

WATANDARI, A CURSE TO MAHARS

“Dr. B. R. Ambedkar presided over a meeting of about 4,000 persons which was held at Sinnar, Nasik district, on August 16th, 1941. Dr. Ambedkar stated that in accordance with the decision of the Haregaon Conference in December 1939, a memorial had been submitted to His Excellency the Governor of Bombay, but to no effect. He alleged that Mahars and Mangs had not been accorded equality of treatment with other *watandars* but that the Judi tax on their *watan* lands had been increased. He, therefore, advised Mahars and Mangs to resist the collection of the increased tax and not to relinquish possession of their lands under any circumstances.”¹

However, there were additional dimensions in the speech of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the subject which were reported by the Bombay Chronicle. The dimensions were :

“Thundering speeches calling upon the Mahar, Mang and Vethia *watandars* of Maharashtra to resist by every means within their power the collection of the additional land revenue levied on *watan* lands, characterised the mass meeting of the *watandars* held here last night under the Presidentship of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.”

Decision to resist the collection of the tax was a logical sequel to them.

“During my entire public career I have remained consistently loyal to the British Government in India,” said Dr. Ambedkar in the course of his Presidential address.

“I have been loyal to the British because the Depressed Classes, surrounded by enemies on all sides, could not afford to fight on all the fronts at the same time. I, therefore, decided to fight the two thousand year old-tyranny and oppression of the caste Hindus and to secure social equality for the Depressed Classes before everything else.”

¹: The Bombay Secret Abstract, dated 23rd August 1941.

“I have directed for these many years bitter and virulent attacks on the Hindu society and its numerous evils, but I can assure you that I shall direct attacks a hundred-fold more bitter, more virulent, more deadly against the British than I have ever done against the Hindus if my loyalty is going to be exploited for crushing my own people and taking away from them the last dry bone from which they draw their barest sustenance.”

“I want to tell the British authorities that their rule over this province is due to us, that it was the Mahar regiments that destroyed the Peshwa rule and established British *raj* in this province.

The Mahars won Maharashtra for the British. What did they get for the services? Nothing.

This *watandari* has become a curse to the Mahars. It ties them down to eternal poverty. It saps their self-respect. It keeps them degraded.

All that we say is We don't want your *watandari*. Relieve us from your service. Levy the full land revenue on our lands and engage men on the basis of monthly payment as you have done for other village services.

That has been my demand for these 20 years. What do we get instead? Far from being relieved of the services, additional duties are imposed on the *watandars* and additional “judi” levied on them.

It is a monstrosity that I will not tolerate. I challenge the British authorities to do their worst.

I tell them here and finally that they will not get a pie of the additional duty from us. Let them do their worst.

As for you, *watandars*, my instructions are plain. You must resist payment of the additional duty no matter what the consequences. If they attach your household goods, or your cattle you must do everything to prevent their taking away the goods and cattle.

Whatever happens we will see to it that the Government climb down. There is no going back on our decision, no faltering in the execution of the decision.

After the Presidential address two resolutions were passed one supporting the memorandum* sent to the Governor by Dr. Ambedkar on the question of Mahar *watandari* and the other calling upon the *watandars* to resist collection of the additional “*Judi*” by every means within their powers.

Among the speakers on the resolutions were Messrs R. R. Bhole, B. H. Varade, J. S. Aindale, P. J. Roham, D. G. Jadhav, B. K. Gaikwad and A. V. Chitre, all members of the Bombay Legislative Assembly representing Poona, Belgaum, Sholapur, Ahmednagar, Khandesh, Nasik and Kolaba districts respectively.

Each of them offered the fullest possible support of the Mahars from their district to any movement that the Nasik district might start and if necessary, to start *Satyagraha* on their own districts if the authorities did not yield in time.

In his concluding speech Dr. Ambedkar corrected the impression created by some of the previous speakers as to the exact date for starting the movement.

“If there are attachments brought tomorrow your resistance begins tomorrow. There is no waiting, no question of receiving instructions” said Dr. Ambedkar.

“This tax has to be resisted right from the moment attempts are made to collect. Let the *watandars*, 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.”¹

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* See the Memorandum on Pp. 308-338 in part-1 of this Volume—Editors.

¹: The Bombay Chronicle, dated 19th August 1941.