics, provided fertile ground for the emergence of a more militant and self-assertive Dalit movement.

The economic transformation of Vidarbha, especially with the growth of the cotton industry and the establishment of mills in Nagpur, played a significant role in the Dalit movement's development. With the arrival of industrialization, many Mahars and other Dalit groups found work in the mills, particularly as part of the emerging industrial working class. This marked a shift away from traditional agricultural and caste-bound occupations. By the early 20th century, a growing number of educated Mahars, many of whom had access to missionary education, began to take leadership roles within the community, which further fueled the demand for social and political change.

Nagpur, being a key city in Vidarbha, had an important industrial and intellectual atmosphere. The presence of mills such as the Empress Mill, established by Jamsheji Tata in 1877, and other entrepreneurial ventures played a key role in transforming the social and economic landscape of the region. With the mills came an emerging urban working class, composed in large part of Dalits, who faced exploitation but also gained some degree of economic independence. The industrial environment, combined with the commercialization of agriculture, weakened traditional social structures, such as the *balutedari* system, which had entrenched caste-based divisions in rural life.

The region's intellectual and political landscape also played a significant role in the Dalit mobilization. Non-Brahman political movements, such as the Satyashodhak Samaj, which was active in nearby Maharashtra, provided a radical ideological foundation for the Dalit struggle. The growing dissatisfaction with the Congress Party's dominance, particularly its moderate approach to social reforms, created an opening for more radical demands. The ideological

battles within Congress, between the moderates and the more radical elements, influenced Dalit leaders to carve out their own path, separate from mainstream Hindu politics.

In summary, the 1920s was a defining period for the Dalit movement in Vidarbha and beyond. The rise of industrialization, combined with the intellectual and political ferment of the time, helped to create the conditions for the Dalit community to challenge its traditional social position. The region's relative economic development, coupled with growing educational opportunities, provided a foundation for Dalit leadership to emerge. However, the era was also marked by intense opposition from the upper castes, who sought to preserve their dominance, leading to a period of ideological and social conflict that would have lasting implications for the future of Dalit politics in India.

Aloysius have argued that nationalism, as 'the congruence between culture and power' manifested in India, in the form of cultural hegemony of caste-class and patriarchal forces (Aloysius, 1998:17). Jotirao Phule, the first organic intellectual of caste subaltern in India has unpacked hegemonic designs of cultural nationalism and displayed that contemporary nationalist politics was unremittingly indulged in upholding the selfish interests of caste elites (Bagade, 1998: ). Taking cue from Phule, the emerging non-Brahmin and Dalit movement distanced itself from nationalism and put up their antagonism vis-à-vis nationalist movement. Congress was averse to social reform since its inception but because of the political expediency under colonialism it started admitting the social evil of untouchability. Congress passed a resolution abolishing untouchability and suffice to it Gandhi's constructive program incorporated the issue of removal of untouchability. Nevertheless the Dalit movement continued its apprehension towards Congress; it not only rejected Congress claims but setting itself on the path of autonomous politics continued its antagonist stand against nationalism (Omdedt, ).

In 1920, under the leadership of Gandhi, nationalism made new inroads; masses including peasants, workers and untouchable started participating in the Congress movement. The elite leadership, mostly belonging to Brahmin Maguzar and Marawadi Bania groups in Vidharbha region, played pivotal role in seeking participation of peasant castes (of certain area) they also had taken the initiative in mustering the support of the untouchable. Nevertheless, politically aware Dalit leaders had seen this attempt of Congress co-option as subduing of the untouchables and resisted it. This indeed had created a situation of combat between Savarna castes adhering nationalism and Dalits resisting Congress hegemony.

### **Boycott of Congress Hindu on Bela Mahar**

In Bela village of Nagpur district, the caste struggle broke out between the Savarna castes and untouchable Mahar caste. Savarna leaders of Bela village issued a command to join Congress which untouchable leaders courageously rejected. A detailed report of this incident was published in Nagpur dated January 26, 1973 in daily Tarun Bharat by N. V. Nagdevate. Revaram Kawade. Bela village is located 50 kilometre away from Nagpur city. Dashrath

Laxman Patil was Bela's *Malgujar* and once upon a time M.L.A. and staunch follower of Ambedkar's movement till the end of his life.

This incident happened in December 1920. A National Congress session was held at Nagpur in 1920, and at the same time Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation resolution was passed in the session. Therefore, members of Congress started membership drive campaign in full swing. This campaign was also started in Bela village. Congress leader Seshamal marwari urged the untouchable Mahars of Bela to become primary members of the Congress. Dashrath Patil and all other prominent untouchable leaders decided that we do not want to become members of Congress. Congress worker Sheshmal got the news so he called Congress workers and others and decided to strictly boycott Mahar because their refusal to become members of Congress.

The next day Saturday was weekly market. At 12 am Seshmal called Dasharath Patil, other some mahar members and asked Patil the reasons of not becoming the members of the Congress. Patil said that we are supporters of Mahatma Jyotiba Phuli's Satya Shodhak Samaj and last summer at Nagpur Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar from Mumbai gave the message, and as per the their direction all Dalits trying to build a separate organization of untouchables, therefore do not want to be a member of the Congress.

On hearing this, Seshmal and other Congressmen got angry and started speaking in abusive language. Dasaratha Patil recognized the situation immediately left the place with his colleagues and came to their Mahar Mohola. Seshamal, Ganapatrao Timande, Narayanarao Deshmukh, Baban Tambekar and others went around the bazaar saying everyone, do not sell any goods to Mahars and if anyone sells, his shop will be looted. At that time there was no grocery store and other shops of untouchables. Mahars who went to the market could not make purchases. News went to other villages also and Kurla, Pauni, Umri, Jaitapur Ashta and other village Mahars were denied to buy oil, salt, chilli, rice, wheat and pulses etc., and mahar's were chased out of the market. Villages in around 32km were boycotted for Bela incident.

Fearing that their wives and children would have to starve as the weekly market was closed, the Mahars gathered at Dasharath Patils palace. Patil encouraged everyone and sold jwar (sorghum), wheat, pulses and chillies for time being and advocated buy groceries next day from another village. Also promised to open a separate market for the people of Bela. Dasharath Patil proclaimed, "Let us have our own markets" and he decided to establish a market for mahars. He advised to manage borrowing oil and salt from each other's for the time being and assured that there will be plentiful once the market opens for Mahars. This assurance gave courage to the people. That night a meeting of the Mahars of all the three mohala was held and five hundred rupees were collected from the community to start a community market. Dashrath Patal himself gave two thousand rupees. And it was decided to travel Sindhi and bring all the groceries for alternate market.

On the second day, Sunday, Dasharath Patil himself, with various well-to-do Mahar farmers, traveled 24 km to the small town of Sindi. After getting this news Sheshmal Marwari immediately along with other village people went to Sindi. Dashrath Patil from Abdul Karim Bohra's shop bought enough supplies—household goods, lentils, grain, vegetables, etc. to fill ten or twelve carts, which he sent with the men to the village.

Seshmal Marwari rallied the Congressmen in Sindi and mobilised people against Dashrath Patil and Bela mahars, also appealed Sindi people to boycott similarly and teach the lesson. Infuriated by this provocation, some of the savarnas attacked Bohora's shop. Due to the attack, Bohra closed the shop and hid in the house. Bullock carts loaded with groceries were blocked and the assailants looted all the groceries. The rebels fled in the darkness fearing for their lives, leaving Bullock carts. Dashrath Patil and his colleagues also took shelter elsewhere for the sake of self-protection.

After not finding Dashrath Patil and others the upper castes mob got angry. They took their march to Mahar mohala in the Sindhi village. As Ganpat Mendhe had a *bolvan* program (The ceremony of conducting a bride in procession to her husband's house after the wedding), a large congregation had gathered there. They searched Mandhe's house but no one got in their hands. Dashrath Patil and some other people were hidden in Mendhe's house in a hidden place. After not finding anyone, the assailants abused the Mahars and left the place.

On such a critical occasion, Vitthalbowa Ganveer accepted this task of giving the report at Sindi Police Station. He donned full female garb and reached the police station outside the village with a bucket in his left hand to defecate. There, he described the situation, and Daroga immediately prepared to provide all possible protection and sent the police and brought Dashrath Patil and all the people to the police station at 11 pm.

This news went to Sindi people. People from Sindi, Sheshmal and other all Congress leaders decided that night, "to attack the police station and take Dashrath Patil and his companions into custody and kill them. And if the police officers refuse their demand, then they should burn the police station." After preparing immediately, hundreds of people went to the police station around 12 in the night, carrying machetes, axes, stick and spears. Daroga had already prepared all the policemen in thana with guns and he himself was ready with a pistol. Daroga was also in great confusion after seeing the rudeness of the attackers. But he handled the situation with caution. The constable went in front of the assailant and told them that he had locked up Dashrath Patil and other people in the thana. He said that the people of Bela are in his custody and cannot escape. Further he asked the mob to face one of their leader. Their chief Ganpatrai Zhade came to the fore and guard took him inside and seated him on a chair. Daroga threaten

him with a pistol and signalled to him to tell the mob to withdraw. Zhade shook and all the attackers fled. Zhade was locked in a custody room.

It was one o'clock in the night that the constable decided to interrogate Abdul Karim Bohra at the same time. He went to the shop and took note of how much wholesale goods had been purchased by Bela Mahar. Also inquired about looting of groceries in Bullock cart. They seized Bohra's account and taken to thane. After that the news of Sindi's robbery was reported to DSP of Wardha through telegram.

The next day, Monday, at 7-8 am, D.S.P of Wardha came to Sindhi with his police force. Armed police were stationed around the village and all the men of Sindi were called to stand in a line. Dashrath Patil and his other companions who were in thane were called outside and asked to identify the robbers. Three people were identified and locked up. D.S.P. said to the people that you will have to pay penance for the oppression you have done to these untouchables.

On Monday Bela people came to know about the robbery in Sind. A grave silence prevailed in the whole of Mahar Mohola. They were eagerly waiting for their leaders. At 4 o'clock afternoon on Tuesday Dashrath Patil along with his other companion returned with empty bullock cart. The dominant castes stopped calling Mahars for work. Similarly, in response to this Dashrath Patil also removed caste Hindus from work. Even freed cattle if went to empty pastures, they began to put them in the barn.

Later, carpenters, blacksmiths stopped producing agricultural implements for Mahars. Children of Mahars were refused admission to school. In this regard G. A. Gawai had questioned the government in the council saying that 40 Mahar students from Bela had stopped attending school because they were not allowed to sit with other castes children. The government replied that Mahar children still go to school. But due to the opposition of the parents of other castes children, their sitting problem has arisen. (Madhya Pradesh Council Report, Vol. 2. Question No. 725 (9) date 10/8/1921). Also, Mahars were not allow to defecate on barren land.

To oppose the socio-economic boycott of Hindus and Congressmen the Mahars of Bela organized and determined the next plan in order to create the capacity to resist with extraordinary courage. They decided again to build an independent market. Three thousand rupees were collected for setting up shops of essential goods and Dashrath Patil gave the same amount. The responsibility of running the shops of food grains, grocery, cloths, sweets, clay pots etc. entrusted to different people. All these goods were brought from industrial towns like Nagpur, Hinganghat and Samudrapur. On Saturday itself, the untouchables started a separate bazaar in front of Dashrath Patil house.

But financially Mahar people were crippled and blocked-up. Majority of the Mahars were labourers and it was not possible for wealthy Mahar to employ so many people. Therefore, the

state of food shortage affected to poor Mahars. To find a way out of this deplorable situation, Dashrath Patil along with other people paid visit to the commissioner of Nagpur and demanded work to solve the problem of food. As promised by the commissioner, from the second day only he arranged work of breaking rocks and repairing roads. This work continued for one year and the problem of food for the Mahar laborers was mostly solved.

In January 1921, the trial of this case started in Wardha court under Justice Pandey and the case proceedings continued for next ten days. There were 10 lawyers were defending the case for caste Hindus. No lawyer was willing to act on Mahar's behalf. Finally, lawyer called Ansari took the courage and agreed to fight on behalf of the Mahar people. In the middle of January, seven-eight criminals were sentenced to less than three months by the court.

The main accused, Sheshmal and Ganpat Timande, were still absconding. A police guard was placed at his house to find out his hideout, but could not find out it for many days. So the government ordered the confiscation of his estate. Accordingly, the constable took two-three policemen, four-five *kotwals* and some five people to his house and took the seizure. First, the belongings of Seshamal's house were seized. His safe was also confiscated. After that, the house and belongings of Ganpat Timande was also seized. At that evening, Ganpat Timande's mother was going out with a bucket. The police seized the bucket. The people gathered there started shouting slogans and in the darkness started pelting stones on the police officer. The Daroga's arm was broken, head split open and the body was covered in blood. Shivram police had broken his arm. The Muslim Jamadar was tied, strangled and thrown out of the village in the dark, thinking that he was dead. All Kotwal's were heavily attacked and badly beaten. Taking advantage of the darkness in the midst of these fights, the beaten and injured police reached the thana by 9 o'clock.

The Mahar laborers of Bela had gone to the work of breaking rocks as usual. They learned about the attack on the police and they started getting worried. Wrestler Motiram Godghate and Mukunda Godghate were present at the time seizure. After the incident they both went to the police station at 10.00 pm and bandaged all the victims. They searched and picked up Jamadar who was in bad situation.

On the day of the attack on police Dashrath Patil and all other main leaders were in village. They gathered together at 12.00 pm and decided that the incident should be reported to the higher police officers immediately. Accordingly, they went to Borkhedi Station, sent telegram to DSP and informed about the attack. From Borkhedi Dashrath Patil went to Wardha and Sitaram Patil left for Nagpur. That night only, Sitaram Patlani went to the DIG's bungalow and informed Bela's incident. After reporting he reached back to Borkhedi at 4.00 am and at Bela on foot before daylight.

D. I. G. an English officer arrived Bela in the morning with a lorry of 70 armed policemen and two magistrates. They came along the road of breaking rock work, so the laborers of the place got courage. As soon as the police entered Bela village, Bela's people started taunting them. Police officer went to the outpost/naka and questioned the police officer about the incident and immediately started arresting attackers.

On the next day morning, Bela's caste Hindus took out a procession towards police station. In procession they abused, shouted slogans against the police officers. From there they went to Mahar mohala and entered the palace of Dashrath Patil and looted the grocery store at 10 o'clock in the day. They started looking for Dashrath Patil and other prominent leaders to kill them. But Dashrath Patil was hiding in Panbude's house. Sitaram Patil was hiding in his own house. Other leaders had absconded everywhere. Motiram Pahelwan went hiding himself to police station and informed D.I.G about the incident. With that, D. I. G alone went to the spot with a pistol and other police officers also followed him with guns. He saw the plight of looting. When police arrived Dashrath Patil and all other people came out and demanded permanent arrangement of police protection. Accordingly officer deployed 1 Daroga, 2 head constables, and 12 policemen at Bela outpost and two armed policemen were guarded in Mahar mohola.

Still Sheshmal and Ganpat Timande were absconding. The persecution of caste Hindus increased. They started burning straws and quarrelling with Mahars. They even decided to burn the entire Mahar Moholla one night. As soon as they heard this news, the people of Mahar decided that 'we too will fight and fall to the ground'. They made preparations to face the impending attack. Mahar's camped in the house of Dashrath Patil to retaliate with weapons like chilli powder, two or three bullock cart stones, slings, spear, sticks, syringe etc.,. Youths were sat on the second floor for guarding the palace. The palace had become a fort. The Hindus got the news of the preparation of this resistance. They had prepared to attack by setting fire but seeing the preparations of the Mahars, they did not dare to attack.

The government calculated the total financial losses of the Mahars in the looting of groceries in Sindi and Bela and agricultural property. The affected people of Bela were called by D. C of Wardha and a total compensation of 65 thousand was given to them. Umred Tehsildar visited to Bela and handover compensation 20 thousand to Dashrath Patil, Narayan Dhabade 3 thousand, Tanba Moon 15 hundred and Ganpat Kamble 500 rupees.

The state imposed punishment on the entire Savarna community in response to the violence and damage caused during the event, holding them collectively accountable and the community was required to pay reparations for the harm caused. As a result, the affected people in Bela village found themselves facing continuous social and economic ostracism. For nearly a year, they had to endure discrimination, economic hardship, and social isolation while fighting against the oppressive boycott and struggling to reclaim their dignity and livelihood.

## **Analysing the event**

Thus, we find huge reporting on caste atrocities in rural areas in 1920 onward. They appeared in Janata and other Vidarbha newspapers. Many cases were registered and agitated by the urban Dalit working class. Mahars were forced to obey the caste duties and maintained hierarchies. In most of the cases, dalit women were targeted, discriminated against, molested and put to death. Dalit women's body became the site of revenge to punish the whole community. They were castigated not to use public places. They had to deal with local caste elites and manage their survival within the community. They underwent violent and inhuman atrocities. Rural masses suffered more than urban. But this did not stop masses following Ambedkar's ideology rather they became more vocal and articulate their suffering. New language, terminologies and articulation was emerging for positioning their citizenship.

The caste struggle escalated at Bela demonstrates fissures in the ideological and socio-cultural practices of nationalism. Under the power relationship of caste-feudal society, nationalism transpired into caste ideology. Savarna community at Bela village viewed their caste dominance as a nationalist pursuit; moreover, so, they perceived the maintenance of caste order as their nationalist duty and inflicted coercion on disobeying Mahar untouchables. A myth that nationalist struggle can assure emancipation to all gets exposed in the Bela episode. Bela incident highlights the sociocultural facets of nationalism and phenomena of nationalist politics which was grounded in the caste-class and patriarchal social milieu. Also it explains the role of dominant caste-class in the formation of nationalism.

Bela episode also marks the Dalit resistance to caste order and their inbuilt contradiction with caste ridden coercive nationalism. Dalits, as per their location and consciousness, responded differently at different times to different notions of nationalism. In 1920 Dalit response to non-cooperation was ambivalent. Some groups of Dalits consciously and unconsciously welcomed (Non-Brahmin) Gandhi's emergence to national scene; they with other caste subalterns participated in congress agitation. Nevertheless, owing to Shahu Maharaj's radical social politics and Dr. Ambedkar's perseverance for autonomous politics in Mahar untouchables put up their antagonism towards the hegemonic nationalism of Congress. They put up their qualified critique and resistance to nationalist politics of cooption. Their engagement with politics of autonomous stance came as the continuum of Dalit politics of caste-class mobility.

Although the immediate cause of the socio-economic boycott and the atrocities against Dalits seemed to be upper-caste retaliation for the Mahar community's rejection of membership in the Congress Party, the situation must be understood in the broader context of the growing political autonomy of the Mahars in the region. The Dalit conference of 1920 in Nagpur, chaired by Chatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur and the emerging leader B.R. Ambedkar, played a pivotal role in distancing Dalits from the Congress Party and asserting their own independent political identity. Additionally, Dashrath Patil, a wealthy Malgujar, was actively involved in organizing



Dalits across the Berar region. His grassroots activism in both rural and urban areas played a crucial role in supporting the Dalit cause for dignity and social justice. These factors contributed significantly to the Dalits' collective action for the formation of a new, independent identity.

The Bela event highlights the complex relationships and contradictions between politics, law enforcement, and the shaping of everyday life for both dominant groups and Dalits. In this particular case, the police and legislative bodies acknowledged and responded to the atrocity and violence, marking a significant moment of recognition for the anti-Dalit violence. The judiciary and police viewed the violence as a collective act of the savarna (dominant caste) community, leading to punitive measures against the entire community for their role in the boycott. This response underscores the broader dynamics of power and control, with the state using legal and police structures to address social injustices. Moreover, the quick intervention by the police department reflects the colonial state's approach to serving colonial interest, which often involved suppressing anti-colonial forces. In this context, the colonial state appeared strategically focused on neutralizing nationalist movements, while simultaneously offering some support to the Dalit community, suggesting a complex balancing act between colonial interests and the protection of vulnerable groups.

The colonial state's support for the Dalits of Bela intensified the response of the savarna (upper-caste) groups, who escalated their efforts to enforce socio-economic boycotts and violently target the police force and its institutions. The caste-governing classes, whose notions of social order had prevailed since ancient times, viewed any external support for marginalized groups during such boycotts as a direct threat to their established power. In the pattern of caste violence, any form of assistance extended to the boycotted group was seen as a challenge to the social hierarchy. Solidarity within the savarna community against the Dalits was viewed as collective responsibility, and any support for the marginalized was condemned. Consequently, the police, when intervening to protect the boycotted group or address caste violence, were not welcomed by the dominant castes, as such actions were seen as an attempt to dismantle their entrenched power structures.

The imposition of the boycott effectively isolated Dalits by blocking access to rural markets, forcing them to rely on urban centers like Nagpur, Wardha, and Hinganghat for their survival. This created significant limitations on Dalit resistance, as their survival was tied to the dominant castes, and rural areas were tightly controlled by the caste apparatus. However, modern cities offered new avenues for survival and ways to sustain everyday resistance. This distinction between rural and urban settings highlights how political geography plays a critical role in shaping the opportunities for resistance.

In the caste system, the punishment for violating caste norms is not limited to the individual offender but extends to the entire community, affecting not just the person who transgressed but also their village and surrounding villages. The imposition of a boycott on Dalits from other villages for violating these norms underscores the idea that defying the hierarchical order is seen as a collective act of disobedience, with consequences for the entire community.

Therefore, the punishment for rejecting Congress membership was not confined to Dashrath Patil and a few others, but also affected the entire community of Bela, as well as neighboring villages. Bela and the surrounding 30-kilometer radius of villages were collectively punished and boycotted as a consequence of this rejection. Anupama Rao in her work on caste atrocity of Kotwals death argues that ‘The social life of this new juridical form, the caste atrocity, is embedded in structures of caste sociality, which are in turn reproduced and distinguished along two mutually constitutive registers: atrocity as a political act that calls for Dalit response and atrocity as the performance of ritualized violence.’ (Rao Anupama, 257) Such punitive measures are deeply connected to the concept of caste servitude, where any form of autonomous assertion or resistance is viewed as a threat to the established order and is harshly suppressed.

## Refernces

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