

Mahad Satyagraha: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's Struggle for Dignity and Rights

Sandesh M Wagh

Department of History, University of Mumbai, Mumbai-400093, Maharashtra, India

ABSTRACT

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha of 1927, led by Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, stands as one of the most transformative moments in India's struggle for equality and human dignity. While often portrayed merely as a social protest for access to public water, this paper reinterprets the movement as a profound philosophical and moral revolution against the inhuman Brahmanical order that institutionalised caste-based subjugation. The Satyagraha redefined the idea of self-respect among the oppressed, articulating the first collective assertion of natural and human rights in colonial India. By examining primary sources, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings, and subsequent scholarly interpretations, the study situates the Mahad Satyagraha within the global discourse on human rights and justice. It argues that the act of drawing water from the Chavadar Tank symbolised more than defiance; it represented the reclamation of humanity itself. The event's moral resonance, culminating in the burning of Manusmriti, signified the ideological break from ritual orthodoxy toward a new vision of social democracy. Through this lens, the Satyagraha emerges not merely as a historical episode but as a foundational expression of India's moral conscience and constitutional humanism.

INTRODUCTION

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha of 1927 was a watershed moment in India's socio-political and moral history. Led by Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the movement began as a protest against the social prohibition that denied "untouchables" access to the Chavadar public water tank in Mahad, a small town in the present-day Raigad district of Maharashtra. Yet, this act of defiance was far more than an attempt to secure a basic civic facility; it represented a fundamental challenge to the deeply entrenched Brahmanical social order that had historically denied Dalits the right to dignity, equality, and self-respect [1].

The movement unfolded during the colonial period when India's political discourse was increasingly dominated by the nationalist struggle for independence. However, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership introduced a radically different dimension—one centred not on political sovereignty alone but on moral and social emancipation. By organising the Mahad Satyagraha, Babasaheb Ambedkar sought to awaken a new sense of *atma-samman* (self-respect) among the oppressed, redefining the meaning of freedom as the restoration of human dignity [2].

This redefinition transformed the act of drawing water into a moral statement that declared equality as a natural right and social exclusion as a moral wrong. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's intellectual

foundation for the Satyagraha was rooted in the Enlightenment idea that human beings are born equal and possess inalienable rights to life and liberty [3]. His philosophy paralleled early modern natural rights theory and foreshadowed the principles later enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [4].

Through Mahad, Babasaheb Ambedkar articulated a vision of justice that transcended both colonial rule and caste tyranny, proposing a human-centred moral order based on reason, equality, and fraternity. The social context of Mahad reveals the intersection of religion, caste, and morality in pre-independence India. The Brahmanical system, legitimised by the Manusmriti and other Dharmashastra texts, classified Dalits as “untouchables,” barring them from temples, wells, and educational institutions [5].

Such exclusion was not only physical but spiritual—it denied Dalits access to the moral universe of society itself. By choosing the act of touching water as the centre of protest, Dr. Ambedkar strategically targeted the most visible symbol of ritual purity and pollution [6]. This protest was unique in that it sought not only material inclusion but also moral reclamation. For Dr. Ambedkar, social democracy could not exist without moral equality, and the latter required the rejection of the religious sanctions that perpetuated social injustice [7].

The burning of the Manusmriti during the second phase of the movement in December 1927 symbolised this rejection. It marked a decisive rupture from traditional Hindu orthodoxy and laid the foundation for a new ethical order grounded in human dignity rather than divine hierarchy [8]. The Mahad Satyagraha, therefore, must be understood not merely as a social reform movement but as a human rights revolution. It was the first organised effort in modern India to assert the principle that all human beings, regardless of caste or creed, possess equal moral worth [9].

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s philosophy of equality—expressed through both action and thought—was the precursor to India’s later constitutional framework, which enshrined the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity as the pillars of a just social order. The present study reinterprets this historic event from the perspective of natural and human rights philosophy, examining how Mahad served as a site where the oppressed reclaimed their right to exist as equals in both moral and civic life. It situates Dr. Ambedkar’s movement within broader global frameworks of justice and explores its continuing relevance in the struggle for dignity and equality in contemporary India. In doing so, the paper aims to demonstrate that Mahad was not only a battle for water but a declaration of humanity—a conscious and rational revolt against an inhuman system. It was a moment when India’s oppressed transformed social protest into a moral awakening, setting in motion a legacy of justice that continues to inspire movements for equality and human rights worldwide.

Historical Context

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha cannot be understood in isolation; it was deeply embedded in the socio-religious hierarchies of early twentieth-century Maharashtra. At the time, Indian society was governed by the Brahmanical orthodoxy, which imposed a rigid caste hierarchy and enforced social exclusion against those categorised as “untouchables [10]. This system was not merely social but moral and religious, legitimised by texts such as the Manusmriti, which sanctioned the denial of access to public resources, education, and sacred spaces to Dalits [11]. The denial of water at the Chavadar Tank epitomised this exclusion, symbolising both the physical and spiritual marginalisation of the Depressed Classes. The immediate setting of the Mahad Satyagraha was the town of Mahad, a small yet significant trading and administrative centre in the Konkan region. The Chavadar Tank, as a communal water source, held profound symbolic significance. While upper-caste communities enjoyed unrestricted access, Dalits were prohibited from drawing water, an act that embodied centuries of subordination [12].

The restriction was justified through notions of ritual purity and pollution, rendering water a contested space where social hierarchies were physically and symbolically enforced. This exclusion reflected the broader pattern of caste-based discrimination pervasive across Maharashtra and much of India.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, acutely aware of these injustices, began preparing for the Mahad Satyagraha by mobilising the Depressed Classes and articulating a clear philosophical rationale for their claim to equality [13]. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s approach was deliberate and strategic. He combined legal, moral, and social arguments to challenge the status quo. On one level, the Satyagraha was a demand for access to water, a basic civic right. On another, it was an assertion of *atma-samman* (self-respect), designed to confront centuries of psychological subjugation and internalised inferiority among Dalits [14].

The Mahad Municipality played a critical role in enabling the Satyagraha. In a progressive resolution passed in 1927, the municipal authorities formally granted the Depressed Classes the right to draw water from the Chavadar Tank [15]. This municipal approval provided the legal and administrative legitimacy necessary for Babasaheb Ambedkar’s public demonstration. However, the resolution also ignited intense opposition from conservative upper-caste groups, who viewed the assertion of Dalit rights as an affront to traditional social norms [16]. The tensions that followed reflected the broader struggle between reformist ideals and entrenched orthodoxy in colonial India.

The Satyagraha culminated on March 20, 1927, when Babasaheb Ambedkar led hundreds of participants from the Depressed Class to the Chavadar Tank. By physically drawing water, the protesters symbolically reclaimed not only the resource but also their dignity [17]. This act represented a confrontation with the moral and religious authority of the Brahmanical system.

The event was both a demonstration of civil courage and a moral statement: equality and dignity were not privileges conferred by tradition but inherent human entitlements. The aftermath of the Mahad

Satyagraha further underscores its historical significance. Conservative opposition escalated to public harassment and attempts to intimidate Dalit participants. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership ensured that the moral and philosophical message of the protest was not diluted. The later burning of the Manusmriti on December 25, 1927, served as a dramatic reaffirmation of the Satyagraha's ethical and ideological foundation, symbolising the rejection of the Brahmanical moral order and the assertion of humanistic principles [18].

Viewed in historical perspective, the Mahad Satyagraha was both a local and a national milestone. Locally, it challenged caste restrictions in everyday life. Nationally, it foreshadowed Babasaheb Ambedkar's broader agenda for social justice, constitutional morality, and the eventual codification of equality in independent India's Constitution [19]. The event's resonance continues to be felt in contemporary discourses on human dignity, access to public resources, and social inclusion, highlighting its enduring historical and ethical significance.

Analytical Discussion (New Perspective)

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha transcends the conventional understanding of a social reform movement; it emerges as a profound moral and philosophical challenge to the inhuman Brahmanical orthodoxy. This analysis situates the Satyagraha within three interrelated frameworks: the assertion of self-respect, the articulation of natural and human rights, and the pursuit of social justice. Each dimension reveals a new perspective on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership, demonstrating that Mahad was not merely an act of civil disobedience but a deliberate moral revolution.

Self-Respect as Moral Reclamation

Central to the Mahad Satyagraha was the concept of *atma-samman*, or self-respect. For Dr. Ambedkar, social subjugation had inflicted a psychological and moral injury upon the Depressed Classes, internalising the perception of inferiority. By publicly drawing water from the Chavadar Tank, Dalits reclaimed not only a physical resource but also their moral and social agency. The act was emblematic: it transformed a mundane civic activity into a symbolic assertion of dignity and equality [20].

Unlike earlier reformist approaches that sought accommodation within the caste hierarchy, Babasaheb Ambedkar's strategy emphasised liberation from psychological bondage. The Satyagraha, therefore, was an act of self-liberation, challenging centuries of internalised oppression. This dimension aligns with contemporary theories of moral agency, suggesting that reclaiming self-respect is a prerequisite for exercising one's natural rights [21].

Assertion of Natural and Human Rights

The Mahad Satyagraha can also be interpreted as an early articulation of natural and human rights in colonial India. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's philosophical reasoning echoed Enlightenment principles: all human beings possess inalienable rights by virtue of their humanity [22]. Water, a fundamental requirement for survival, became a symbol of universal entitlement, and the denial of access

represented a violation of natural justice. The protest thus transcended local grievances and entered the realm of moral philosophy, positioning Babasaheb Ambedkar as an early proponent of human rights discourse in the Indian context [23].

Moreover, Babasaheb Ambedkar's insistence that equality and dignity were inherent, rather than granted by social custom or religious authority, anticipated the language of modern human rights instruments [24]. The Satyagraha, therefore, was not merely a tactical manoeuvre but a declarative statement: humanity and dignity cannot be constrained by ritual, hierarchy, or orthodoxy.

Social Justice and the Rejection of Brahmanical Orthodoxy

A third critical dimension of the Satyagraha is its engagement with social justice. Dr. Ambedkar's critique extended beyond practical exclusion to the very moral foundations of the Brahmanical social order [25]. By challenging the hierarchical authority legitimised by the Manusmriti and other religious texts, Babasaheb Ambedkar confronted the ideological roots of inequality. The subsequent burning of the Manusmriti was not a symbolic gesture alone; it was a philosophical repudiation of any moral system that sanctioned oppression based on birth [26].

In this sense, Mahad represented a reorientation of moral authority. It demonstrated that justice is not a privilege conferred by tradition but a universal imperative. Babasaheb Ambedkar's actions anticipated the principles later codified in the Indian Constitution, including equality before the law and protection of fundamental rights [27].

Moral Revolution and Ethical Awakening

By integrating the dimensions of self-respect, human rights, and social justice, Mahad emerges as a moral revolution [28]. Unlike conventional Satyagrahas, which primarily addressed political or civic grievances, Mahad addressed the 'ethical foundations of social life'. It highlighted the moral contradictions inherent in a society that simultaneously claimed democratic ideals and upheld caste-based exclusion [29]. The Satyagraha thus served as a site

of ethical awakening, where the oppressed could assert moral agency and challenge structural injustice in both visible and symbolic ways.

Contemporary Relevance of Dr. Ambedkar's Perspective

The analytical interpretation of Mahad has enduring implications. Today, the struggle for access to resources, social dignity, and equality continues in various forms, both in India and globally [30]. Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on moral equality and human rights provides a framework for evaluating contemporary social policies and movements. The Satyagraha illustrates that legal or administrative reform is insufficient without the corresponding moral recognition of the oppressed as fully human. By emphasising self-respect and universal rights, Dr. Ambedkar's model offers a timeless blueprint for justice-oriented activism. In sum, the Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha was more than a local protest; it was a deliberate moral and philosophical intervention. Through the act of drawing water

and publicly asserting dignity, Dr. Ambedkar challenged the normative structures of caste, articulated an early vision of human rights, and laid the groundwork for social justice in modern India. Viewed through this lens, Mahad represents a convergence of ethical reasoning, civic action, and revolutionary moral imagination.

Philosophical and Human Rights Dimensions

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha offers a rich site for exploring the philosophical underpinnings of social justice and human rights in India. While often studied as a historical or sociopolitical movement, it also represents an early and deliberate engagement with moral philosophy and the concept of universal human dignity. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership at Mahad exemplifies a profound synthesis of local social critique and global moral reasoning, revealing the movement's enduring relevance in both philosophical and human rights discourses.

Natural Rights and Ethical Universality

At the core of the Mahad Satyagraha lies the principle of natural rights—the idea that all human beings possess inherent moral entitlements independent of social or religious sanction [31]. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's insistence that Dalits had the right to draw water from the Chavadar Tank resonates with the Enlightenment notions of liberty, equality, and fraternity articulated by thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant [32]. Unlike traditional reformers, who sought incremental social inclusion within the caste hierarchy, Babasaheb Ambedkar asserted that these rights were inalienable and universal, transcending local custom, religious sanction, or colonial law [33].

The Satyagraha thus functioned as a moral experiment in universalism. By framing access to water—a basic human necessity—as a matter of moral entitlement, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar challenged the prevailing social orthodoxy that equated ritual purity with moral worth [34]. In doing so, he demonstrated that human dignity is not contingent upon caste, occupation, or ritual status; it is a foundational moral principle that legitimises social and political equality.

Self-Respect and Human Dignity

The philosophical concept of self-respect (*atma-samman*) was central to Dr. Ambedkar's reasoning at Mahad [35]. Beyond asserting rights to material resources, the Satyagraha was a means to cultivate psychological and moral agency among the oppressed. Self-respect, in Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision, was inseparable from human dignity: without recognition of one's inherent worth, legal or political rights remain hollow [36].

This focus on moral consciousness anticipates modern human rights theory, which emphasises the dignity of the individual as the foundational premise for all rights. By linking self-respect to rights, Dr. Ambedkar transformed the Satyagraha into a moral pedagogy: it was not merely an act of protest but a public education in ethical equality [37]. The participants' act of drawing water symbolised a

reclamation of their humanity, a challenge to centuries of social conditioning that had rendered them submissive.

Social Justice and Moral Responsibility

The Mahad Satyagraha also illustrates Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's understanding of social justice as a moral imperative rather than a purely political goal [38]. Dr. Ambedkar critiqued the Brahmanical system not only for its practical exclusions but for its ethical failure: it institutionalised injustice, sanctioned oppression, and dehumanised a segment of society [39]. By confronting these moral failings, the Satyagraha highlighted the inseparability of ethical reasoning from social reform.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's philosophical approach at Mahad aligns with contemporary theories of social justice, which emphasise both the redistribution of resources and the recognition of moral equality [40]. The Satyagraha demonstrated that social justice cannot be achieved without confronting the ideologies that justify exclusion, making it as much an ethical revolution as a political or social one.

Intersection with Global Human Rights Discourse

The philosophical dimensions of Mahad anticipate elements of the global human rights framework that would formally emerge two decades later with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) [41]. Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on equality, dignity, and moral entitlement mirrors Articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration, which affirm the universal and inalienable nature of human rights [42]. Although the Satyagraha was rooted in local social conditions, its ethical reasoning resonates with international discourses on human rights, illustrating the universality of Dr. Ambedkar's vision [43]. Moreover, by framing the protest in moral and philosophical terms rather than mere political agitation, Dr. Ambedkar contributed to a normative foundation for human rights activism in India. The Satyagraha demonstrated that civil action could be justified not only by law or custom but by universal moral principles, establishing a precedent for rights-based movements that would later inform constitutional and civic reforms in India.

Conclusion of Philosophical Analysis

Viewed through the lens of philosophy and human rights, the Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha emerges as a normative, moral, and intellectual revolution. It was not simply a struggle for access to water but an articulation of universal ethical principles: human dignity, moral equality, and the right to self-respect. Dr. Ambedkar's strategic and philosophical framing of the protest created a powerful moral precedent, positioning Mahad as a foundational moment in India's journey toward human rights consciousness and social justice.

Impact and Legacy

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha was not an isolated historical incident; its influence extended far beyond the immediate struggle for access to water. The movement had enduring ramifications

across social, political, and ethical domains, shaping the trajectory of Dalit mobilisation, social reform, and the conceptualisation of rights in India. By analysing the Satyagraha's consequences, it becomes evident that Mahad represented both a transformative moment in colonial society and a foundational milestone in India's modern moral consciousness.

Social Impact

The Satyagraha's most immediate impact was the restoration of social dignity and self-respect for the Depressed Classes [44]. By challenging entrenched caste hierarchies, the movement empowered Dalit communities to assert their rights in both public and private spheres. The act of drawing water from the Chavadar Tank was highly symbolic, demonstrating that social barriers could be contested through organised, nonviolent action [45]. In subsequent years, Mahad inspired similar local and regional movements advocating access to public spaces, educational institutions, and temples, fostering a culture of assertive participation among marginalised communities [46]. Furthermore, the Satyagraha catalysed a psychological awakening. Dalits began to recognise their intrinsic worth and moral entitlement, which had been systematically denied for centuries. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's leadership instilled a sense of agency that transcended immediate material gains, fostering long-term social consciousness and resilience [47]. This cultural and moral empowerment laid the groundwork for sustained Dalit activism in the decades leading up to and following Indian independence.

Political Consequences

Politically, the Mahad Satyagraha underscored the necessity of structural reforms that enshrined equality and justice [48]. Babasaheb Ambedkar's demonstration of organised, principled protest illustrated the limitations of relying solely on legislative or administrative interventions to achieve social justice. The event also highlighted the need for constitutional safeguards to protect marginalised groups from systemic oppression—a principle that would later inform Babasaheb Ambedkar's contributions to the Indian Constitution, particularly in the framing of fundamental rights and affirmative action policies [49].

The Satyagraha also challenged mainstream nationalist movements, which often prioritised political independence over social reform. By emphasising moral and social equality as integral to national progress, Babasaheb Ambedkar created a framework for evaluating political action not only in terms of sovereignty but also in terms of justice and ethical responsibility [50]. This repositioning of social reform as a central political concern contributed to the broader discourse on inclusive governance and constitutional morality in modern India.

Ethical and Philosophical Legacy

Ethically, Mahad signalled a rupture with traditional Brahmanical authority and hierarchical moral systems. The symbolic burning of the Manusmriti later that year reinforced the philosophical message that 'justice and human dignity supersede ritual and tradition' [51]. By confronting the ideological

foundations of oppression, Dr. Ambedkar advanced a new moral discourse, one grounded in rationality, universality, and ethical equality [52].

Philosophically, Mahad prefigured the incorporation of human rights principles into Indian thought. Dr. Ambedkar's insistence on equality, dignity, and moral agency parallels Enlightenment and global human rights frameworks, demonstrating that the Satyagraha was not merely context-specific but anticipatory of universal ethical norms [53]. The movement established a precedent for rights-based activism, showing that moral reasoning could be both a guiding principle and a practical instrument for social change.

Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of the Mahad Satyagraha continues to resonate in contemporary India. Access to public spaces, equality before the law, and the moral recognition of marginalised groups remain central concerns in ongoing struggles against caste discrimination [54]. Mahad's symbolic power persists in Dalit movements, legal interventions, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting equality and human dignity. The event also offers lessons for global human rights activism, demonstrating the effectiveness of moral assertion combined with organised, nonviolent collective action [55].

By reclaiming water and asserting human dignity, Mahad's participants established a template for ethical resistance—one in which social justice, human rights, and moral philosophy converge. The Satyagraha thus represents a foundational episode in India's moral, political, and legal history, illustrating the transformative potential of principled, rights-based protest.

Conclusion on Impact and Legacy

In sum, the Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha had multifaceted and enduring consequences. Socially, it empowered Dalits to assert self-respect and dignity; politically, it highlighted the importance of structural reforms and constitutional safeguards; ethically and philosophically, it challenged entrenched hierarchies and advanced universal principles of justice. By situating Mahad within broader discourses of morality and human rights, it becomes clear that the movement's legacy extends beyond its historical moment, offering enduring insights for contemporary struggles for equality and justice.

CONCLUSION

The Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha of 1927 stands as a landmark in India's struggle for equality, dignity, and social justice. Led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the movement was not merely a local protest for access to water but a deliberate and profound moral intervention against the inhuman Brahmanical orthodoxy. By situating the Satyagraha within the frameworks of self-respect, natural and human rights, and social justice, this study has highlighted the multidimensional significance of Mahad as both a historical and philosophical phenomenon.

The Satyagraha's assertion of self-respect (atma-samman) empowered Dalits to reclaim moral agency, challenging centuries of internalised subjugation and social exclusion. Its articulation of natural and human rights prefigured global human rights discourse, asserting that dignity, equality, and moral entitlement are inherent to all humans, independent of caste, religion, or social convention. By confronting the ideological foundations of caste hierarchy, Mahad also advanced social justice, demonstrating that ethical reasoning and moral authority are essential to achieving equality and reform in society.

The legacy of Mahad extends across social, political, and philosophical domains. Socially, it catalysed the empowerment of Dalits and the assertion of collective agency. Politically, it emphasised the necessity of structural reforms and constitutional safeguards to protect marginalised groups. Ethically and philosophically, it challenged entrenched hierarchies and offered a universalist vision of human dignity that continues to inform contemporary debates on equality and rights.

Ultimately, Mahad represents a moral revolution—a historical moment in which oppressed communities, guided by reason and ethical conviction, asserted their right to exist as equals. Its enduring relevance lies not only in the social and political gains achieved but in the normative framework it established: that true justice requires the recognition of the inherent dignity of every human being, a principle that continues to inspire movements for equality and human rights in India and beyond.

In conclusion, the Mahad Chavadar Tank Satyagraha exemplifies the convergence of moral courage, philosophical reasoning, and social activism, positioning it as a foundational event in India's journey toward ethical governance, constitutional morality, and the protection of human rights. It remains a timeless reminder that equality and dignity are not concessions of tradition or authority but inalienable human entitlements that must be actively reclaimed and defended.

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