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Touching the Untouchables

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Who are the Harijans ?

The spot light is on the Harijans today. It is rumoured that the well-known Harijan leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, will embrace Buddhism on the 2,500th anniversary of Buddha, and at the same time lead a large number of his brethren into the Buddhist fold. Some of the Hindu leaders, including a member of the Madras Cabinet, uttered a warning that, in the event of their conversion to Buddhism, the Harijans would not be entitled to any of the special privileges which the Congress Government is giving them.

Untouchability is a social institution which has no parallel in any other country, and the Indian people as a whole have no conscience about it. Mahatma Gandhi, the political genius of India, saw the danger of untouchability to the unity of India and strove for the political rehabilitation of the untouchables by means of the Poona Pact of 1932 and of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The Poona Pact required the Harijans to vote with the Hindus on the understanding that a certain percentage of the seats in the Hindu electorate would be reserved for the Harijan candidates. The Temple Entry Movement which was championed by the Mahatma was intended to restore to the Harijans the right of worshipping the Gods of the Hindu religion. By a happy imagination Mahatmaji decided to call the untouchables 'Harijans', i.e., the people of Hari, the Vaishnavite deity of Hinduism. The depressed class community was apparently not impressed with these overtures to friendship. In 1935 Dr. Ambedkar addressed ten thousand Harijans in Nasik on the question of their conversion to some other religion. In 1936 the *Ezhavas* of Travancore wanted to give up all connection with Hinduism.

In all discussions about the Harijans the general presupposition is that the untouchables are a part and parcel of the Hindu community. Thus Mahatma Gandhi could say to the untouchables in Nellore,¹ 'You claim to be Hindus, you read the Scriptures; if therefore the Hindus oppress you the fault lies not in Hindu religion but in those who profess it!' It is somewhat extraordinary to say that the untouchables claim to be Hindus and that they read the Hindu Scriptures. On a number of occasions the Arya Samajists have carried out the *Suddhi* ceremony in an effort to restore to the bosom of Hinduism untouchables who had become Christians. This is indeed a strange procedure for the modern 'Aryans' when we remember that the Aryans of the Vedic times regarded these people as aliens and enemies. From time to time

¹ Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas by C. F. Andrews.

Hindu political leaders have been highly critical of the Evangelistic work of the Christian Church among the Harijans and have not hesitated to interpret it as 'sheep stealing' (presumably from the fold of Hinduism). This is a charge which is as indefensible as it is unreasonable; because Hinduism has virtually consigned the seventy millions of the original inhabitants of this land to the dung heap, and when some of these people received a new birth through the Gospel of Jesus Christ and every whit made whole, the Hindus turn round and say 'you are sheep stealing'. Therefore we may ask the question, 'who then are the Harijans?' A simple or an easy answer may not be forthcoming, but we shall be in a better position to evaluate the Hindu agitation concerning the Evangelization of the untouchables of India.

Possible Explanation

The origin of the untouchables of India is lost in obscurity, and as for their history there is none. The Code of Manu and the Epics and the Puranas contain various references to the untouchables under the name *Mlechas* and *Candālas*. *Mlechas* is a term which is often used by Hindu writers to denote foreigners or barbarians. In this sense the Bodo people who speak a Tibeto-Burmese dialect and who live in some parts of Northern Bengal are called *Mlechas*. The early Aryans sometimes used the term *Mlecha* to indicate the region inhabited by a people who were utterly alien to them. The region between the Himalayas and the Vindhya mountains was known as *Aryavārtha* (the land of Aryans) and the region to the South of the Vindhya was known as the land of *Mlechas*, i.e. the aboriginal dwellers of India. In the later Hindu writings the Moslems of the West were called *Mlechas*. This goes to show that the ancestors of the untouchables who used to be known as *Mlechas* were really 'outsiders' so far as the Aryan pale was concerned. The *Mlechas* had nothing to do with the Aryans as the Jews had no dealings with the Gentiles.

Candala is another name for the Harijan in the early Sanskrit literature. The Law books of Hinduism regard the *Candalas* as having a peculiar place in the Aryan community. Manu defines *Candala* as one who is the offspring of a high caste woman by a *Sudra* (10: 12, 16). 'A *Candala*, a village pig, a dog, a menstruating woman must not look upon the Brahman when they eat. The dwelling of the *Candala* and *Svapaca* (i.e. a dog-eater) shall be outside the village. They should be *apapātrās* (i.e. those from whose vessels no one else would eat or drink).' (10: 51, 56.) Though the Code of Manu is an unimpeachable authority on Hindu manners and customs there is a tendency among some modern writers on Hinduism to minimize its authority. It is generally held that the Code of Manu was compiled, between the fifth and the second century B.C., by various authors of the *manava* tribe of Brahmins. It obtained general acceptance gradually. At the time of its composition the question of caste was not very rigid.

In some ways the origin of the untouchables is bound up with the institution and development of the caste system. After the Aryan settlement in India society became complex. The Aryan communities were surrounded by a class of 'aliens' (possibly the original dwellers of India) who resisted their advance. The Aryans in their turn looked down upon those who had been in possession of the land, and called them by

various unpleasant names such as 'Dasyus'—destroyers of the good ; Rakshasas or Asuras meaning demons ; and Anāsās or the nose-less folk. The black complexion of these people, their rude speech, savage yells and the sudden attacks they used to make on the Aryan settlements under the cover of darkness led the Aryans to speak of them as Rakshasas or fiends. In course of time a number of the aboriginal tribes were conquered and subjected to aryanization. The bulk of these vanquished people were brought into the servitude of the new masters. Thus the Sudras, the farming class, are partly the conquered aborigines and partly half-breeds. In time they became integrated into the Aryan community occupying the lowly position as hewers of wood and drawers of water. These folk are allowed none of the privileges which pertain to the three superior castes but are accorded the freedom of moving in and out of the Hindu homes as domestic servants. Their religious outlook is more akin to that of the Dravidians.

With the spread of the Aryan influence in India some of the aborigines who were unable to withstand the onward march of the invaders retreated into the fastness of the jungles and continued their life of primitive simplicity and freedom without harassment. The existing communities of Adivasis found in various parts of India are the descendants of this group. Tribal life, the matriarchal system, and an animistic type of religion are some of the distinguishing characteristics of these people.

Then there is the third branch of the original inhabitants of India who neither fled away from the face of their conquerors, nor consented to be aryanized. They chose to linger around the Aryan settlements retaining their own way of life. As years went by the animosity between them and the newcomers died down, and they were obliged to perform certain humble duties on behalf of the Aryans, such as the execution of those condemned to death, the disposal of dead animals, and the care of burial grounds. They refused to adopt the Aryan religion and its social institutions. They propitiated their gods and godlings with buffalo sacrifices. Though they sought to maintain their independence of the Aryans who were more prosperous, they had to work for them on their fields as serfs.

The Aryans in their turn were careful to maintain the distinction between themselves and 'the people of the land' by a policy of social segregation, resulting in untouchability and unapproachability. In time 'the people of the land' found themselves outside the framework of the Hindu caste system ; they became outcastes or were cast out of the Hindu community. As Hinduism developed, the caste system also was completed and with the completion of the caste system the outcastes emerged with all their disabilities as a unique phenomenon of human society. From time to time children of irregular unions and disreputed individuals from every class of society who had for various offences forfeited their right to associate with respectable people were consigned to the outcaste community. In the course of the development of Hinduism social distinctions based on colour were further complicated by distinctions based on certain ceremonial practices and degrading functions of certain classes of persons. Thus the *Pariah* was a drum beater and town-crier. In East Bengal there is a non-Aryan community exclusively engaged in boating and is generally called the *Candalas*. The *Bhangis* were sweepers and scavengers ; and the *Chamars* were the leather workers. Thus the Harijan community consists chiefly of two classes of

people: those who performed the degrading duties which Manu had ordained ; and those who for some reason or the other had been expelled from the Hindu castes. It is no doubt true that the Harijans have been connected with Hinduism for centuries, accepting a status of servility and degradation which was arbitrarily imposed on them. It is not easy to go beyond this and affirm that the untouchables belong to the Hindu community. But the co-existence of these two large groups of people in close proximity is not without certain important consequences. The *Paraiyahs* and *Pulayans* of Cochin, for instance, cherish the memory of their former greatness and regard themselves as the original owners of the land. On certain occasions the *Paraiyahs* are allowed to pull the temple car at processions without causing any pollution. Sometimes the Harijans are considered as those who know the correct method of propitiating the local godlings ; and hence in many parts of India they are considered the priests of the temple of the *grama devata* (the village deity). With all this the Indian untouchability is the most daring and the most thorough experiment in racial segregation in human history. In the process of achieving segregation the Hindus have done incalculable harm not only to the Harijans but to themselves as well. The social segregation which was introduced in order to preserve racial purity was in course of time endowed with divine sanction. Thus Krishna could say in the Gita ' the fourfold caste system is my creation '. Manu, the lawgiver of Hinduism, while sanctioning the social segregation of the aboriginals, goes on to explain how the untouchables should live and conduct themselves. They ought to live outside the village where no-one dare enter for the fear of pollution. The *Candalas* should have only earthen pots in which to cook and out of which to eat their meals. They should have for dress the shroud with which corpses are covered. The descriptions of the *Candalas* contained in the Puranas go to show that they were short and dark people with unpleasant features and revolting habits. All this caused the Hindus to acquiesce in this iniquitous system without criticism or protest.

The condition of the Harijans in India appears to have remained unchanged through the ages. In the thirteenth century the vaishnavite preacher Ramananda preached Vishnu Bhakti to the untouchables and thereby scandalized his orthodox contemporaries. During the Muslim period a small percentage of Harijans in South India and Bengal were converted to Islam. But the condition of the bulk of them continued to be the same to this day. Even as recently as 1930 the following prohibitions stood against the *adi-dravidas* (the Harijans of South India) in the Ramnad district :

1. that the *adi-dravidas* shall not wear ornaments of gold and silver ;
2. that the males should not be allowed to wear their clothes below their knees and above their hips ;
3. that no *adi-dravida* shall be allowed to have his hair cropped ;
4. that their women shall not be allowed to cover the upper portion of their bodies by clothes such as *ravikai* ;
5. that their women shall not be allowed to use flowers or saffron paste ;
6. that the men shall not use umbrellas, nor should they wear sandals.

In Bengal the use by a *namasudra* bridegroom of a palanquin in a marriage procession led to a disturbance. In 1930 the Kala Ram temple in Nasik was closed for a month to keep the *mahars* from entering the temple. In the census of 1931 political considerations outweighed all else and attempts were made to induce the untouchables to record themselves as 'Hindus' and nothing else. In Punjab the All-India Shraddhanand Depressed Class Mission called on the untouchables to return themselves as Arya-Hindus instead of *Achuts* (unclean folk) while the leaders of the untouchables called on their people to return themselves as *Adi-Dharmis* (those who are of the original faith).

In 1930 the census officer of Assam referred to the untouchables by a new name: 'exterior castes'. Explaining the employment of this new term the census officer says: 'The expression as it stands connotes castes which are Hindu castes but which are outside something. What are they outside of? The answer is that they are outside of the pale of Hindu Society.' Then the officer goes on to say 'By this expression I mean castes whose water is not acceptable, and who in addition are so deficient as castes in education, wealth and influence'. The census officer concludes by saying '... an exterior caste may in course of time possibly become what I may call interior one'. Thus the Harijans are an enigma and cannot be quite certain whether they are the creation of Hinduism or whether they are altogether a people apart, quite independent of the Hindu community. The untouchables have a vague religion of their own quite apart from Hinduism. They are forbidden to learn or practise Hinduism. All that the Hindus have taught them is that their present degradation is due to their Karma.

The Redemption of the Outcaste

The caste system in India has reduced the untouchables to a position of hopelessness and helplessness. They depend for this very existence on people who despise them utterly. Today the practice of untouchability is made a legal offence, nonetheless it stands as a symbol of the bankruptcy of the Hindu social system. Whether Hinduism was directly responsible for the emergence of the Harijan community or not, it has proved unable to abolish it. Hinduism which claims to be the religion of the bulk of the Indian people has no answer to the problem of untouchability.

Theoretically, the Hindus cannot have fellowship with the Harijans and admit them into their fold without ceasing to be Hindus; and yet fellowship with the untouchables is the secret of Harijan uplift. Mahatma Gandhi felt that Hinduism was quite capable of abolishing untouchability, and thus proved to be an extraordinary type of Hindu! Fellowship with Harijans would spell disaster to Hinduism as a socio-religious system; but one does not see why it should not be ready to die in order to live a larger life.

The redemption of the untouchables had begun in the first instance when some of their number had heard and received the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the nineteenth century. The Gospel told them how much God cared for them. The care and concern of the living God for man is brought home to men in the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of God's eternal Son. How much God cared for them was perceived in a faint measure by the Harijans in the life of the Christian missionary who came to live

in their midst and bore with all their shortcomings, and in the life of the Christian pastor who was unto them as a shepherd to the flock. The secret of the Harijan uplift lies in their spiritual uplift. Very often it happens that a fallen person begins to make a recovery when he comes to know how much So-and-so has loved him. For the first time in his life the Harijan hears how much the Saviour loved and suffered for him and how much He longs for the love of his poor heart. He sees something of the care of God for him in the life and work of the Christian Evangelist who lives in his midst. He thinks about it; asks to know more about the Christian faith and way of life, and decides to be baptized into this religion of God's love. Before the Harijans are admitted into the Church they have to promise to give up the worship of idols and demons; they have to attend Christian worship on Sundays; send their children to the school; and give up drinking and unclean habits such as eating carrion. They are prepared for three to six months before they are baptized. Once when a survey was made in order to find out why the untouchables became Christians, the answers furnished to a questionnaire varied a great deal, 'to marry a good girl', said one; 'to escape from the cholera goddess', said another; 'because the landlord oppressed us' was another answer; 'to fight the devil and save my children' was the testimony of another person. The motives which led people to Christ in mass movements are those which led individuals to Him anywhere and at any time. In almost every human situation motives are mixed. Anyone who genuinely desires the emancipation of the untouchables should rejoice at the transformation wrought in the lives of these unfortunate people by the power of the Gospel. The Church's work among the Harijans is a solid testimony to the fact; Harijan uplift work should begin with and aim at the spiritual uplift of these men who have been deeply wronged.

This enquiry may be concluded with two quotations, which need no comment. A Brahmin Census Officer in 1901 wrote in the Travancore Cochin Report as follows:—

'But for these missionaries, these humble orders of Hindu Society would have for ever remained unraised . . . To the Christian missionaries belongs the credit of having gone to their humble homes and awakened them to a sense of better earthly existence . . . The heroism of raising the low from the slough of degradation and debasement was an element of civilization unknown to ancient India.'

Mr. V. A. Giri, Joint Secretary, Bharat Sevak Samaj, said in a speech in Madras on 26th April, 1955:—

'Dr. Ambedkar's proposal to lead 250,000 of his followers among the scheduled castes to embrace Buddhism is fraught with dangerous consequences. Once the scheduled caste members are converted to Buddhism they will forfeit their claim to the various concessions provided for them as belonging to Hindu religion. They will no longer be members of the scheduled caste. They should not leave the Hindu fold at any cost.'