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BACKWARD CLASS MOVEMENT IN KARNATAKA AND ITS IMPACT

Dr. Venkatarao Palati

Associate Professor and HOD

Department of studies and Research in History

Davanagere University,

Davanagere (Karnataka)

And

Chandrashekhar K.M.

Research Scholar

Department of studies and Research in History

Davanagere University,

Davanagere (Karnataka)

Abstract:

An attempt is made in this paper is to analyse the backward class movement in Karnataka, its effects on Indian society. Due to the negative implications of caste system backward class movement arises. The caste system in India creates a bundle of social problems as a few castes are deliberate as greater to others. The social distinctions on the foundation of the caste system have been perpetuating because of the long tradition in giving significance to castes. There are violence and terrorism as people belonging to one caste attack people belonging to another caste. Backward Caste/class movements emerged among depressed castes and deprived sections of society in different parts of India with the broadening of the national movement.

Key words: Backward class, movement, impact.

1. Introduction:

In the years before Independence in 1947 and until the unification of the state in 1956, the present state of Karnataka was administered by no fewer than six different authorities. These were: 1) The Government of the Maharaja of Mysore. 2) The Government of Bombay Presidency. 3) The Government of Madras Presidency. 4) The Government of Nizam of Hyderabad, 5) The Chief Commissioner of Coorg. 6) The Princely State of Sandur. This made Karnataka a highly fragmented region during the British period, and it created extreme difficulties for the historians to present a brief and general account of the social history of the region due to the following reasons.

Firstly, the social composition and factors that influenced social movements were different from one region to another.

Secondly, the different governing authorities used varying categories of analysis and modes of enquiry when they gathered data to understand the region over which they ruled.

Thirdly, the socio-economic policies pursued by the governing authorities differed from region to region.

In addition to geographical pluralism the State of Karnataka was marked by “primordial pluralism”. This is to say that it was a society in which no single caste was dominant, and the source of any kind of power had to be some form of multi-caste alliance.

2. Anti-Caste Movements during Pre-colonial Period:

The region presently comprising the State of Karnataka witnessed a well organized movement with a pronounced non-Brahminical stand in 12th century in the form of Veerashaiva movement, a movement linked to the name of Basaveshwara. The Veerashaiva movement that became very popular in the present North Karnataka region, professed an anti-Brahmin, anti-ritualistic ethics, and thus provided a cultural legacy to non-Brahmin movement in Karnataka. It demanded renunciation of all that formed an integral part of the social structures associated with Brahmins. The movement shunned elaborate ceremonialism and excessive ritualism introduced by the Brahmins. It challenged not only existing inegalitarian norms and values in which all non-Brahmins were engaged but also the legitimacy of their very basis. It rejected the role of Brahmins as spiritual representatives before God. The movement defended equality of the sexes and women were granted right of worship in the spiritual sphere, and they were not made to suffer any stigma of pollution.

The concept of egalitarianism which formed the unifying theme and which came to dominate the movement's ideology brought together all strata of society on an initial footing of equality. The social groups in which the movement was anchored hailed predominantly from lower social strata. The bulk of Lingayat saints were outcastes. Thus the whole Veerashaiva movement and its ideology provided a 'counter-culture' to orthodox Brahminical Hinduism.

The leaders of the Veerashaiva movement created an organisational framework parallel to that of Brahmins in order to sustain, uphold and propagate the Veerashaiva doctrine. The movement relied on conversion as the major avenue for gaining more members to the community. Later it attracted the attention of Hindu chieftains and Kings, notable among whom were the successive Kings of Vijayanagara and Hoysala

dynasties. These rulers lent concrete support and royal patronage to the poets, scholars and philosophers of the Lingayat sect.

It is true that Lingayatism could not bring changes in the whole social structure, but it did succeed in introducing some changes in it. It was, therefore, a change in the social system, but not of the system. It contributed to the creation of a distinct sub-culture of liberal social values through its magnificent literature and philosophy. This sub-culture remains an integral part of the regional culture of Karnataka. The abolition of ritual pollution paved the way for the liberation of caste ties considerably. While the caste system did not altogether disappear among the Lingayats, its rigidity certainly became less. Veerashaivism offered immense possibilities for the crafting of an anti-caste ideology.

A second major protest against the hierarchical structure of orthodox Brahminical Hinduism in Karnataka could be seen in the so called Bhakti movement that spread in fifteenth century. This movement recognised that any person, whatever is his caste, could seek God. The saint poets like Kanakadasa and Purandaradasa ridiculed caste consciousness and argued that only individual goodness and not birth counted in the eyes of God. Their onslaughts on certain religious beliefs, myths and practices current at that time weakened the theoretical foundations of the caste-ridden society to a considerable extent.

But Bhakti movement did not constitute a major challenge to Brahminical Hinduism, nor did it bring any socio-economic change among depressed classes of the region. It was no doubt a cry of protest on behalf of the suppressed sections, but they based their protest on metaphysical and theological grounds. They did not demand rights as natural rights of man or in terms of social justice and ethical integrity. As a result the higher groups in the economic domain were not materially affected at all.

3. Social dynamics among backward classes during the British period:

During the colonial period, especially in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Karnataka underwent a remarkable transformation. It was during this period that various social and religious movements re-interpreting traditional beliefs emerged throughout this region. With the appearance of the printing press, and later, of newspapers a literary renaissance was witnessed and a new world of ideas ushered in.

The colonial administration helped to establish educational institutions of modern western kind in different parts of Karnataka and through them introduced liberal thought in the region. Christian Missionary organisations like the Basel Mission, the Wesleyan Mission, the London Mission and the Catholic Church contested accepted ways of religion and beliefs. These Missionary organisations also acted as proselytising agencies and with intense efforts they brought a section of the touchable backward class population and untouchables into the Christian fold. The lower classes saw in European Missionaries the possibilities of economic change and advancement.

The liberal thought imparted through English education and the attack of Christian Missionaries on age old beliefs and practices had profound impact on the social relations in the region. A number of attempts at Hindu social reform were initiated by them. They were mainly concerned with emancipation of women, eradication of untouchability and similar social evils. They made a strong appeal to reason and initiated many attempts to reform society.¹³ Though the reform movement attracted the urban- educated population

it could not successfully appeal to the rural masses due to its central doctrinal shortcomings such as abandonment of idolatory, rejection of symbols, myths, customs, rituals etc. These movements appeared and disappeared sporadically, due to their failure to construct and manage significant organisational activities. Though the influence of tradition persisted, the impact of the West could also be seen in these movements. In the state of Karnataka, as in Maharashtra, these movements could not successfully challenge brahminical dominance and clear the way for backward class mobility.

4. Emergence of Non-Brahmin Movements:

1. Non- Brahmin Movements in Bombay -Karnataka:

Chronologically speaking, it was the Bombay-Karnataka region that first witnessed the non-Brahmin movement, the origin of which sometimes is traced back to Shivaji's period. In Maharashtra, the home of radical social movements, some Shudra castes, especially the Maratha- Kunbi caste groups, started to claim their higher status in the caste hierarchy even before the British came to power in this area. In the later part of the nineteenth century they made claims to a higher social status in spite of the opposition of the Brahmin caste groups. Out of this situation arose the so called 'non-Brahmin movement'. One of the earliest and most distinguished, ideologues of this movement was Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-90), who founded Satyashodhak Samaj. Though it was a socio-cultural movement in the beginning, later it was transformed into a political movement. The spirit and programmes of the Satyashodhak Samaj were embraced and partly extended by Shahu Chhatrapathi Maharaj (1874-1922) of Kolhapur.

The non-Brahmin movement was not confined to Kolhapur State alone. It spread to Belgaum district and the neighbouring areas of Bombay-Karnataka region. While the Marathas took the lead in Kolhapur and other areas of Bombay province in articulating the non-Brahmin cause, the Lingayats organised non-Brahmins in Belgaum and other districts. Thus it was an alliance between two dominant communities of the area. Several conferences of the Lingayats were organised in the district of Belgaum, starting in 1904. These culminated in the establishment of the Karnataka Lingayat Education Society in 1917. Similarly, the Muslims and Jains also organised to protect their interests. Bijapur, Dharwar, Chikodi and Nippani were the centres of Satyashodhak Samaj in Kannada region. A conference of Satyashodhak Samaj was held in Nipani of Belgaum district in 1916. Sholapur Branch of Satyashodhak Samaj was established in January 1918.

A non-Brahmin Conference was also organised in 1920 in Belgaum. The movement was led by the numerically and economically dominant Lingayats of the Bombay-Karnataka area, supported by Marathas and Jains.

The period from 1873 to 1919 saw the growth of the Samaj as almost a purely social religious reform organisation. But from 1919 to 1930, with the emergence of the non-Brahmin Party resulting from Montague- Chelmsford Reforms the Samaj activity was directed towards the political and economic disputes.

2. Non -Brahmin Movement in Mysore state:

However, in political terms, the most potent and well-organised non-Brahmin movement emerged in the Princely State of Mysore during the first two decades of twentieth century. The social and political developments of the Madras Presidency had an immediate impact on Mysore politics. In the Madras Presidency Brahmin dominance in the social and administrative set-up, even under the British rule created an awakening among the English educated non-Brahmin elite. This group became restive in Madras city, which ultimately manifested itself in the form of the non-Brahmin movement.

In Mysore, after the Princely family was placed in control of the state government again in 1881 the Government cultivated the reputation as a rare liberal island in the autocratic sea that was princely India. The press and speech here were as free as in British Indian provinces, educational institutions were developed and long before provincial legislatures were created in British India a Representative Assembly was established in Mysore. Given this liberal atmosphere an attempt by non-Brahmins to challenge Brahmin predominance in bureaucracy and other centres of power and dominance emerged as a natural and inevitable development. On this ground, Bjorn Hettne argues that the non-Brahmin movement in Mysore was not a mere reflection of the development in Madras. The social structure in Mysore had undergone certain changes, which created favorable conditions for a similar movement.

The Brahmins, though numerically very small, had come to occupy a predominant place in the princely state of Mysore. Realising that the Brahmin intellectuals were not properly serving their interests and that they stood to lose in the long run, the non- Brahmins began to seek avenues leading to places of position and power. The movement organised by K. H. Ramaiah and M. Basavaiah secured the support of some members of the royal family. They claimed to safeguard the interests of the backward communities, which essentially meant job opportunities for them.

In Mysore, the castes most fit to replace Brahmin monopoly were two numerically dominant Communities, the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, economically strong but educationally backward. Therefore, they could not compete with the Brahmins, who constituted just 3.4 percent of the population for government service. They, therefore, took lead in demanding reservations in state government jobs. They were supported by Other Backward Castes, Muslims, Indian Christians, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The economically dominant caste groups thought in terms of mobilisation of their communities through caste and community associations in the beginning of twentieth century. Accordingly, Lingayat Education Fund Association was formed in 1905 and Vokkaligara Sangha was formed in 1906. Central Mohammeden Association was established in 1909. These communal associations established between 1906-1909 indicate the attempts of the leaders of those sections to mobilise their respective communities, which laid the foundations for the events which took place in the following decades. They used the existing semi-democratic political forum, the Representative Assembly, to articulate and advance their demands effectively.

The non-Brahmin movement received a great impetus with the arrival of C. R. Reddy in Mysore from Madras where he had a name as an ardent champion of non- Brahmin cause. Under Reddy emphasis of the movement gradually shifted from education to politics and by 1917 Reddy had forged a political association

called Praja Mitra Mandali, which was really a turning point in the history of Backward Classes of Mysore State. In June 1918, a delegation of Praja Mitra Mandali leaders presented a formal plea to the Maharaja demanding major concessions for non-Brahmins.

The royal family, which was supporting the non-Brahmin cause from the beginning responded to the demand favourably and in August of that year a committee was appointed under Sir Leslie Miller, to enquire into communal representation in the state administration. Thus, the Princely state of Mysore was the first state to appoint a committee to go into the demands of the Backward Classes, the realisation of which would break the monopoly of dominant minority in the field of intellectual production and administration.

The Committee in its report submitted in August 1919 called for special provisions for non-Brahmins in scholarships and educational facilities and in appointment to state civil service, which came into force by an order of the Government in May 1921. When Maharaja had consented to the establishment of the Miller Committee in 1918, his Brahmin Dewan Sir. M. Vishweshwaraya had felt compelled to resign, and in 1919 the Maharaja appointed his uncle Kantharaj-Urs as Dewan, the first non-Brahmin to hold that post.

The Praja Mitra Mandali just became defunct with the departure of C.R. Reddy to Madras where he hoped to gain a better personal career in the wake of the introduction of Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. By the end of 1920s, the movement had to face a setback due to a number of other reasons too.

Firstly, its active membership probably never exceeded to two dozen men, all of whom were drawn from the urban elite class of non-Brahmins. None of these men sought to develop a popular base among the rural elite.

Secondly, leaders who formed C. R. Reddy's coalition were much more concerned with the furtherance of their own personal and family interests than the interests of their 'caste' or 'community', or of non-Brahmins in general. They advertised themselves as the spokesmen for these massive social categories primarily because it was a useful play in pursuit of their personal interests.

Thirdly, the Mandali failed due to the absence of internal cohesion also. The three major caste groups involved in the non-Brahmin movement-Lingayats, Vokkaligas and Muslims- could in no sense be said to constitute a community.

However, it should be accepted that the Government of the Princely State of Mysore effected numerous measures for the progress of Backward Classes in the field of education and to secure increased representation to them in the state service. However, the progress was brought in a very slow pace, creating distrust among non-Brahmins leaders towards the Government. The following figures presented in Table No.2.1 indicate the slow pace of change in this period.

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