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Social reformer- Vitthal Ramji Shinde

Maharashtra is generally called the land of saints. Along with saints, this land has always been the flourishing ground for social reformers in India who worked on different fronts and left their mark on the history of India. We know Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, Maharshi Karve, and many more. But still, some unsung heroes are yet to come into the lime light. Among such reformers is Vitthal Ramji Shinde.



Vitthal Ramji Shinde was born on 23 April 1873 in Jamkhandi, the princely state of Karnataka. His family belonged to the Varkari sect as he belonged to the Varkari sect. It is evident that he grew up listening and reading about the great saints of Maharashtra who preached equality in society. Later, he read the works written by Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Mahadev Ranade, Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, J. S. Mill, and Herbert Spencer. He completed his LLB from Fergusson College of Pune. As soon as he finished his LLB, he decided to join Prarthana Samaj as he was deeply impressed by the work of Prathama Samaj. Considering his zeal and enthusiasm, Prarthana Samaj agreed to send him to England for

further studies. He even received a scholarship from Baroda's Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad (III). In 1903 he returned to India after completing his higher education.

After returning to India from England, he started his revolutionary work in untouchability. He was a great admirer of Mahatma Phule. In the year 1905, he opened a night school for the children belonging to the untouchable class. One thing common among all the social reformers is that they tried to build strong organizations. Mahatma Phule started this tradition with the establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj. On the same ground, Vitthal Ramji Shinde also founded one organization called Depressed Classes Mission. The upliftment of the Dalit and the untouchable class was its sole purpose. Shinde studied the issues of untouchability. He considered that untouchables should be educated for the abolition of untouchability. The main motive of the Mission behind the opening of the schools was not only to teach reading and writing but also to civilize the minds of the students and their parents. So, he stressed educational awareness among untouchables and the establishment of schools and hostels for their children. He started hostels for the students in Pune, Nagpur, Mumbai, and Madras by opening an institution, namely Depressed Class Student Mission.

Regarding the annihilation of caste, Shinde's perspective was radically different from that of Mahatma Phule as Shinde was heuristic in approach. It was desirable and beneficial for the Untouchables to lead life gently during the contemporary era. Shinde frequently said, "The life of poor, untouchables, and Dalits is burning and alighting. I have to extinguish this fire by serving them with love bore in my heart. Humanism lies in it".

They worked to spread education among Dalit and untouchable communities. Along with education, the issue of unemployment was also addressed by them. To give them the best medical facilities, free hospitals were also run by the depressed classes association. Looking at the smooth functioning of the depressed classes mission, it gained people's trust. By 1912, the depressed classes mission flourished with 23 schools in 14 places. 1100 students were studying in those schools. As a result of great support, Vitthal Ramji Shinde opened the branches of this mission in different parts of India.

Vitthal Ramji Shinde was an ardent supporter of women's education. He was against the sati system. He formed an organization in Maharashtra to make people leave this demonic practice. Once, his followers even tried to question Mahatma Gandhi on this issue. They were asking Gandhi to raise the issue of women's education. Vitthal Ramji Shinde and his disciples kept working despite anyone's support. It was the time of Montague Chelmsford's reforms when political factions used depressed classes for their benefit. Maharshi Shinde understood the situation and formed his tactics. He laid the foundation of Maratha Seva Sangh in the year 1916. In addition, he started conducting sessions right where Congress held its national conferences. It was his way of getting the congress party's attention. As a result of his persistence, Congress passed the bill against untouchability in its Kolkata conference which Annie Besant led.

Along with being a social reformer, he was also a prolific writer. He used to keep a diary with him, which gave crucial and authentic information about his life. As he was from Maharashtra, most of his writings are mainly written in Marathi. Bharatiya Asprushyatecha Prashna (The question of Indian Untouchability), Bhagawat Dharmacha Vikas (Development of Bhagwat Dharma), Marathyanchi Purwapithika (Background of Maratha's) Kanadi –

Marathi Sambandh (Relation between Kanadi & Marati), 'Konkani – Marathi Sambandh (Relation between Konkani & Marathi) are some of his writings in the Marathi language. Vitthal Ramji Shinde also got the title of Maharishi.

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