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Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde

Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde resolved to establish the 'Depressed Classes Mission' in 1906, an organization committed to eradicating untouchability at the societal level and ensuring comprehensive upliftment of the oppressed classes at the national level. From Bhavnagar to Mangalore, he established numerous branches of the mission, organizing various conferences and meetings, displaying utmost dedication to this cause. It was through his efforts that the Indian National Congress passed a resolution for the eradication of untouchability in 1917. Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde was a pioneer of the awareness campaign against untouchability.



Vitthal Ramji Shinde was born on April 23, 1883, in the village of Jamkhundi in Karnataka. His family was rich in past however had been struggling with poverty at the time of his birth. The experience of poverty played a significant role in shaping his thoughts. He helped the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Raised in a household with a Vaishnavite tradition and influenced by the pure conduct of his parents, he felt to work for social reform in his future. Maharshi Shinde believed that his home environment was progressive. There was no segregation based on caste, and his upbringing instilled in him the idea of social

improvement. Because there was no concept of caste segregation in his home, there was no need for him to make any effort to abandon caste divisions, unlike modern social reformers.

In 1891, after passing the matriculation exam from Jamkhundi, Vitthal Ramji Shinde started his studies at Fergusson College, Pune in 1893. During this time, he was introduced to the Prarthana Samaj inspired by the monotheistic religious doctrine, which led him to become involved in the activities of the Prarthana Samaj. He had the opportunity to listen to speeches by Justice. Ranade, Dr. Bhandarkar, and K.B. Marathe all prominent figures in the Prarthana Samaj. As a result of these experiences, Vitthal Ramji Shinde formally joined the Prarthana Samaj in 1898. The aim of the Brahmo Samaj established by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Bengal in 1833 and the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra was the same. Shinde believed that religion was not a separate entity from life but an integral and extremely significant aspect of life. He believed in adopting monotheistic religion to eliminate inappropriate elements from life and to elevate the standard of living. For the dissemination of monotheistic religion in every community and to destroy misconceptions, the Prarthana Samaj and Brahmo Samaj chose Vitthal Ramji Shinde to send him to study religious education to Oxford. From 1901 to 1903, while in England, he not only expanded his knowledge beyond the religious books but also observed various activities of diverse religious institutions. Upon returning to India, he was determined to carry out similar activities.

Upon returning to India in 1903, Vitthal Ramji Shinde worked as a propagator for the Mumbai Prarthana Samaj, traveling extensively throughout India. At that time, the condition of the untouchable castes in various provinces of India was pitiable. Vitthal Ramji Shinde closely witnessed how the touchable castes oppressed the untouchables, how they suffered from the evil practice of untouchability, and how the untouchable castes lived a life akin to animals due to being demeaned by the wicked tradition of untouchability. The pain of the untouchable castes deeply affected Vitthal Ramji Shinde, leading him to make a firm commitment to eradicate untouchability and dedicate his life to the upliftment of this castes. He addressed the issue of the untouchable caste's situation and talked about the improvement measures in speeches at the Indian Social Reform Association. He expressed the idea of establishing an organization at the national level to bring about a complete transformation in the lives of the untouchable castes. On October 16, 1906, in Mumbai, he founded the 'Depressed Classes Mission Society of India.'

The initiative to eradicate untouchability was started by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule in the mid-19th century. However, due to the lack of support from contemporary educated classes, it remained fragmented, and the 20th century had already commenced. At that time, the presence of such a degrading practice as untouchability in society, which should have been considered a stain on humanity, was prevalent, yet nobody found any objection to the abominable practice of untouchability. Efforts to educate the untouchable caste were underway in places like Mumbai, Baroda, Madras, and Mangalore, but their reach was limited to those regions alone. At the social level, nobody was familiar with the suffering caused by untouchability to the extent that it was pervasive in people's behavior, and untouchability was not naturally rejected by everyone. In such times, the establishment of the 'Depressed Classes Mission Society of India' by Maharshi Shinde, aimed at eradicating the practice of untouchability at the social level and improving the condition of the untouchable castes, on an all-India scale, is itself a historic event.

After the establishment of the Depressed Classes Mission, Maharshi Shinde accelerated its work in both Western and Southern India. He significantly uplifted societies that had been plagued by untouchability for centuries by imparting education, teaching skills for employment, instilling a sense of dignity, fostering good citizenship, and working to eradicate untouchability at the social level. Initiating such dual efforts was crucial in their work, as it aimed not only to eliminate the feeling of untouchability from the minds of the touchable castes but also to build the confidence of the untouchable castes. It was essential to create people's confidence in the untouchable castes societies from whom they could receive the suggestion to work. Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde emphasized this point and worked accordingly.

While working for the untouchable caste, Maharshi Shinde sought help from various political figures, keeping his own political ideologies aside. He sought assistance from individuals such as Dr. Annie Besant, Na. Gokhale, Lokmanya Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Mahatma Gandhi, who were involved in politics. He also received support from institutional figures like Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, Tukojirao Holkar of Indore, and Kantirava Maharaja of Mysore. Additionally, he received assistance from English officers such as Sir John Clarke and Sir Mew MacKenzie, as well as leaders from the untouchable community such as Shri Shivram Janba Kamble and Shripatarav Dangle.

The issue of untouchability eradication needed to be taken up by the National Assembly, so he made continuous efforts for seven to eight years. Eventually, during the National Convention of 1917, chaired by Dr. Annie Besant, the proposal for untouchability eradication was accepted, making it a part of the National Assembly's agenda. Maharshi Shinde's initiative towards untouchability eradication marked the first nationwide effort at the institutional level. His foresight and efficiency are evident in this endeavor. Maharshi Vitthal Ramji Shinde continued to advocate for the upliftment of the untouchable caste until the end of his life.

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Reference:

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