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Advocate Ekanath Awad's Biographical Sketch (1956–2015)

Lalit Khandare¹ PhD, MPhil, MSW

Pacific University

*“Over me Bhimrao² left a banner unfurled,
Strike a blow as will change the world” (Awad, 2018, p. 3)*

Caste is understood as a global phenomenon affecting one fifth of the world's population, including (but not restricted to) the people of South Asians and their diaspora. The caste-based exclusion restricts individuals' accessibility to social and economic opportunities affecting individuals' well-being in a society (Thorat, 2002). Dalit communities that are disproportionately impacted by caste-based hierarchy are consistently under the threat of discrimination, deprivation, and humiliation irrespective of their economic position. The situation of these discriminated communities becomes deplorable in the case of rural areas society embedded in feudal relationships based on unequal ownership of land and access to water (Bhasme, 2016). The National Crime Record Bureau-NCRB (2021) report shows that every hour, six heinous crimes against Scheduled Caste (Dalits) are committed with total number of reported cases 50,900 and in majority of cases the caste-criminal get acquitted due to caste nexus in legal governance. NCRB 2021 report shows rising number of atrocity cases, a

¹ This article was developed with inputs from Dr. Suhas Bhasme, Dr. Milind Awad, Dr. Suryakant Waghmare, and many other scholars.

² Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar <https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/content/mumbai-bhimrao-ramji-ambedkar>



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total of 2,63,512 cases of SCs and 42,512 cases of STs were placed for trial in the courts. This caste-based social ostracization and segregation practices takes different shapes in rural, urban, and immigrant communities. The issue of caste and descent-based discrimination is recognized by United Nations, European Commission, and many countries globally. CSWE has included “caste” as a protected category in the EPAS 2022 that will help incorporate more learning content on caste within the USA context.

In this context of caste-based discrimination and deprivation, one needs to understand the significance of the work and struggle led by Advocate Eknath Awad, promoting the rights of the millions of people belonging to most downtrodden community in Western India.

Early Life and Career

Advocate Eknath Awad, also known fondly as *Jija* (meaning “the respected”). He was born in Maharashtra on January 19, 1956, in a Mang caste, where his father continued family religious tradition as *Potraj*. Awad’s previous generations led their lives as Potraj where they were forced to live in this oppressive caste religious role, they worship a Marai-aai Goddess, they grow long (sometimes matted) hair, they dance on streets, they mercilessly whip themselves with woven coir or leather, and live life on alms. Mang/Matang community is one of the “ex-untouchable” caste whose traditional occupation was midwives/Doula, Potraj, rope making, musicians for important events like marriage, death, and other ceremonies. Eknath’s traumatic childhood was steeped in the humiliations of caste, untouchability, and poverty. However, Eknath was a bright young man; he finished his schooling in his village and went on to attain his Bachelor of Arts, graduated with a Master of Arts, Master’s in Social Work, and later earned his Bachelor of Law. During his university days, he was exposed to Phule-Ambedkarite ideology, critically understanding the social relationship, and aiming to build an egalitarian society following the plan of annihilation of caste. The social and cultural awakening led him to reflect on his traditional occupation that his father was continuing as a Potraj—young Eknath



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Awad pleaded his father to leave this degrading social tradition and he cut his long-matted hair. He continued this social awakening for other social practitioners from his community and took them out of undignified life.

Manvi Hakka Abhiyan or Campaign for Human Rights took inspiration from struggles of Dr. Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, Annabhau Sathe, Shahu Maharaj, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Eknath Awad, like many educated individuals in the 1970s and 1980s, under the growing influence of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, became an active member of the Dalit Panthers. Dalit Panthers was a revolutionary organization established by educated Dalits in Maharashtra. Dalit Panthers adopted a democratic path to implementing the plan of social transformation across the region. Active membership in a radical organization molded his idea of an individual role and responsibility in bringing out a social change in society.

Eknath Awad's participation in radical politics revealed the significance of education in empowering individuals to assert their rights in society. His consistent belief in the idea of education as means of empowerment leads to active involvement in the *Namantar* struggle (a movement to rename Marathwada University after social reformer Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar). Advocate Awad continued his social work in an organization to fight for the land rights of the Adivasi (Indigenous communities). At a later stage of his life, he headed several social campaigns and formed his organization addressing the issues of caste inequality, caste atrocities, and the livelihood of the people in western India.

The significance of his leadership and social movement can be understood by looking at the some of the issues highlighted here.

Institutional Creator



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Advocate Awad's early life experiences significantly evolved his understanding of the caste complexities, particularly in rural areas. Awad believed in adopting approaches highlighting the significance of building institutions coordinating the voice and needs of the Dalits. Advocate Awad believed in the formation of a Dalit organization primarily led by the Dalits themselves to engage in networking, advocacy, and coalitions influencing the policy corridors. The 1990s saw a growing influence of Dalit non-governmental organization (NGO) activism arguing for rights of Dalit in India (Waghmore, 2013).

Advocate Awad realized the growing need, civic awareness, and support for critical work addressing intersectional issues around caste, gender, and class; as a result, he decided to begin his work through the creation of the Rural Development Centre (RDC) at Dukdegaon. His vision was to build an organization dedicated to fighting inequities and working towards formation of a just society. The focus of RDC's work was agitations for claims on fundamental Dalit civil rights and the idea of sustainable development. With the support of likeminded people and philanthropist, RDC undertook various developmental projects, namely water conservation, health projects, and the provision of safe drinking water, along with the agitation against the swindling of money by the money lenders and high-handedness of the prominent figures of the upper castes in rural areas.

RDC led as an example for many educated young minds in the region willing to contribute to transforming the rural farming area. Under the staunch leadership and guidance of Advocate Awad, many young educated Dalits formed a cadre of social workers, effectively implementing the social justice work in the region. Awad was also instrumental in starting a financial bank—Ramabai Ambedkar Non-Agricultural Cooperative Society—to support small-scale industries, self-employment programs, and self-help groups. In reflecting on the next generation of activists, he said, "Our work had transformed the village. And the movement was expanding in scope. The Maanavi Haq Abhiyan had become the representative of Dalit pride. Many lives had been transformed by it. With me, other activists had grown and developed. Their faces pass



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before me now. I have seen their lives turned right around. So many have made huge strides and have taken the movement forward with them” (Awad, 2018, p. 223).

In contemporary times, many of these inspired young members initiated hundreds of not-for-profit organizations to continue the legacy of Eknath Awad to realize the cause of social justice and rural development. Advocate Awad’s efforts strengthen the belief in institutions’ influential role and lead the organized struggle for an egalitarian society.

His work became a role model for social work practitioners, he gave lectures at national and international universities and institutions, they coordinated numerous national/international travel immersion programs, scholars wrote articles, Ph.D., and books on the work on Human Rights Campaign organization led by Advocate Awad (Waghmore, 2013).

Land, Labor, and Sustainable Livelihoods

The availability of scarce land is a significant aspect affecting the lives of the millions of socially marginalized people. Unavailability of land deprives them of opportunities to sustain and achieve economic mobility to break the shackles of caste oppression. Globally and particularly in developing economies like Mexico, the accessibility to land rights has empowered the communities and supports achieving economic sustainability.

In the case of India, the land movement, despite its efforts, failed to deliver land rights to a significant section of the Dalit population (Thorat, 2009). In the case of marginalized communities, it also leads to the condition of bonded labor restricting access to economic mobility. Per the International Labour Organization ([ILO], 2017), bonded labor is a form of modern slavery significantly affecting the lives of nearly 25 million people across the globe. Most of this bonded labor is debt bondage labor arising out of poverty, restricting the individual’s freedom to pursue their choice of profession. In the case of the agriculture



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dominant society of South Asia, the bonded labor is closely tied with the existing caste relationship among the people that perpetuates modern-day slavery.

Advocate Ekanath Awad understood these close ties of caste, gender, and class relationships restricting the social-economic mobility of the marginalized communities. During his early career as an NGO staff member, he organized *Adivasis* (Indigenous Indians) of the region for a forceful agitation against the land grabbing by the affluent farmers in the area. The violent rage under his leadership was responsible for releasing 500 bonded laborers from the clutches of their “masters” and allowing them to pursue an independent path of economic welfare.

Taking inspiration from indigenous movement in India and globally, Advocate Awad decided to lead *Manvi Hakka Abhiyan* /Campaign for Human Rights (CHR) to fight for equal land and human rights for Dalits and *Adivasis* (Indigenous Indians). CHR took inspiration from diverse struggles across the globe example: *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST in Brazil and freedom struggle in South Africa and civil rights movement in the United States. This movement adopted a “rights-based approach” and worked extensively for land rights of marginalized groups—mostly to legalize encroached barren lands in villages as property of marginal groups. CHR closely worked with more than 24,607 Dalit families from 1,100 villages to submit their claims over grazing land (i.e., empty government land). Eknath Awad’s lifelong struggle resulted in reclaiming more than 70,000 hectares of land to the tillers from Dalit and tribal communities. Awad led this remarkable work in Indian social history, however he remained as one of the unsung heroes of the dispossessed; however, people from Dalit community cherish his legacy and he is remembered every year during Dalit History Month.

CHR organized training and capacity development for the social workers. CHR trained them in the areas of police and law functioning, awareness on land and property laws, employment guarantee programs, and other social legislations. These training helped to enhance the confidence of the social activists. In addition, the land reclaiming movement gave Dalits and



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tribal communities to experiment environmentally sustainable techniques to cultivate the barren land. These efforts provided employment and facility for drinking water to the local community. CHR made efforts to reduce the seasonable migration of laborers who were engaged in sugar cane and cotton farms. CHR also successfully conducted mobile educational support schools for migrant families as their children travelled with them from one town to another in search of farm work. Throughout his life, Eknath Awad's organization used multiple approaches like protest marches, *dharna*, hunger fast, *Gheraos*, campaigns, group meetings, public meetings, and training camps to build and enhance the masses' capacity to fight for their rights in Maharashtra state and other states like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Women's Empowerment

Phule-Ambedkar's maxim of social transformation rests on the idea of women's empowerment. Advocate Awad believed women's empowerment is the key to the social upliftment of the rural communities. Advocated Awad supported women's self-help group formations, particularly among agricultural labor and small landholding farmers lacking institutional access to financial support. These self-help groups created economic sustainability among women and established a support group mechanism in hard times. Simultaneously, women were encouraged to participate in community-related programs such as water, sanitation, and health programs.

Social and Cultural Transformation

In India, social movements—notwithstanding all efforts to build an egalitarian society—seldomly challenge the hegemonic *Brahminical* (the dominant priestly caste) social life decidedly appreciated among the people. The caste practices inflict everyday psychological and physical harms on Dalits. CHR led numerous campaign and fights to use legal means to register cases whenever they came across any atrocity or violence against Dalits or Tribal communities.



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During a famous conference, “Niradhar Parishad,” led by Advocate Awad at Mumbai on December 17, 1989, a week after World Human Rights Day, hundreds of Dalits and Tribal activists along with retired Chief Justice P. N. Bhagwati pledged: “I will always endeavour to sow in society the values of equality, independence, brotherhood, and justice that are enshrined in the Constitution of India. I will not bear atrocities committed upon women in my society. I will dedicate my life to fighting these atrocities” (Awad, 2018, p. 176).

Irrespective of caste, Brahmin played a vital role in every ritual, particularly in marriages. Following the anti-Brahminical tradition of Phule-Ambedkarite thought, Advocate Awad decided to challenge the hegemonic Brahminical form of social life. Awad decided to conduct marriage ceremonies without Brahminical rituals. Between 1995 and 2012, he started the *Satyashodhak* (truth-seekers), de-Brahmanized congregational marriages as the act of liberation. The step counted as a solid cultural revolt, particularly in the feudal caste-dominated setup of Central Maharashtra, challenging the traditional domination of an affluent caste group in villages. The invention of non-Brahminical marriages eliminates the social position and the conventional sources of income of Brahminical groups in society. The wealthy caste groups strongly opposed these efforts of Advocate Awad. However, he and his team survived the opposition and successfully carried out the marriage ceremonies of many couples in a non-Brahminical tradition. In 2006, as a mark of protest against caste inequalities in Hinduism, he converted to Buddhism.

Advocate Awad led his fearless battle against dogma and traditions to bring millions of people out of slavery. He faced several deadly threats and attacks on his life. One of such sad day was June 4, 2004, when some people attacked him and he survived from the death row. He appealed to his activists who were ready to revolt and punish the culprit communities and said, “I have faith in my country’s Constitution, the Constitution that Babasaheb has given us. The enemy wants us to lose control, to give into rage. Do not bring shame to our movement. I am healthy



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and fit. I have the strength to withstand 10 such attacks. Be calm, be peaceful. Do not lose your balance. *Jai Bhim*” (Awad, 2018, p. 252).

With inspiration from his role model, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who tried all social, legal, economic, and political means to annihilate caste, but when everything else failed, Advocate Awad—along with thousands of his followers—also left the Hindu religion that perpetuates untouchability and converted to Buddhism.

Advocate Eknath Awad’s intellectual activism remarkably impacted the lives of millions of deprived masses. His life-struggle and social justice campaign remains critical addition to global social work education.

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Biographical Interview With His son, Professor Milind Awad

Part 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI2a18s2xks>

Part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJ0AUaprQsY>