

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on Mahar Watan: Quest for Socio-Economic Emancipation of Mahars

Sudhi Mandloi

This article seeks to explore the struggle of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to secure the abolition of the Mahar Watan for liberating Mahar Watandars from socio-economic exploitation prevalent at the village society. It is argued that the Mahars were tied to the watan system due to fixed hereditary occupations based on caste. It obligated them to undergo oppression about rendering disgraceful jobs, begging of leftover food, low remuneration, facing denial of landownership rights, which was primarily responsible for their degraded socio-economic status. He endeavoured to attain economic independence and social dignity for Mahars by demanding separate villages with land ownership rights away from the villages of caste Hindus.

Keywords: *Mahar Watan, Caste Hierarchy, Exploitation, Self-Esteem, Land, Segregation*

This paper discusses the concern of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on Mahar Watan and examines its various implications on the Mahar Watandars. The rural society of Maharashtra comprised proprietary and temporary peasants and a network of hereditary village official servants (balutedars) institutionalised through the balutedari system. Mahar being an untouchable marginalised community of Maharashtra located at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy, had to undergo numerous hardships under the Watan system. This paper addresses the two primary issues raised by Dr. Ambedkar: The first issue centres on Ambedkar's concerns for the Mahar Watandars and their deteriorating socio-economic condition in the rural society. The second issue focuses on Ambedkar's struggle for the abolition of Mahar Watan.

This paper aims to understand and analyse the socio-economic deprivation particularly landlessness, and *vethbegaari* (forced labour) imposed upon the Mahars, which were directly related to the vexed issue of Mahar Watan. Dr Ambedkar's writings in *Bahishkrit Bharat* and *Janata* unravel the economic exploitation and social servitude intrinsic to caste hierarchy in agrarian society, severely affecting the Mahar Watandars. It is argued that Dr Ambedkar's endeavour to secure the abolition of Mahar Watan arose from his deeply embedded intense urge to liberate the Mahar Watandars from the exploitative apparatus of the baluta system prevailing in the villages dominated by the upper caste Hindus. Ambedkar's key underlying issue was ensuring economic independence of Mahars by claiming ownership rights of cultivable land, preferably in separate villages, to eradicate their economic deprivation and, thus, enable their social emancipation by freeing them from the bondage of forced labour. He mainly addressed three pertinent questions

coupled with the complex issue of the Mahar Watan- *vethbegaari*, lack of access to economic resources which sealed their dependence on the villages, and social slavery as inferior village servants amalgamated with Untouchability vis-a-vis upper-caste Hindus in rural society leading to their oppression and disempowerment.

Mahars Watandars and their Socio-Economic Status in the Rural Society

The Watan system was one of the notable features of the Maharashtra's conventional society, which became an effective mechanism for maintaining administrative setup. Watan is an Arabic word signified place of residence, a hereditary land grant, and office given to the watandars. Their office and accompanying inam land as well as privileges were called watan (literally patrimony in Arabic), which was not only heritable but saleable and transferable with acknowledgement of state authorities and village assembly.¹ Mahar Watan was a land grant, as well as hereditary office. The rural administrative system of Maharashtra was prevalent at two levels, the district and the village level. The district-level Watandars included the Deshmukhs and Deshpandes, who supervised Patils and Kulkarnis at villages. The village-level Watandars were Patils, Kulkarnis, and Mahars, who assisted them. These inhabitants formed the village communities, which always existed as the socio-economic unit in the Maratha territories.² The Watandar was a hereditary functionary entrusted to look after the rural administration, and the state regulated it by decentralising power through the Watandars. They performed crucial duties in the administrative mechanism of Maharashtra.

However, not all the balutedars (village artisans) were regarded as Watandars; those who resided permanently in the villages were Watandar balutedars. Thus, for the Maratha Watandars, the acquisition of Watan was a matter of social prestige and significance. It is essential to point out that the Watandars held the Watan office and its various privileges including inam land, since times immemorial. Under the British Government, they had received no privileges as Watandars which they did not possess before.³ In parlance to the old rulers of Deccan, an inam was a piece of land granted by a ruler for a special purpose. Such grants were often made to temples, to group of village servants, to the headmen of the village or subdivision for the payment of his work.⁴ The practice of granting rent-free lands either as subsistence or remuneration for services appear to have been of very ancient origin.⁵

The balutedari system was an indispensable constituent of the village organisation in Maharashtra since the Medieval era and continued to function during British rule. According to the established customs and practices, the bara-balutedars were bound to serve the village community in a composite manner. They played a vital role in the functioning of village administration. A.R. Kulkarni remarked that the baluta system cannot be classified as demiurgic or jajmani. The only term that explains the system is grambhrutak or gramasevak traditionally used in the literature. This implied that the balutas were essentially the servants of the village as a whole.⁶ The social groups of the village community were tied together in the baluta system based on caste. As per their skills and capacities, each caste had been assigned a role or job to fulfil the needs of the entire village community. The bara-balutedars were classified into three

rows according to the principle of division of labour and precedence of the services required by the village community and the state. The first row of the balutedars included those servants whose services were considered to be more crucial to the kunbis (cultivators) for productive activities. In return, they were entitled for remuneration which was divided into three segments: a share of agricultural produce in kind (balute); various haqs (rights) (both in cash and kind); and revenue-free inam land. Altogether, this compensation was regarded as Watan of the balutedars. Under this system, a particular grain share was paid every year by each farmer to all the village servants based on their crop production. The payment was not made in cash, but in kind; nor was this payment in kind made on each occasion the service was rendered, but annually at harvest time. They could enjoy these privileges and perquisites as long as they carried out their duties efficiently. The balute entitled to them was fixed, but the nature of their responsibilities and hours of work depended upon the necessities of the village community. While “caste and class were significant factors in village life”, the baluta system, as Orenstein points out, was “superimposed upon them; it incorporated them and helped to make the community a unified whole.” The superiority of the land-owning group was also incorporated into the system, especially that of the dominant caste. The baluta system existed for the landowners. The village was theirs, for e.g., in a Maratha village, they were the “maliks”.⁷ Fukuzawa⁸ argues that in traditional Maharashtrian society the artisan castes were not servants of the dominant castes as such but rather of the village as a whole.

The Mahars were among the bara-balutedars ranked lowest in the social hierarchy while, ironically, providing services essential for the day-to-day functioning of the village community. They were deeply entrenched in the village administration. Their duties derived from their dual status as balutedars to the village as a whole and inferior village servant to the state functionaries. They are the most numerous class of village servant.⁹ There was hardly a village without at least one Mahar house. A Marathi proverb illustrates: ‘Wherever there is a village, there is a maharwada.’¹⁰ The Mahar balutedar duties, concomitant though they were with Untouchability, gave the Mahar a widely-held reputation for cleverness and, as Elphinstone put it, “early habits of inquisitiveness and observation.”¹¹ The nature of the responsibilities of Mahars was utterly different from those of the other Untouchable balutedars such as Chambhars and Mangs, skilled in particular crafts like shoe-making, rope-making, respectively. The Mahars did all the unskilled tasks and were obliged to carry out menial duties. The entire village community, including hereditary village officers like Patil and Kulkarni had a right to the Mahar’s labour. They are of uniform entity in the districts of, Khandesh, Nasik, Ahemednagar, Sholapur, Satara, Poona, Aurangabad, Thana, Kolaba, Ratanagiri, and Kolhapur. In this tract they form 9% to 5% of the population.¹² They live on the skirts of the towns and villages in dirty ill-kept one storeyed house... they work six to 12 and 2 to 9.¹³ Of the twelve subordinate village servants the Mahar is said to have been the most useful and the most honest. His voice carried greatest weight in cases of disputed property. He was considered the most trustworthy man in the village.¹⁴ It was due to the importance of the services of the Mahars they were placed in the first row in the classification of balutedars. The role of the Mahar in the village administration was not confined to one particular job, instead, they used to discharge manifold duties, which were quite tiresome.

Alexander Robertson said:

‘The duties of the Mahars as village servants are those of watchmen, of gatekeepers, messengers, of porters, of boundary referees, of guides and it is because they have the duty of removing the carcasses of dead animals that they are counted as untouchable. He is also the guide and a most important factor in the police.’¹⁵

A. Robertson further stated:

‘The kotwals Mahars are under the command of the Patil for carrying messages connected with the administration, and when superior officers visit the village the duties of the Mahar multiplied...The Mahar takes a pride in the duties required of him as government messenger; for he is often entrusted with the transport of large sums of money remitted to the district treasury.’¹⁶

A mid- nineteenth century British report by R. N. Gooddine provides an accurate estimate of Mahar:

‘The Mahar is called the village eye. He is the watchman and guardian of the village. His situation or his curiosity makes him acquainted with everybody’s affairs and his evidence is required in every dispute. Should the two cultivators quarrel respecting the boundaries of their fields, the Mahar’s evidence ought to decide it, the Mahars are always the chief actors in it. The Mahar’s duties are so numerous that complete enumeration of them would be tiresome; in short, the Mahar is to the village what a peon is to a government office.’¹⁷

The Mahar Balutedar’s duties also included tracking thieves, repairing the chaudi (village hall) and village wall, sweeping the village roads, carrying messages to other villages.... and bringing fuel to the burning ground.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that of all the tasks, the removal of dead cattle was viewed as the most impure; it was based on the notions of purity and pollution from which Mahars suffered. Their touch is considered to pollute Hindus, and so strong is the feeling about them, that a Mahar meets a high caste man the Mahar is expected to leave the road and step to one side, in case his shadow should fall on the man of high caste.¹⁹ Ambedkar said: ‘The case of the Untouchables is that of compulsory segregation. Untouchability is an infliction and not a choice.’²⁰ Ambedkar knew that exploitation, deprivation, and segregation were the inherent characteristics of the caste. The Untouchables were forbidden to live within the village and allowed to enter only because they had to perform polluting tasks which no other caste would perform. There were certain restrictions upon the Mahars to be abided by entirely by them. In addition to wearing the black thread, Mahars could own no new clothes or jewellery. They dressed in clothes taken from corpses, wore iron jewellery, ate from broken clay pots, and owned only ‘dogs and asses; rats and mice.’²¹ It was pretty ironic that despite fulfilling the village’s indispensable requirements, Mahar’s children could not attend schools, barbers refused to serve them due to Untouchability; entry into village temples was prohibited; and their quarters were segregated along caste lines outside the villages. Socially, Mahars were afflicted by Untouchability; thus, Ambedkar wanted the Mahar Watandars to emancipate themselves of the caste-based occupations imposed upon them by the upper caste Hindus.

Presidency Gazetteer of Sholapur, 1884 notes:

‘They are village servants and most of them enjoy a small government payment partly in cash and partly in land. He goes about begging food from the villagers, skins dead cattle and sells the useful to the villagers by digging the grave. They are poverty-stricken class barely able to maintain themselves. They hold a low position among Hindus and are both hated and feared.’²²

The Mahars income in the form of baluta was supplemented by what they could grow on their Watan land and by a host of perquisites known as fifty-two rights.²³ The Mahar Watan and the balute obtained from the cultivators was a means of their subsistence. There was no uniformity in the percentage of balute (grain payment) released as remuneration, and as W.H. Sykes; remarked, “rarely could one certainly know what one gave”. It depended very much upon the crops and also upon the services the Mahar performed for each individual cultivator.²⁴ M.G Bhagat blames the extreme poverty of Mahars on the low incomes they drew from the baluta and watans system, and if, they possessed a hereditary landholding, it was divided and sub-divided to the point that it did not bring back hardly anything.²⁵ Ambedkar argued that the Mahar Watan did not bring about any prosperity for Mahars; instead, it degraded their socio-economic conditions. Ambedkar said that Caste is still ‘the foundation of the Indian social fabric.’ Every Hindu is born into a caste and his caste determines his religious, social, economic and domestic life from the cradle to the grave.²⁶ He vehemently opposed the caste-based hereditary occupations, which, according to him, perpetuated economic injustice. He saw the Mahar Watan as a major aspect of Dalit exploitation and the false security it provided as a major socio-psychological barrier keeping the Mahars integrated into an exploitative village community.²⁷

Ambedkar pointed out that villages in Maharashtra were divided in two parts: Touchable villages, and Untouchable ghetto. The well-maintained houses belonged to the dominant castes, and poorly built homes were of Untouchables located outside the village. The dominant castes enjoyed all the privileges, whereas the Untouchables were economically dependent on them and were primarily landless agricultural labourers. Land was a productive asset for the rural communities and a significant source of livelihood. It was not merely economic security for rural society, but its ownership was concomitant with social status and prestige. Land relations in rural Maharashtra were based on caste hegemony facilitating the upper caste Hindus to enjoy the prerogative of land ownership. In contrast, Untouchable Mahars were forced to serve the upper castes and were deprived of fertile lands, hindering their socio-economic growth. According to Goodine, “the village of the Maratha country appears on first view as a kind of primitive commonwealth held together by individual interests” but on further investigation it reveals itself to be “a minor branch of feudal system of the earlier age.”²⁸ Ambedkar addressed the complex issue of unequal distribution of land holdings and upheld that the upper castes had extensive holdings compared to the lower castes, which were either landless or had small and fragmented holdings, which was the crucial factor behind poverty. Ambedkar was aware that the Depressed Classes have no economic independence in most parts of the Presidency. Some cultivate the lands of the Orthodox Classes as their tenants at will. Others live on their earnings as farm labourers

employed by the Orthodox Classes and the rest subsist on the food or grain given to them by the Orthodox Classes in lieu of service rendered to them as village servants.²⁹

Gail Omvedt pointed out that a crucial characteristic of Indian caste feudalism was the degree to which it institutionalised hierarchy and inequality among the exploited classes. These field servant's castes were not considered by the general feudal ideology to have any rights at all to the land.³⁰ Ambedkar observed that land distribution in rural Indian society occurred along caste lines, making it challenging for the Untouchables to acquire productive lands in the villages. He advocated redistribution of land to landless Mahars labourers to make them economically independent, enabling them to alleviate their socio-economic status. He argued that 'Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. The division of labour brought about by the Caste System is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination.'³¹

It was pretty evident that socio-economic conflicts existed between the upper caste Hindus and Untouchables Mahars in the rural society of Maharashtra. The claims of Mahar Watandars for procurement of inam land, haqs, and perquisites often led to hostility between them and the cultivators. Ambedkar was apprehensive that the Untouchables who were in the minority in the villages had to face a social boycott from the upper caste Hindu majority having socially and economically predominant position. R.V. Russell observed that: 'The status of village menial castes appears to be fixed by their dependent position on the cultivators and his social position was naturally superior to theirs. The latter are their patrons and superiors to whom they look for their livelihood.'³² Ambedkar knew that Untouchability was not merely a religious system but also an economic system and in fact, worse than slavery. He said that 'In slavery the master at any rate had the responsibility to feed, clothe, house, and keep the slave in good condition... But in the system of Untouchability the Hindus takes no responsibility for the maintenance of the untouchable. As an economic system it permits exploitation without obligation.'³³ He firmly believed that the caste system perpetuated the economic exploitation of the Untouchables and was the important reason behind their economic stagnation. He realised that the socio-economic rights of social groups were unequal, and caste hierarchy was primarily responsible for their dissimilar access to financial resources, leading to tyranny and dispossession of Untouchables. Ambedkar argued that the Hindu village is a working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing.³⁴ He pointed out that:

'They were not allowed to come closer to a touchable. They could not possess land or cattle which was the prerogative of touchable. They mainly work as agricultural labourers sustained on the basis of the wages provided by the touchable...As part of their remuneration the whole body of Untouchables get a small parcel of land assigned in the ancient past which is fixed and is never increased and which the Untouchables prefer to leave uncultivated because of its excessive fragmentations.'³⁵

The baluta system functioned mainly on the principle of cooperation and inter-dependence.

Still, it resulted in many disputes among the Watandar balutedarsto acquire various haqs and perquisites without uniform customs and practices. The Mahars had to struggle for their haqs with the other Untouchable castes such as Chambhars and Mangs and the village cultivators, resulting in these being reported to the village council for resolution. The Government of Bombay appointed a committee to enquire the educational, economic and social conditions of depressed classes in 1928:

The report highlighted that social boycott is always held over the heads of the Untouchables by the Caste Hindus as a sword of Democles. Only the Untouchables know what a terrible weapon it is in the hands of the Hindus. We have heard of numerous instances where the orthodox classes have used their economic power as a weapon against those Depressed Classes in their villages, when the latter have dared to exercise their rights, and have evicted them from their land, and stopped their employment and discontinued their remuneration as village servants.³⁶

Their biggest challenge was battling against socio-economic injustice. Ambedkar stated that the conflicts mostly related to the non-performance of disgraceful duties by Mahars. He said that, 'one of the duties of the Untouchables is to skin and carry the dead animals of the Hindus in the villages. If the Untouchables refuse to perform these duties to the Hindu public, the land which they live on is liable to be confiscated. They have to choose between doing the dirty work or facing starvation.'³⁷ Whenever cultivators attempted to stop the payment of balute, Mahars retaliated by killing cattle of cultivators to take revenge. The crime of cattle poisoning of which the Mahars of the village are often believed to be guilty, either from motives of revenge on account of non-payment of their dues or in order to obtain skins of animals. This is a crime which is most difficult to detect and punish which entails the most ruinous consequences on ryots.³⁸ The result of the conflict between them was the denial of all resources to Mahars. Ambedkar vociferously articulated that denial of socio-economic rights and access to cultivable land were most pronounced among Mahars, making them vulnerable to deprivation and subordination to the upper castes. Sometimes, the conflict between peasants and Mahar Watandars extended to such an extent that the peasants refused to pay perquisites and began replacing their services with other village servants, especially Mangs. As long as the Mahars accomplished their day-to-day duties and continued to accept their subjugated status without complaint, the village community guaranteed their subsistence.

The mechanism of the Watan system discouraged mobility for seeking independent earning by the village servants, nor was it too rigid either to bar them from moving out in search of new jobs. They could sale Watan land and migrate or settle down in nearby towns. Still, village servants preferred to be tied to the village structure for the sake of marginal perquisites, in am land, and they were also tenacious in clinging on to the Watan office. The tendency of abandoning Watan land was not a common phenomenon among the Mahar Watandars until the mid-nineteenth century.

Ambedkar's Struggle for Abolition of Mahar Watan

This section presents Dr. Ambedkar's endeavour to abolish Mahar Watan. Dr. Ambedkar had proposed a Bill to the Bombay Government in 1928 to secure the abolition of Mahar Watan. As

far as the Bombay Government was concerned, it realised that the Watan system was performing a dual function by regulating the agrarian relations of the village society on the one hand, while looking after the administrative needs at district and village levels on the other. The prime concern of the Bombay Government was to raise the maximum revenue and ensure its collection through hereditary officers at village level. The British intended to use the administrative knowledge of the Watandars and jagirdars for the development of the new system of revenue collection. The Bombay Government brought about two Acts related to the Watan system to regulate the hereditary officers. The Summary Settlement Act of 1863 released regional officers, Deshpandes and Deshmukhs from their hereditary duties by levying reduced taxes on their inam land through a process the British called “commutation” because their obligations were regarded as redundant by the state. Under the British, the hereditary village officers could maintain adequate connections with the cultivators and effectively served the Government. Thus, the state felt that it was essential to reinforce its authority over them. The Bombay Hereditary Offices Act was passed in 1874, which defined a ‘hereditary office’ as follows:

‘Hereditary office means every office held hereditarily for the performance of duties connected with the administration or collection of the public revenue, or with the village police, or with the settlement of boundaries or other matters of civil administration.’³⁹

By this definition the only balutedars who were included in the category of the hereditary village officers were Watandar Mahars and some other balutedars directly connected with tax collection, the village police, and certain other duties.⁴⁰ It appears from the examination of the Government records that there is no precedent for the grant by Government of either land or cash as allowance to the Watandar Mahar in an alienated village.⁴¹ It may be said that there was a demand even among the Untouchables for a better treatment, and that it was ultimately state power that suppressed such a demand and left them in the lowest position in the society.⁴² The state did not take any concrete steps for redressing their grievances; instead, it continued to avail their services as inferior village servants to maintain the setup of the rural organisation. The Watan system had innumerable consequences on Mahars which drove the educated Dalit class to raise their voice against it. The abolition of Watan became a contentious issue in the Bombay Legislative Council between 1923 and 1928. D.D Gholap, the first nominated Depressed Class member to the Council, expressed concern for the abolition of the Mahar Watan in 1923. He recommends to the Government the commutation of the Maharkhi Watan.⁴³ Still, the Bill could not bring about changes in the Mahar Watan as demanded by Gholap. On 19 March, 1928, Dr. Ambedkar proposed a Bill in the Bombay Legislative Council to amend the Bombay Hereditary Offices Act, 1874 and highlighted various hardships faced by the Mahar community. Ambedkar believed that with the abolition of Mahar Watan, other grievances of the Mahar could be redressed simultaneously. He proposed a bill:

‘Sir, I rise to move that Bill No. XII of 1928 be read for the first time. The hereditary officers referred to in this Bill are known under the Hereditary Offices Act as the inferior officers. A large part of these inferior holders are Mahars, I shall largely

speak of the Mahars as representative of the inferior officers.⁴⁴

The 'statement of objects and reasons' of his Bill ran as follows:

1. To make better provision for the remuneration of the officiating watandars.
2. To allow commutation of watans of inferior hereditary village servants.
3. To provide for the conversion of Baluta into a money cess.
4. To allow the holder of inferior watan to free himself from the obligations to serve the ryots.
5. To define the duties of officiating watandars.⁴⁵

He discussed multiple issues linked with the Mahar Watan to substantiate his claim for its abolition. First, it tied them involuntarily to the baluta system and compelled them to dispense laborious and polluting duties to the entire village community and the state. This Act did not delineate the obligations of Mahars precisely to force them to do all those works forbidden for the other castes. Every other Government servant; every peon in the Collector's office knows that he has to go to his duties at definite hours and return at definite hours. But that is never the case with these Mahars.⁴⁶ They were obliged to execute numerous types of vethbegaari tasks and had to undergo all sorts of tribulations and ignominy. Dr. Ambedkar steadily condemned the abuses associated with the Watan office, and held it responsible for their ruinous conditions. In his speech to the Bombay Legislative Council, he decried that these inferior holders of Watan were government servants according to the Watan Act, but their duties were not defined anywhere. 'It is not known, in fact nobody as a matter of fact, to what particular department these watandar Mahars belong. As a matter of fact, every department claims their services. Mahars were treated as servants to all government departments.'⁴⁷

Second, the number of working hours was not specified, and if the officiator to whom the work was assigned was not available, another member of his family was coerced to do the job assigned to the Mahar who was in service. Ambedkar asserted that the males and even female family members were also constrained to fulfil the assigned duties if the officially appointed person could not render assistance. Further, 'they could be called upon to render service at any hour of the day or night.'⁴⁸ He remarked that 'I submit that this is a most oppressive system not obtainable in any other department of Government service.'⁴⁹ Third, the remuneration they managed to obtain was in kind and cash. The payment in cash was insufficient in return for the arduous duties fulfilled by them and varied greatly from region to region. Ambedkar knew that inam land assigned to Mahars was small in size, largely infertile, and got apportioned among different family members to such an extent that it became a formidable task for them to sustain themselves. Ambedkar upheld that small and fragmented holding were the significant factors behind the low productivity of their lands. The release of the payment of balute by the cultivators was the central part of the remuneration of the Mahars, which they could get only with great difficulty due to their bitter relations with the cultivators. Thus, they left with no alternative of livelihood than depending entirely upon the cultivators. In this feud, the Mahars had always been at a loss due to the control caste Hindus exercised over resources, and they, thus remained subservient at their beck and call. Ambedkar argued that the Mahars were government servants, yet, the Government

resiled from paying their remuneration and referred them back to the cultivators for conciliation, which was further demeaning for them, because in most villages of Bombay Presidency, their mutual relations were hostile. He denounced the Government strongly for its outright dereliction of the duty to the cause of the Mahars. He remarked:

‘This House will be surprised if I tell them that the Government practically pays nothing from their treasury directly for the services it exacts from these people. In Thana district the amount paid by Government directly to the Mahar officiator comes to Rs. 1-8-0 per month; the amount paid in the Nasik district comes to Rs. 0-13-4 per month. Dr. Ambedkar remarked that the Mahars are government servants but the Government does not take upon itself the responsibility of paying the remuneration to the person who the Government employs... Mahar is left to the sweet will of the ryots.’⁵⁰

Refusal of duties by the Mahars was a matter of great concern by the caste Hindus. The Mahars had to face a backlash from the upper caste Hindus whenever they attempted to assert their socio-economic rights, which only aggravated the sufferings of Mahars. Whenever, for instance, any Mahar community in any particular village desires to make progress in any particular direction and that direction is not liked by the ryot, the one immediate step that the ryot takes is to stop the baluta and to proclaim a social boycott.⁵¹ It has even occasioned violent conflict between Mahars and caste Hindus, particularly the Marathas, who predominate in the village administration.⁵² Ambedkar observed that ‘such a system which enslaves the whole population, which smothers the spirit of progress, which blocks the way for furtherance, is a system which, I think, no right-minded person, no man with any feelings, will sustain or will justify.’⁵³ Another implication of the system was that it obligated the Mahars to beg for leftover food, considered as haq and wages that were the most disgracing and humiliating experiences, as highlighted by baby kamble in her memoirs:

‘Payment for this daily work carried out by the entire family consisted of going for bhakri. The Mahar head of the family had little spherical bells hanging on to a stick, so that villagers could move away as soon as they heard the Mahar coming to beg... On reaching a dwelling, without opening his mouth, he rang the bells on his stick three times. Then some scraps of rancid and stale food were thrown into his blanket.’⁵⁴

Dr. Ambedkar proposed to classify the Mahars in two groups. In the first, he placed those Mahars wanting to be free from the compulsion of performing strenuous duties and favoured the abolition of the Watan office by retaining Watan land. In the second group, he put those who desired to continue their services, provided their grievances were redressed. Ambedkar strongly recommended for the first group in his Bill the “commutation” of the Mahar Watan, which implied relieving mahars from delivering such hereditary services and allowing them to retain lands with their consent to pay the full revenue assessment. For those Watandars who were willing to offer hereditary services, he suggested converting baluta for them into a money cess by apportioning it in two parts—one for the government services, and another for private services. He also advocated

that the Mahar Watandar be recognised as a salaried government servant. However, the Government regarded balute as a joint remuneration for the services to the ryots and the Government. It was therefore essential to lay down proper remuneration for the Mahars separately for the state and private services. The committee appointed for this matter recommended that half of the proceeds of Watan land be given to the Watandars as land instead of as payment of the complete assessment of their lands. Ambedkar highlighted that:

‘They would like to have their freedom to serve or not to serve. But under the existing law this freedom is denied to them. They are forced to serve whether they wish it or not. This is due to the fact that the baluta is a joint remuneration and there is no way of finding out how much of the remuneration in the form of baluta is due for Government services and how much of it is due for private services.’⁵⁵

Ambedkar desired that if Mahars were not willing, they must be free from the compulsion of serving the cultivators, and they be paid accordingly. To be fair to the cultivators, he recommended that they not be pressured to employ their services. Ambedkar said:

‘My scheme provides for that freedom of contract, and I think at least in this century when every society has advanced from status to contract, we ought not for instance to block the progress of Indian society by refusing the Mahars and the ryots the liberty of contract.’⁵⁶

He argued that ‘it is therefore very essential, I think, in the interest of better administration and in the interests of peace in the villages that this partition of the baluta should take place. I submit it is absolutely contrary to the principle of law that the services of one class of people should be forced upon other classes of people.’⁵⁷ Ambedkar realised that under the pretext of watandari, Mahars had been coerced to work subserviently as landless labourers for the entire village community, leaving no scope for them to rid themselves of it. They had to work for the village officials and cultivators as agricultural labourers irrespective of their will. He was painfully aware that backed by caste rigidities, the upper-caste Hindus firmly opposed any attempt to acquire land ownership by the Mahars for fearing loss of control over their labour and, also this would have made them equal in status to upper-caste Hindus. He assured the House that this Bill had the support of the Mahar’s and it would not be mandatory for Mahars to accept it if they were not willing. He said:

‘I have placed the principles and the provisions of this Bill before the whole Mahar population at several meetings to enable them to express their opinion on this Bill and I am glad to say that the principles embodied in it have been unanimously accepted by them... and if the Government refuse to liberate these people on grounds of finance, on grounds of convenience, or on any other grounds, that it will be a war between the Revenue Department and the Mahars. If this Bill does not pass, I am going to spend the rest of my time in seeing that the Mahars organise a general strike.’⁵⁸

Ambedkar appealed to the Government:

‘In the case of those village servants whose services were only necessary for the

purpose of the ryot, Government by what are known as the Gordon settlements, commuted their watans, that is to say they allowed them to retain full possession of the lands on their consenting to pay full revenue assessment. Sir, the proviso of my Bill is nothing else than the principle embodied in the Gordon settlement.⁵⁹

Dr Ambedkar criticised the Government for being unresponsive to the Bill. He argued that the Government was unwilling to accept the Bill's proposal for the commutation of the Mahar Watan because then it would have to employ a large number of inferior village servants to perform the duties done by Watandar Mahars, which would enhance the financial burden on it. Ambedkar got disappointed and withdrew the Bill on 24 July 1929. Dr. Ambedkar introduced another Bill to amend the Bombay Hereditary Office Act of 1874 at the meeting of the Bombay Legislative Assembly held on 17 September 1937. He remarked:

'Three purposes underlay to Bill. First is to permit commutation of the Watan at the option of the holder, second to provide better security for the payment of the remuneration of certain classes of Watandars and the third purpose is to provide for specification by rules of the duties to be performed by the Watandars.'⁶⁰

In this Bill he proposed suggestions to the Watandars, the Government and the cultivators to come to common ground to resolve the various issues involved with the Mahar Watan but the Government did not pay any heed towards it. Instead, the Bombay Government brought about a new policy resolution in 1938 containing a list relating to the new duties to be performed by Mahars, Mangs and Vethias and imposed certain additional taxes (judi, an additional cash levy). To protest against this policy a conference of Mahars, Mangs and Vethias were held at Haregoan on 16 November in 1939 under Ambedkar's presidentship.⁶¹ In this conference, several resolutions were passed against imposition of additional taxes on their Watan lands, demanding its withdrawal; the prickly issue of reduction in their remuneration; substantial increase in their duties; and finally, commutation of the Mahar Watan. This conference wishes to bring to the notice of the government that there are innumerable villages in the presidency where Mahars are compelled to render the services free of cost.⁶² Ambedkar raised his voice vigorously against the policy of the Bombay Government which had been brought about in 1938. He submitted a representation to the Government in 1941 and stated:

'These grievances arise out of the new policy initiated by the Government of Bombay relating to the Watandars called Inferior Village Servants. They affect them in two vital matters, namely:

- (i) Heavy reduction of their remuneration, and
- (ii) Substantial increase of their Duties.'⁶³

Ambedkar proposed to the Government to enhance their remuneration in daily wages to not less than eight annas for performing new duties and to reduce judi imposed on inam lands. But he was quite disappointed that the Government remained blissfully indifferent to the representation submitted by him. Ambedkar pointed out that the Government neither increased their remuneration nor allotted additional land to them. On the contrary, the policy of collecting *Judi* has been going on apace and even pots and pans of poor and indigent families of the Inferior Village Servants are

being attached under the process of the Court and many of these families have been rendered quite destitute.⁶⁴ Ambedkar said that, 'The policy now adopted in the case of levying *Judi* on the Mahar Watan lands is a complete departure for which there is no precedent.'⁶⁵ Ambedkar's disillusionment with the Government's lackadaisical attitude, made him even more assertive to secure abolition of Watan. He argued that the Mahar Watan was onerous and inequitable to Mahars and wanting to end the system to give them equality of treatment with other Watandars. Ambedkar stated, 'the Mahar watan system is a system of heartless exploitation.'⁶⁶ Ambedkar delivered a speech in the Nasik conference held in 1941, 'this watandari has become a curse to the Mahars. It ties them down to eternal poverty and saps their self-respect.'⁶⁷ The conference resolved that Mahars defy collection of judi from them. He stated 'Let the watandar, therefore, go back with this idea fixed in their minds that the collection of the additional tax has to be resisted from the very first step and at every subsequent step'.⁶⁸ Ambedkar stated that 'what makes this injustice so unbearable is the conduct of the Government officers, who take service from the Mahars, but who never help them to recover the Baluta from villagers.'⁶⁹ Ambedkar realised that social justice for the Mahars was impossible to attain in the Hindu villages because they could in no way enforce the upper castes to release their balute as they were economically and socially weaker castes. Because of these reasons, he wanted untouchables to establish separate settlements (villages) for themselves to become free of the disgraceful hereditary services to the upper caste Hindus and their tyrannical attitude towards them. Ambedkar said that:

'I refer to the project of having new settlements of the untouchables, separate and independent of the Hindu villages. Why have the untouchables been the slaves and serfs of Hindus for so many years? To my mind the answer lies in the peculiar organisation of Hindu villages. Attached to Hindu village there exist a small settlement of untouchables. Secondly this settlement of untouchables is economically without any resource and opportunity for improvement. It is invariably a settlement of landless population. It is wholly a population destitute and dependent for its livelihood upon Hindu village. In this setting you can well understand why the untouchables remained in a degraded condition for centuries. The village system must therefore be broken.'⁷⁰

Dalit leaders met at the All-India Depressed Class Conference held at Nagpur on 18 July 1942 to take several important decisions about the Untouchables. The Conference of 1942 passed several resolutions and endorsed that along with constitutional changes in the system of Government; there must be changes in the complex structure of the village setup:

1. The Constitution should provide for the transfer of the scheduled castes from their present habitation and constitute separate scheduled caste villages, away from the Hindu villages, a provision shall be made in the constitution for the establishment of a settlement commission.
2. All government land which is cultivable and which is not occupied shall be handed over to the commission to be held in trust for the purpose of making new settlements of the scheduled castes.⁷¹

Ambedkar thought that as long as the Untouchables lived in the Hindu villages, they would continue to be subject to economic disabilities and oppression of all kinds by the upper caste Hindus. The explicit motive of the caste Hindus was to ensure that they could never claim their socio-economic rights to alleviate their condition. Thus, the only alternative available to them was to either serve the cultivators or starve. Dr. Ambedkar said: that there were large areas of cultivable waste land lying untenanted in the country which could be set apart for the settlement of Scheduled Castes. Objection, he thought, would come only from those who had been accustomed to using the Scheduled Castes as a source of labour which was available to do all the unclean jobs and who could be forced to work at the cheapest wage-rate. They would like to perpetuate this slavery.⁷² Ambedkar asserted that the demand for separate villages became an unavoidable step to bring about the socio-economic independence of the Mahars. Ambedkar suggested migration to “some better and distant lands” if Dalits wanted to get rid of the oppression in the villages. He even suggested Sindh and Indore as destinations where he would try to secure cultivable land for the Dalits.⁷³

Conclusion

This article seeks to demonstrate that two factors were instrumental behind Ambedkar’s drive to secure the abolition of Mahar Watan. The first was the desire to redeem Untouchable Mahar Watandars from the serfdom of performing degrading duties imposed by the caste-Hindus via the balutedari system to facilitate the social emancipation of Mahars. The second was to secure equal distribution of economic resources for them, specifically fertile lands for cultivation to achieve economic liberation for those Mahars who were landless agricultural labourers. In “Annihilation of Caste” Ambedkar analysed caste from the perspective of economics and argued that economic rigidities and division of labour in water tight compartments had tendencies to make society backward. He hypothesised that caste hierarchy and stigma were coterminous with Untouchability and were major factors in perpetuating bonded labour, economic deprivation and social exclusion of Untouchable Mahars in rural society. He saw that landless labourers in the villages were utterly poor and remained at the mercy of the upper castes. Ambedkar advocated that the Untouchable landless agricultural labourers must get their due share of national wealth, which prompted him to demand separate villages. Ambedkar regarded Mahar Watan as a stumbling block in the path of advancement of the Mahars. He was against the monopoly of economic resources and argued that unless economic inequalities were eradicated, economic democracy would never be achieved. He believed that ownership to cultivable land and emancipation from caste-based occupations could play key roles in empowering them.

Dr. Ambedkar suggested two remedies for them: first, he encouraged Mahar to relinquish their hereditary menial jobs by retaining the Watan land and, second, he urged them to pursue new avenues of jobs triggered by colonial modernity for their financial advancement. He suggested that they shift to the cities to reap the benefits of urbanisation and industrialisation. But many of them had trepidation in moving out of the village by quitting their traditional occupations. Large numbers of Mahars were still tied to the Watan system without ownership of cultivable lands.

Dr Ambedkar sought to get the Bill passed, but unfortunately, could not succeed. However, his struggle for the abolition of Mahar Watan continued. He prepared a memorandum entitled “State and Minorities” to be submitted to the Constituent Assembly in 1947, proposing several remedies to resolve the agrarian issues, specifically land. Ambedkar was in favour of state socialism, which would facilitate rapid industrialisation. He suggested state ownership of land with collective farming instead of consolidation of land holdings. His eventual solution to the agrarian problem was collectivisation of agriculture where the state would lease out land to families without a distinction based on caste so that “there will be no landlord, no tenant and no landless labourer”⁷⁴ Ambedkar’s movement did create an awakening among the Untouchable Mahar sat their socio-economic rights having been usurped by the dominant castes in the villages. In the post-Independence period, Ambedkar demanded Government-owned Forest and uncultivated fallow land for Untouchables. After Ambedkar’s death, Dadasaheb Gaikwaad, a follower of Dr. Ambedkar, launched a Bhumiheen Satyagraha in 1958-59 under the Republican Party of India banner. He fought to procure the land rights of Untouchables which was a vision conceived by Ambedkar. It was finally after relentless efforts that the Bombay Inferior Village Act was passed in 1959. The Act did not take away Watan land from the Mahars, essential for earning their livings. It gave Mahar communities access to land by paying the price equal to three times the total assessment of such land within the prescribed period at least on paper. Still, they had a long way to break many barriers to get livelihood security, social dignity, and equal rights.

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