



## AD DHARM AND BHAI MANGU RAM PRADHAN'S "ACCLAIM OF AD DHARM", A FOUNDATION OF DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS IN PUNJAB

**Manisha Choudhary**

Department of English, University of Delhi

### ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to study the situation of lower castes in colonial Punjab through a religious and political movement called Ad Dharm and Mangu Ram's book *Acclaim of Ad Dharm*. To understand this, it will be necessary first to critically discuss the persona of Bhai Mangu Ram Pradhan as is reflected through his book and the reformatory movement. Second, there is need to briefly analyse the Ad Dharm movement and its ideology. The paper also attempts to study how different was the colonial society from society after independence in Punjab and to what extent is education successful in liberating the ex-untouchables. To understand these changes, this research draws upon the Mark Juergensmeyer's case study of three villages and his book *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*. In doing so, the paper suggests that reformatory movements like Ad dharm and motivational literary works like *Acclaim of Ad dharm* had made low caste citizens of Punjab conscious of their rights and had helped them to improve their economic status, but this did not ensure complete liberation which can be provided only by a casteless society.

**KEYWORDS :** Ad-dharm, Mangu Ram, ex-Untouchables

Mangu Ram, the founder of Ad Dharm movement, had his roots in village culture of the lower Chamar caste, but experiences abroad forged him into a modern man. Mark Juergensmeyer(2009b) says that "... his characteristics were modern ones: eclectic, assertive, uncompromising, optimistic" (p. 289). In his book *Acclaim of Ad Dharm*, Mangu Ram(2018) narrates that on coming back to India, he realises the miserable condition of the people of his community and also reflects on the unjust behaviour of high caste people. He through his verses motivates the people of his community to organise themselves and get recognition. He says,

"Ad Dharmis, this is my request and a question for the reformation of community.

I have visited foreign country, this question is raised by heart only.

On returning I observed your condition, my blood outburst with rage. (para. 1)

He wants people of his community to form their own unique identity by making an emotional, economic and physical contribution. His agenda was to save the next generation through education and the slogan of Ad Dharm, "Education leads us to where the truth resides [sachkhand]" (Juergensmeyer, 2009b, p. 120) clearly reflects Mangu Ram's(2018) belief. He says,

"Don't forget while working, we have to reform our community.

Send our children to schools, let them get well educated.

Education makes a community get recognized, let us get known as scholars. (para. 4)

He advised opening religious accounts in villages where people can donate money because without money they can not liberate and educate this large section of people. When Mangu Ram came back to India, his first action was to establish a school for lower caste people. Later on, in 1926, he and other leaders of Ad Dharm took upon themselves the task of creation of alternative religion for untouchables, which they called Ad Dharm. In this, they fostered three powers of lower caste communities which, Mark Juergensmeyer(2009b) states, are "communal pride[qaumiat], religion[mazhab] and organisation[majlis]" (p. 46).

Ad Dharm movement by Mangu Ram was a response to the need for social and political mobilisation of the lower castes of Punjab. Though, Punjab is considered by many to be a state where there is less caste-based discrimination due to the presence of Sikhism, however, as far as the real-life situation is concerned it is far from being an exception. Lower castes in Punjab also have been subjected to humiliation just like their counterparts in other parts of India. But as discussed by Ronki Ram(2012c), Punjab has a notably exceptional caste hierarchy which does not follow mainstream Hindu social order, in which Brahmins are placed at the top. "Brahmins in Punjab are not venerated. Instead, they are treated rather derogatorily and are condemned as a *mang khani jaat* (a community/caste simply living on alms)" (p. 659). However, in Punjab, the land-owning Jat Sikhs occupy the top position in the caste hierarchy and at the lower end falls the landless low castes of Churas and Chamars. This hierarchical system is due to material and political

consideration, as jats here are land owners. It has no relationship with hindu social order. The roots of caste-based discrimination in Punjab were so well entrenched that they survived the reformatory endeavours of movements like Arya Samaj. So, there was a need for a movement, Ad Dharm, which can give separate *qaumik* identity to low caste people of Punjab. In this movement, Ravidas was given the status similar to Sikh Gurus and was also called *Adi Purkh*. They did not worship idols, used the red colour of their ancestors and adopted the salutation '*Jai Gurudev*' to make their religion different from Sikhism, Hinduism and others. Mangu Ram(2018) evokes to Gurudev in his verses as well, in Bant 1 he says, "Auspicious Gurudev you are auspicious, we plead before you" (para 6). The Ad Dharm Mandal newspaper *Adidanka* which was, printed in Urdu and Punjabi, was used to spread consciousness among low caste people.

Ad Dharm presented to its followers a vision of a world which both confirmed and transformed the rude experience of Untouchables. It gave meaningful shape to the situation in which they already lived by extolling the power of qaumiat and mazhab, projecting the notion of a separate community understood as a new religion. (Juergensmeyer, 2009b, p. 54)

The collective identity of untouchable low castes existed even before Ad Dharm, but the notion of untouchable as a qaum came into the picture only after the emergence of this movement.

Although, Punjab has a reputation of liberality in social attitudes the low castes still have to face the stigma of Untouchability, only the intensity of oppression can vary. The case study of three villages by Mark Juergensmeyer named Bimla, Nalla and Boota Mandi clearly shows this. Some forms of discrimination discussed in the *Acclaim of Ad Dharm* continue to exist even today as the uneducated low caste people are still doing wage labour and odd jobs. In the villages surveyed by Mark Juergensmeyer, the society of lower castes was more liberal than upper caste society, they consumed beef, divorce was permissible, and all the members of the family including women were employed. The village Bimla was a semi-feudal society where the cultivable land was owned by Jat Sikhs. *Chamars* and *Chuhra* castes were landless and were working as agricultural labourers. None of the lower caste children attended schools. There is a discussion of such brutalities by high caste people in verses by Mangu Ram as well. He says that people of his community were addressed using derogatory terms like *Kamin*, *Chandal*, and *neech*. They survived on *begaar* and lived a miserable life. The lower caste people of the village Bimla had their separate religious leader, Bhagat Singh, who was a priest of the *gogapir* sect. In Nalla, the situation of lower caste people was not as worse as Bimla. The government in this village had built houses for Chamars but due to the fear of exclusion and isolation from mainstream society they refused to move into this concrete housing. The Churas and Chamar's here were following alternative religions like Ad Dharm, Radhasoami, Ravidasi and Nirankari. Third village surveyed, Boota Mandi, was a developed area. Here the economic condition of low caste citizens was better, however they were

untouchables in the eyes of many high caste citizens, even if they owned television sets, lived in middle-class residential complexes and their children went to school. So, the above studies show that Punjab has different forms of discrimination. Even if the lower caste people were educated and working in respectable professions, they still have to suffer the stigma of untouchability and caste discrimination. When Mangu Ram (2018) says that,

"Ad Dharmis are in sound sleep, its influence of illiteracy.

People insult us like dogs, no account of sufferings.

Get intelligence with education, keep eye at the higher goals." (para. 7)

He had high hopes in education for liberating the lower castes. But the example of Boota Mandi clearly shows that education can improve the economic condition of the lower castes, but it can not liberate them fully from the stigma of caste.

Before the arrival of Ad Dharm mostly conversion, Sanskritization and what Mark Juergensmeyer calls '*Sikkhisation*' were used for social mobilisation by lower caste people but to ensure complete liberation Ronki Ram says that we need to find alternative agendas for chura and chamar population of Punjab like Ad Dharm, Ravidassia, Guru Ravidas apart from spreading education.

It is argued that what distinguishes the alternative Dalit agenda from conversion and Sanskritisation is that it gives expression to the native religion and heritage of the Punjabi Dalits as indigenous inhabitants of the land, without inducing them to get assimilated into the dominant regional cultural patterns or to convert to another religious faith. The adherence to Ad Dharm or the cult of Ravidass is neither a case of conversion nor of Sanskritisation. On the contrary, it can be characterized as a case of Dalit homecoming as well as a radical mode of Dalit social protest. (R. Ram, 2012c, p. 641)

But how far are these alternatives successful in liberating the Dalits need to be discussed further by looking into the situation of lower castes after the decline of Ad Dharm and the reasons for its decline.

Ad Dharm's success can be seen when in 1931 caste census, nearly 418,789 citizens registered themselves as Ad Dharmis but later on the influence of movement began to fade. The reason for the decline of Ad Dharm, according to Mark Juergensmeyer, is that the movement began to give more importance to the political mobilisation than the religious one. Also, it was lured by the model provided by Muslim nationalists of a separate state and formulated the idea of a geographically separate state for untouchables, called *Achutistan*. Though the idea never worked in a systematic way, it directed the momentum of movement towards legislative representation. "In abandoning religion for politics the Ad Dharm leaders had abandoned the Ad Dharm and the strength of its unifying symbols.... the high hopes and great expectations had been replaced by factionalism and petty ambitions" (Juergensmeyer, 2009b, p. 152). Ad Dharm declined but the Dalit consciousness founded with it can be felt even today. The clashes of Boota Mandi and Talhan discussed by Ronki Ram clearly shows that now low caste people are more conscious of their rights and had learned to say 'no' to the discrimination.

Talhan village was distinctly prosperous as many of its inhabitants have emigrated to Europe, North America, and the Gulf region and also most of the population was educated. The dispute emerged over the issue that there was no lower caste representation in the management committee of "...smadh-(tomb)-turned-gurdwara of Gurdwara Baba Nihal Singh..." (R Ram, 2004a, p. 906). The Gurudwara manages to receive a lot of monetary offerings from its Punjabi diaspora and local devotees, but the funds were utilised by Jat members in the development of their own areas in the village. But this dispute alone does not cause caste violence, the incident which enraged the Ad dharmis was when in January 2003 the management committee of gurudwara terminated 39 lower caste women who were employed in gurudwara to prepare food for distribution. Their community members were beaten by the committee with the help of police and were socially boycotted. Then,

The Ad Dharmis organized a Dalit Action Committee (DAC) under the leadership of L. R. Bailey, a prominent Ambedkarite, to fight against the social boycott and for representation on the management committee. The DAC organized sit-ins and hunger strikes in Talhan and Jalandhar. (R. Ram, 2004a, p. 910)

This clearly shows that now lower caste people of Punjab were not

silent sufferers and they know how to fight for their rights. In Boota Mandi also, the clashes took place between Jats and Ad Dharmis when the latter were asked to leave the fair organised by emigrant Jat Sikh at the grave of Sufi Pir Baba Fateh Shah Qadri due to social boycott which started at Talhan. The conflict in Talhan was caused not only due to the alluring gurudwara wealth rather it was rooted in the rise of Dalit consciousness in Punjab during the past six decades. Also, the cycle of violence led to the shooting of the Dera Sachkhand leader, Sant Ramanand Dass in 2009 in Vienna. "The [conflicts] sharpened the question of Dalit human rights and civil liberties in Punjab and contains the seeds of Dalit emancipation in the real sense of the term" (R. Ram, 2004a, p. 912). Also, the impact of the foundation of Dalit consciousness through Mangu Ram's movement can be seen in the efforts of Mangu Ram Jaspal, who tried to revive the Ad Dharm Mandal and established a newspaper called *Ravidas Patrika* on coming back to Punjab from England in 1969. The primary aim of the new movement was the revival of qaumic identity. This movement is the evidence of the continuing struggle of lower castes to organise themselves and form a separate qaumic identity in religious and communal spheres.

Due to Mangu Ram's motivating verses, promoting education, in his book *Acclaim of Ad Dharm* and the movement Ad Dharm,

Punjab has changed, the nature of its politics has altered, the attitude towards untouchability has progressively improved, and opportunities for the lower caste have expanded exponentially. Yet the need persists for organisations of cultural and social regeneration which will mobilize lower caste people, provide a base of support for their claims, give them pride in who they are, and excite their imaginations about who they might become. (Juergensmeyer, 2009b, p. 267)

Because even after getting education and living in modernity of the city Model Town, where the houses of both upper caste and lower caste look similar, with the living rooms crowded with furniture, television sets etc, they still have a feeling of embarrassment and fear in disclosing their caste. Inter-caste marriages also pose a problem. The survey by Suneila Malik, Sociologist from Punjab University, which is discussed by Mark Juergensmeyer in his book *Religious Rebels* in Punjab, shows that the members of a high and low caste who had the same educational qualifications were still treated differently. So, apart from education and economic stability, there is a need to continue the struggle for separate qaumic identity and political mobilisation. Sikkhism, which was meant to create a casteless society failed to free the society from age-old prejudices of caste so there is need for alternatives which can create a society free from caste based discrimination.

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