



## Role of Ad-Dharm Movement in Dalits' Lives and Its Relevance in Present Times

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### Abstract:

In the history of Dalits in Punjab, the most important development have occurred in pre independence period is emergence of the Ad-Dharm movement. This movement serves the mile stone and sources of inspiration for Dalits particularly in Punjab and broadly in India. This paper is an attempt to understand its ideology, strategies to create awareness among Dalits and the role of Ad-Dharm movement to uplift Dalit community in Punjab.

**Key Words:** Ad-Dharm movement, Dalits, Caste, Discrimination, Salvation, Inspiration, Relevance

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### I. Introduction

Dalits<sup>1</sup>, who are/were always become victims of caste based discrimination, try to get rid of it. Hence, three basic ways have been suggested from time to time to provide salvation from caste discrimination to Dalits: Sanskritization, Conversion and Social Reform movements. The term 'Sanskritization'<sup>2</sup> used and popularised by M.N. Srinivas, was implied to adoption of Hindu rituals for removing the effect of caste and untouchability. The Conversion is the second way to get rid of caste based discrimination. In the South Indian states, it was a very popular way to get relief from deprivation and humiliation on account of the caste status. The Buddhism is the most respected religion for conversion. Dr. Ambedkar also adopted conversion as a way to get liberation from casteism in the last years of his life and got converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Dalits followed the path or conversion to get relief from their sorrows and miseries originating from their caste status. They converted to other religions e.g. Islam, Sikhism and Christianity but could not succeed in achieving an equal status in the religions they converted into. The instances of conversion still continue but discrimination still remains there. However, Punjab is different from other regions of India because Dalits of Punjab did not adopt first two ways for salvation instead they adopted the third way of social reform movements as argued by Ram, (2012)<sup>3</sup>. The social reform movements have their own importance. In the history of Dalits in Punjab, two types of movements emerged; socio-religious and political movement. The first type of movements started in pre-independence period. The leaders of these movements also entered in politics and contested elections of 1937 and 1946. The second type of movement mostly emerged in post independence period as an effect of reservation policy. The

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<sup>1</sup> Dalit is a term which refers to oppressed and broken people. It is used for the Depressed Classes as Hindi version which are now called Scheduled Castes. Hence it is politically correct as Dalit is inclusively used for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and the Backward Castes. And exclusively used for the Scheduled Castes.

<sup>2</sup> The term Sanskritization was preferred to Brahminization which means give up carrying dead animals and meat and adopt Hindu rituals like wearing sacred thread. see: Srinivas, M.N. (2002). *Collected Essays*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.

<sup>3</sup> Ram, Ronki. (2012). Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab. *Modern Asian Studies*. 46(3).

first phase basically started with Ad-Dharm movement. It was independent in nature. In the beginning, it was socio-religious in nature but towards the end it entered into political phase. It has succeeded in building new consciousness and instilling a sense of dignity in Dalit community. It was the only movement in Northwestern India which aimed to secure respect, political assertion, social status and spiritual regeneration for Dalits.<sup>4</sup> It tried to secure a separate identity from Hinduism like Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> It attempted to build new spirit in Dalit community and worked independently without any pressure from upper castes people. This paper is an attempt to understand the role of Ad-Dharm movement to uplift Dalit community in Punjab and its relevance in present times.

### **Role of Ad-Dharm Movement in Dalits' Lives**

Ad-Dharm Movement was an independent Dalit movement and their agenda was very clear which aimed at the creation of a new religion or qaum like other religions. As Juergensmeyer (1988) explained, "Its main motif was novel: the idea that untouchables constitute a qaum, a distinct religious community similar to those of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and that the qaum had existed from time immemorial."<sup>6</sup> Ad-Dharm movement has produced many committed leaders who worked for their community like Mangoo Ram Mangoo-waila, Sant Ram B.A., Vasant Rai, Thakur Chand, Swami Shudranand, Mangoo Ram Jaspal etc. These leaders of Ad-Dharm movement had effectively done their job in leading and motivating the Dalits of Punjab.

The first meeting of Ad-Dharm movement was held on June 11-12, 1926 Hoshiarpur in which many people from other religions participated. Mango Ram made restless efforts to preserve own culture, festivals, religious scriptures, places and teachings of Gurus in order to provide a distinct identity to Dalits in Punjab. The leaders of movement claimed that Dalits are the real inhabitants of India and therefore they used the word 'Ad' for their identity. The motive was to fill inspiration in Dalits and change their thinking. They appealed Dalits to shun their inferiority and follow the path shown by their Gurus to live a respectful life. They condemned other religions and made efforts to establish their own religion 'Ad Dharm'. They wanted to build self-confidence in untouchables to prepare them to revolt against the inhuman treatment by upper castes.<sup>7</sup> For the fulfilment of the ideas of the movement, the leaders of the movement accepted Guru Ravidas as Guru who was also from Chamar caste. He played an important role for creation of equality and fraternity in the society. He gave a middle path between assimilation and radical separation. It was an obvious choice as Guru Ravidas and his teachings already existed in the consciousness of Punjabi Dalits. "His mysticism is not based on the blind faith but is the by-product of first hand and immediate encounter of truth and reality. The Ad-Dharmis used his picture as their emblem and his sayings as their sacred texts."<sup>8</sup> Further, Mangoo Ram met Sant Sarwan Dass Maharaj at Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Jalandhar). With their concern, the Ad Prakash, a holy Granth was prepared. It contains the Bani of Guru Ravidas and other Dalit Gurus. They also said that Guru Nam Dev, Guru Ravidas, Sant Kabir, Swami Valmiki and all other Dalits saints are our Gurus. The satsang of Ad-Dharmis followed a pattern like Sikhs. Like other religions, they choose symbols for their separate identity. The sign of Har, Jai Guru Dev, Aarti and Ardass and wearing of red clothes are the main symbols which helped to create a distinguish identity for the followers of the movement.<sup>9</sup> The basic idea of the movement revolved around Guru Ravidas. He was not only a Guru but a symbol of cultural and religious identity of the lower castes. He occupied an important place in the Sikh holy Book 'Guru Granth Sahib'. Ad-Dharm presents a different view of a religion which always works for people's welfare. It was an organization to present a real vision. Leadership of this movement appealed to Dalits that they should live their life according to principles of Ad-Dharm movement and also follow the path shown by own Gurus.

Secondly, for the fulfillment of the political ideas, Ad-Dharm movement established an Ad-Dharm Mandal. This was a political organization of this movement. It contested the elections in 1937. Despite the Mandal won all but one seat, it was successful in spreading awareness and assertion among lower castes. Alliance with the Unionist Party, Ad-Dharm Mandal, contested election in 1945-46 and Mangoo Ram got elected. After independence, Ad Dharm movement lost its effect, none of the Dalit leaders emerged as an

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<sup>4</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark. (1988). *Religious Rebels in Punjab*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi.

<sup>5</sup> Ram, Ronki. (2004a). Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab, *Contribution to Indian Sociology*, 38(3).

<sup>6</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark. (1988). *Religious Rebels in Punjab*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi. p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Chumber Prem Kumar. (2013). Ad Dharm Day June 11-12. [http://www.ambedkartimes.com/the\\_ad\\_dharam.htm](http://www.ambedkartimes.com/the_ad_dharam.htm) (accessed on 6 Aug. 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Kumar, Vinay. (2014). Historical Analysis of Dalit Assertion in Punjab: A Study of Ad Dharm Mandal Report, *International Journal of Research*. 1(4), p. 944.

<sup>9</sup> Ram, Ronki. (2008). Ravidas Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67(4).

impressive personality.<sup>10</sup> Ad-Dharm Mandal is the saviour of Ad-Dharm movement and the leadership of this movement held it strongly to protect the rights of untouchables. Many Dalit leaders have worked for the success of the movement. Ad-Dharm Mandal report which was published in Punjabi and Hindi by the editor of magazine "Kaumi Odarian" claimed that the Ad-Dharm Mandal had 500 members and 55 missionaries.<sup>11</sup> They also started newspapers like *Adi Danka* and *Ujjala* to bring consciousness in Dalit community.

### **Impact of Ad-Dharm Movement and Its Relevance in Present Times**

The impact of the movement was revealed through census 1931 as it was a great event for Dalits in Punjab. It was an opportunity to show their strength and assert their identity. 'Mangoo Ram also expected to bring other untouchable communities into the fold of Ad-Dharm and emerge as a viable community at the regional level.'<sup>12</sup> Jodhka (2009)<sup>13</sup> also argued that Ad-Dharmis succeeded in making a new beginning with a new identity despite opposition from other communities. They pressurised British government to conduct a caste based census in 1931. They had no faith in Hinduism and wanted to enlist themselves as Ad-Dharmis. Therefore the leaders of the movement convinced the British Government to list Ad-Dharm as a separate religion. The British Government accepted this idea as they wanted to know, how clearly change has taken place. The members of Ad-Dharm movement worked hard towards this cause related to census. They made rallies and contacted the people door to door so that they became aware of their rights and enrolled themselves as a member of Ad-Dharm for dignity and separate identity.

Despite the reaction from other communities, the Ad-Dharm finally created history when 418789 people considered and enlisted themselves as Ad-Dharmis. Their number was roughly equal to Christians in Punjab. It was a massive change as the census showed the strength of untouchables depicting hard-work of their leaders. People from every region like Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Lyallpur, Lahore, Kangra, Shahpur and Gujarat etc enrolled as Ad-Dharmis.<sup>14</sup> The signs of a great movement appeared in the beginning itself with the first meeting where all Dalits even non Dalit castes came together. In the first meeting in 1925, people from all sections of Punjab attended this meeting. The participants of this meeting comprised of Chuharas, Chamars, Ravidasis, Sansis, Bhanjires, Ghadhilias, Burrs, Julahas, Megas, Chambaras, Kabirpanthis, Mahashas, Doms and other castes. The people from non Dalit castes like Chirstians, Sikhs, Muslims, Arya Samajis and Sanatanis also attended this meeting.<sup>15</sup>

It was the great movement in Dalits' history which made remarkable improvement in their lives. It is also true that every sunrise has a sunset. Therefore, in post independence period, the effect of Ad Dharm movement decreased. A number of reasons became the causes of decline of the movement. One is the rift between Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi which led to the Poona Pact. As Jodhka (2009) explained that "The beginning of the decline of the Ad-Dharm movement can perhaps be located in the famous Poona Pact of 1932 between Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar and the formation of Scheduled List in the Government of India Act 1935."<sup>16</sup> Another reason is the rift within Ad-Dharm movement leaders that led to the establishment of two separate organisations in 1930s: the Ad-Dharm Mandal lead by Mangoo Ram and the All Indian Ad-Dharm Mandal lead by Vasant Rai. Mangoo Ram group worked on the idea to create new religion for untouchables because they felt humiliated by other religions. Then Dalits started following new religious sects like Radha Soami and Dalit Deras.<sup>17</sup> The decline of the movement leads to two outcomes- the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Dalit Deras which are working on the agenda of this movement.

In spite of this literarily views, it is important to collect the responses of present generation among Dalits to analyses the role and legacy of Ad-Dharm movement. During my field trip, I met many respondents with this aim to know their views regarding this great movement. But it is very surprising thing for me as a researcher that majority of the respondents did not know about this movement. Some respondents expressed their views about the movement that it was a great movement and Mangoo Ram who awakened the Dalits was himself inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, "*Dr. Ambedkar inspired Mangoo Ram. He tolerated discrimination and*

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<sup>10</sup> Ram, Ronki. (2010). *Dalit Chetna: Srot Te Saroop*, Lokgeet Parkashan , Chandigarh.

<sup>11</sup> Ram, Ronki. (2010). *Dalit Chetna: Srot Te Saroop*, Lokgeet Parkashan , Chandigarh. p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Jodhka, Surinder S. (2009). The Ravi Dasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44 (24), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> see also Juergensmeyer, Mark.(1988). *Religious Rebels in Punjab*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi. p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 77-79.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in Punjab*, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988), 298.

<sup>16</sup> Surinder S. Jodhka, "The Ravi Dasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIV, No.24 (2009): 81.

<sup>17</sup> Jodhka, Surinder Singh.(2004). Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy: Caste and Untouchability in Rural India", in Harish K. Puri, (Ed.), *Dalit in Regional Context*. Rawat Publications, New Delhi.

*started Ad Dharm movement for Dalits' progress and in order to carry forward Baba Sahib's movement in Punjab. It is big contribution to unite Dalits and role of Mangoo Ram in Dalits is unmatched."*

One respondent described the importance of this movement and the struggle of Mangoo Ram with illustration of a true story, *"Ad-Dharm movement was started by Mangoo Ram which is very important for Dalits. There is a very famous incident regarding Mangoo Ram. He lifted the chair on his head in Lahore assembly. Then Sikandra Hiyat (CM) asked him that why he lifted the chair. He asked him to put it down. Then Mangoo Ram asked where should he put it? He said the he has no place to put his chair, meaning that Dalits have no land or even the right to purchase land. It was a way to show the landlessness of Dalits. Then Dalits, in the first time of history, succeeded to get rights to purchase land. After it, Dalits got land inside the red line area. It was big contribution from Mangoo Ram to Dalits."*

Some respondents highlighted the leadership qualities of Ad-Dharm leaders and suggested that present leadership should have learn a lesson from it, *"The entire leadership of Ad-Dharm movement was brave and had guts. They were fearless and brave hearted persons who struggled for rights despite their poverty. Mangoo Ram struggled a lot for community. There is need of a strong base to establish a building. (Je makan bana hove tan nee (base) di jarorat pendi hai.) This movement was a strong base for Dalit assertion."*

One of the respondents recalled the linkage of his forefather with Mangoo Ram. His grandfather was Seth Kishan Chand who worked with Mangoo Ram and played key role for the success of Ad-Dharm movement by giving financial help. He also started 'Adi Dhanka Newspaper' to raise their voice. *"The beating of drum to awaken the Dalits."*(*'Ad-Dharmis nu jagaun lai Danka vajya'*.)

Some respondents gave argument that the movement gained much impact only in Doaba region, *"It was a successful movement which created new consciousness in Dalits mainly in Doaba region. Now, Dalits from Doaba are revolutionary because of Mangoo Ram."* Some respondents explained Mangoo Ram's role to support the claim of Dr. Ambedkar as leader of Dalits during 'Round Table Conferences' at London, *"During Round Table Conferences, under the leadership of Mangoo Ram, Dalit people sent letters in Dr. Ambedkar's support proclaimed that Dr. Ambedkar is their leader and not Mahatma Gandhi. Ad-Dharm Mandal gave full support to Baba Sahib and also appreciated him. Ultimately Ad- Dharm movement and its leadership struggled for Dalits. On the recommendation of Dr. Ambedkar, the British government sent Simon Commission to India to analyse the conditions of Dalits. Due to report of this commission, reservation was implemented. We can say that leaders sacrificed for us but we have been forgotten their struggle."*

Some respondents argued that the movement could not maintain its success due to lack of effective leadership in contemporary times, *"The success of any movement depends on its followers but followers of Ad-Dharm movement could not keep its momentum. If BSP leadership could follow it properly, then it would have given us good advantage. Though we have the knowledge about the Ad-Dharm movement and its heroes but our forthcoming generations have no knowledge about it. They even do not know who Mangoo Ram was? Nowadays, it is not a sub caste in Scheduled Castes but a religion. The movement and its struggle were great but it has not been highlighted by the leadership. The leadership of Ad-Dharm movement made great sacrifices but intellectuals and Dalits do not recognise them. It is the responsibility of Dalit leadership to highlight the movement and create awareness in the community regarding this great movement. But it is not happening. BSP should organise seminars and rallies regarding this. This will doubly benefit the society, first people will awaken and second, it will highlight the sacrifices made by our heroes."*

A few of respondents said, *"It was a good movement but nowadays it has no relevance at all."*

## **II. Concluding Remarks**

In the concluding remarks it can be said that Ad-Dharm movement was a great movement in north India especially in Punjab. It spread a great impact on the lives of Dalits of Punjab and creates a new consciousness among them. Under the dynamic leadership of this movement, Dalits organized struggle against caste system and discrimination. In present time, Dalits are more conscious socially, religiously and to some extent politically. They understand their strength and try to build new identity. They persistently work for their self respect and dignity especially in the society. Hence it was a successive movement but it is also true that it could not maintain its momentum. Nowadays, new generation of Dalits do not know about this movement and try to find other platforms for the fulfilment of their aspiration to create an equalitarian society. Therefore it is a responsibility of Dalit leadership to spread the legacy and ideas of this movement and create awareness among Dalits.

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