

## Holocaust in Marathwada: 1978

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ANY event whether of a catastrophic nature or not needs to be understood in its total context. It can hardly be denied that the basic problem of Indian society is that of inequity, injustice and exploitation. This is not to deny the importance of development—economic, political, socio-cultural, etc. However, such development is both a very tardy process and something which does not necessarily benefit all the sections of the people equally. In any case, the process of development as it has taken place generally has tended to benefit those who are already well-to-do in every sense of the term and left high and dry those who have not been so fortunate. The latter form a majority of the people particularly in villages.

Thus, holocaust in Marathwada specially affected the Scheduled Caste people in the villages although the agitation for renaming the Marathwada University after Dr. Ambedkar, was spearheaded by Dalit Panthers and such leaders mainly in urban centres like Aurangabad, Nanded, etc. In giving a call for agitation, hardly any effort was made to protect the villages or villagers, particularly the persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes. It should be mentioned that as a result of conversion to Neo-Buddhism, Scheduled Caste people had both resented and resisted participating in the village economy on traditional terms. Further, political and social awakening had also reached the villages and the villagers as a result of which they came to question the traditional order based on inequality, injustice and exploitation.

### Special Case of Marathwada

Marathwada, a sub-region of Maharashtra, has to be understood and studied

as the special case of compounding of backwardness – economic social, cultural and political. Even today, in terms of various indicators of development, Marathwada has been adjudged as a backward region, practically on every count. Thus, its economic development is quite poor when compared with the rest of Maharashtra and particularly Western Maharashtra and Greater Bombay. The socio-cultural environment and ethos is also not what operates in Western Maharashtra and Greater Bombay in particular or even in Konkan which is economically backward. While there have been some Chief Ministers from the Marathwada region, by and large Marathwada has been lacking in political clout. It should be mentioned here that underdeveloped or undeveloped sugar cooperatives in Marathwada also signifies absence of any political clout which is enjoyed by sugar cooperatives in Western Maharashtra. Western Maharashtra and Greater Bombay have benefited considerably from various kinds of reformist movements and as such there has been always a ferment against any kind of inequity, injustice and exploitation which was relatively, if not entirely absent in the case of Marathwada. While it is true that Marathwada was proud of producing saint poets who fought against inequity, injustice and lack of human dignity, what was really needed was a strong social reform movement which was based on rational intellectual and moral-philosophical basis. As is well known, Marathwada was under the tutelage of the Nizam and the Ruler had no interest whatsoever in introducing any kind of changes. That is how Marathwada suffered from stagnation of every kind and in fact can be characterized as essentially a feudal system. The feudal ground inhibited any kind of rational analysis and innovative action, which is dogging the footsteps of even educated people today. Acceptance of existing reality has been the habit of people. One can easily imagine how such a habit would be much more pronounced in villages and particularly among the villagers who were at the lowliest rung of the ladder, that is, the Scheduled Castes. The Scheduled Castes have always been part and parcel of caste and economic interdependence in fact condemned them to a very subservient, if not sub-human existence.

It should also be noted that the people of Marathwada waged a struggle against the autocratic rule of the Nizam, which culminated in the liberation of Marathwada from the Nizam's rule and its integration with the rest of Maharashtra. Of course, there was political and military action on the part of the Government of India. However, this could not have been successful without the support of the people of Marathwada from within. It is with reference to this struggle that some of the roots of the holocaust in Marathwada are to be found for the simple reason that the people and even leaders of Marathwada felt that Scheduled Caste people had abstained from participating in the struggle for emancipation from the Nizam's autocratic rule. In fact, it has even been alleged that Nizam's Razakars and as such Scheduled Castes as a group became the subjective perceptions, if any experienced by the people, which certainly accounts

in colouring a particular social reality. Then again, Scheduled Caste persons have also been found wanting in casting their lot whole-heartedly in their demand for development vis-a-vis the rest of Maharashtra. In a sense, this particular abstaining drove a wedge between the Scheduled Castes and the Savarnas.

Due to the valiant and foresighted efforts of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, education was spread in Marathwada, particularly in Aurangabad which helped create consciousness in the minds of people and particularly the Scheduled Castes. Dr. Ambedkar visualized this effort in higher education to bring about integration of different segments of the people, which unfortunately did not fructify. Actually, the college started by him became characterized as a Scheduled Caste Institution, another college a Brahmin Institution, a Maratha Institution and still another a Muslim Institution, thereby defeating the very purpose of higher education. The spread of education created socio-cultural and political consciousness which led particularly the disadvantaged and disprivileged sections to question, if not defy, the existing inequitous and unjust social order. Therefore, the consciousness created amongst the Scheduled Castes in particular spelled the non-acceptance of the present order against which they protested.

Symbolically speaking, one may say, the demand for the renaming of the Marathwada University after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, represented the burning dissatisfaction and discontent with the state of affairs by the Scheduled Castes. This symbolic action was not acceptable to the caste Hindus particularly because it was looked upon as a thin end of the wedge. As a matter of fact some Scheduled Caste leaders even stated that the demand for renaming of the University was only a beginning and would be a major step in gaining political power. While it is true that when Dr. Ambedkar had advised his followers to pursue both education and empowerment, he had not envisaged the kinds of difficulties with which the latter was riven in Marathwada and this point was not adequately appreciated by those who gave a call for action.

While Maharashtra Legislature and the University Executive Body had passed a resolution recommending the renaming of the University, hardly any effort was made to convince the progressive element on the other side, leave aside those who were relatively orthodox and entrenched in the traditional structure. Then the call was given to rename the University and action was confined to urban centres, which resulted in destruction of public property, which was followed by violence in villages, which was particularly unleashed on the Scheduled Castes. While launching the said action, it was not envisaged by the leaders who gave such a call that the villagers would be held to ransom and would provide easy targets for reprisal. The information available has pointed out how bridges and culverts were deliberately broken or impaired so that neither the police-nor the military could reach the villages in time to protect the vulnerable villagers, that is, the Scheduled Castes.

The report has furnished a very detailed chronology of events from which it can be easily discerned how the situation went out of hands. Moreover, this particular event or action succeeded in alienating the progressive elements almost for good. The atmosphere of suspicion and mutual rejection was written large and there is no doubt that this particular catastrophic event invited all India attention from men of public affairs, politicians, social workers, social reformers, intellectuals and so on. However, the situation as it obtained after the event was so volatile that very little could be done to bring about rapprochement between the two groups.

That the situation was very volatile and delicate can be adjudged in terms of the tremendous hurdles experienced and encountered by the Research Team in talking to the people with any degree of frankness and honesty. That is how recourse had to be taken to greater reliance on secondary material which was available in plenty, in terms of information and reports in the Press as well as interviews with the persons from both the groups. Reference to files maintained by the government on this issue also facilitated constructing of the events to a large extent.

From this investigation certain things become obvious:

- (1) Subjective perceptions of different groups definitely matter in (a) giving rise to the problem or at least (b) aggravating the problem, and (c) resolving the problem.
- (2) Burning of boats is not particularly useful specially for the aggrieved party because scope has to be offered for mutual discussion, dialogue and empathic understanding which alone can ultimately help resolve a given grievance or a problem. In order to succeed in protest and action call, a great deal of preparation is needed, which in this case was obviously found wanting. Even Muslims refused to side with the Scheduled Castes in this issue. Moreover, due to branding of this particular action by a particular group, that is, Dalit Panthers, even those who otherwise stood to suffer from this order refused to participate wholeheartedly.
- (3) A proper appreciation and understanding of the complexities of the situation is very vital for the success of any protest movement.
- (4) In addition, the legal provision by which any person belonging to the Scheduled Castes could file a case against a Savarna regarding bad treatment also created bad blood in the minds of the Savarnas, because they were apprehensive about such facility being misused. As a matter of fact, very recently, Shri Ramdas Athavale, Minister for Social Welfare, Maharashtra, had also pleaded that the Scheduled Caste people should withdraw such cases filed against the Savarnas, which was of course objected to by the Scheduled Castes.

Practical and policy implications are in a way implied in the foregoing

namely, (i) Any call for protest movement should be founded on prior preparation. (ii) It should be based on proper understanding of the complexities of the situation. (iii) It should enlist cooperation of the saner and progressive elements. (iv) It should keep doors open for any kind of dialogue and discussion. In short, any action programme which has not been carefully planned is not likely to succeed and it may be noted here that various groups which are genuinely interested in averting such a course of action and events should do their home work in order to be useful to the aggrieved party in particular, because the aggrieved party tends to be by and large more vulnerable. Thus any indiscreet call for action has to be tampered down by all the constituents concerned including the government.

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