

THE UNTOUCHABLE

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Our country is in a really bad shape; here strangest questions are asked but the foremost among them concerns the Untouchables, who count 6 crores in population of 30 crores.

For instance :

Would contact with an untouchable mean defilement of an upper caste?

Would the Gods in the temples, not get angry by the entry of untouchables there?

Would the drinking water of a well not get polluted if the untouchables drew their water from the same well?

That these questions are being asked in the twentieth century, is a matter which makes our heads hang in shame.

We Indians boast of our spiritualism, but then, we avoid accepting every human being as a fellow being just like ourselves. Western people on the other hand, who carry a reputation of being money-minded, had unequivocally affirmed their faith in the principle of equality. This they did during the revolutions in America and France and above all in Russia; these days Russia is committed to the extension of this principle to all aspects of life and to ending of discriminations in any form whatsoever, thereby fulfilling the ideals of May Day declaration. But we Indians on our part who never tire of boasting about our gods and godliness are, yet seriously debating whether to permit the untouchables to wear the sacred thread or the *janeu* and whether the untouchables be permitted to read Vedas/Shastras. We often complain about our maltreatment in other countries, and particularly when we are maltreated by the whites, do we have any moral right to voice such a protest?

In 1926, a Sindhi Muslim gentleman, Mr. Nur Mohammad, member of Bombay Legislative Council aptly remarked:-

"If the Hindu society refuses to allow other human beings, fellow creatures at that, to attend public schools, and if...The president of the local board representing so many lakhs of people in this house, refuses to allow his fellows and brothers, the elementary human right of having water to drink, what right have they to ask for more rights from the bureaucracy? Before we accuse the people coming from other lands, we should see how we ourselves behave towards our own people...

How can we ask for greater political rights when we ourselves deny elementary rights to human beings.

How true! But since this had been said by a Muslim, Hindus lost no time in alleging that the Muslim's real intention was to convert the untouchables to Islam and thus assimilate them into their own brotherhood. But then, it amounted to an open admission of the harsh truth—that if you (the Hindus) treat them worse than your cattle, they will desert you, join the fold of other religions where they hope to enjoy more rights, where they are treated as fellow beings.

Would it not then be pointless to blame the Christians and Muslims, that they were undermining Hinduism?

How fair and true! Yet the Hindus tremble in anger on hearing this plain truth. In any case, it has shaken Hindus from their complacency in the matter. Orthodox Brahmins too have started re-thinking about it, joined also by some self-proclaimed reformers. At Patna a gala Hindu meet was held. Lala Lajpat Rai, known for his longstanding sympathy for the untouchables, was presiding. A lot of hot arguments were exchanged as to whether the untouchables are eligible to wear sacred thread, the *janeu*? Could they read Vedas/Shastras? A number of social reformers lost their temper but Lala ji was able to persuade them to compromise on these two matters and thereby saved the prestige of Hindu religion; otherwise, what would have been the consequences?

Just imagine how shameful it is! Even a dog can sit in our lap, it can also move freely in kitchen but if a fellow human touches you, your *dharma* is endangered. So much so, even a reputed social reformer like Pandit Malviya ji, known for his soft corner for the untouchables, first agrees

to be publicly garlanded by a sweeper, but then afterwards regards himself to be polluted till he bathes and washes those clothes. How ironical! In the temples meant for worshipping God, who lives in us all, if a poor man enters, it gets defiled and God gets annoyed. When this is the state of affairs within the Hindu fold, does it behove us to quarrel and fight in the name of the brotherhood? Above all, this kind of approach to the question amounts to an ingratitude of the highest degree; those who provide us the comforts by doing menial jobs for us, we shun them. We could worship even animals, but would not tolerate fellow humans to sit beside us.

This is an issue of hot debate these days, the poor creatures getting special attention in this way. In the context of our advance towards national liberation, the problem of communal representation (seats in the legislatures allotted in proportion to Hindu, Sikh and Muslim population) may not have been beneficial in any other manner but at least Hindu/Muslim/Sikhs are all striving hard to maximize their own respective quota of seats by attracting the maximum number of untouchables to their own respective folds. Accordingly Muslims started providing them equal rights after converting them to Islam.

This naturally hurt the Hindus. Bitterness mounted, riots too broke out. By and by Sikhs, too woke up lest they be left behind in this race. They too started administering *Amrit*; tension mounted between Sikhs and Hindus over the removal of *janeu* or hair shaving. All in all, all the three are trying to outdo the others, resulting in widespread disturbances. Christians sitting on the fence are quietly consolidating their hold.

Be as it may, this turmoil is certainly helping us to move towards the weakening of the hold of untouchability.

As for the untouchables, when they discovered that all this great turmoil was on their account and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, all were trying to profit at their cost, they also started thinking, "Why should we not organize on our own?" No one is certain whether they are doing so as a result of official prompting or at their own but once this line of thinking had taken roots, certainly this trend is being fully backed up by official quarters. "*Adi Dharma Mandal*" and the like are the end result of this trend.

Here, the basic question arises, how precisely can we solve this tangle? The answer is quite obvious; above all, it needs to be settled for good, that all humans are equal without distinctions of birth or vocation. In other words that since someone is born in a poor sweepers' family, he shall continue cleaning toilets all his life and thus get deprived of all chances of progress in life, is all nonsense. Historically speaking, when our Aryan ancestors nurtured these practices of discrimination towards this strata of society, shunning all human contact with them by labeling them as menials, and assigning all the degrading jobs to them, they also, naturally started worrying about a revolt against this system. "All this is the result of your past sins; What can be done about it? Bear it silently!" and with such kinds of sleeping pills, they were able to buy peace for quite some time. All the same they were guilty of a great sin on this account, since this amounted to the negation of core human values like self-esteem and self-reliance, a grossly cruel conduct by all means. Yet present is the moment of its atonement.

In a broader social perspective, untouchability had a pernicious side-effect; people in general got used to hating the jobs which were otherwise vital for life. We treated the weavers who provided us cloth as untouchable. In U.P. water carriers were also considered untouchables. All this caused tremendous damage to our progress by undermining the dignity of labour, especially manual labour. We have thus to accept it once for all, that in order to move forward we have to give up either considering or calling them untouchables.

Everything else shall fall in place by itself.

In this regard, a strategy adopted by *Naujwan Bharat Sabha* and the Youth conference is, most apt to seek forgiveness from those brethren, whom we have been calling untouchables by treating them as our fellow beings, without making them go through conversion ceremonies of Sikhism, Islam or Hinduism, by accepting food / water from their hands. On the other hand quarrelling among ourselves in the race to win them over, without restoring to them their human dignity is futile.

But the moment we went to villages with our message of human equality and brotherhood mentioned above, Government agents started inciting the *Jat* community saying that this would embolden these menials to refuse serving them. This was sufficient to provoke the *Jats*, to oppose our efforts in the right direction.

But the upper castes should also realise that their own status in life cannot change for the better as long they persist in considering these people as inferior, calling them menials, and keeping them under their heels. It is argued that they are unclean. The harsh truth is that they are poor; remove their poverty and they shall be clean. Don't we find that the poor even among the upper castes are no less unclean? Besides doing unclean jobs is not bad; for example mothers perform all the unclean duties for their children. Do they become unclean?

However, ultimately the problem can not be satisfactorily solved unless and until untouchable communities themselves unite and organize. We regard their recent uniting to form their distinct identity, and also demanding representation equal to Muslims in legislatures, being equal to them in numbers, a move in the right direction. Either reject communal representation altogether, else give these people too their due share! In principle, Councils and Assemblies are duty bound to ensure full and free access for all these communities to schools, colleges, wells and roads; that too not only on paper but by actually accompanying them to wells, schools and get them admitted there. But can these legislatures, where a lot of hue and cry is raised even over a bill to ban child marriages, on the grounds that it shall be a threat to their religion, dare to bring the untouchables to their level on their own? No, never; that is why we plead that they must persist in pressing for their own distinct representation in legislatures in proportion to their numerical strength. We mince no words in proclaiming: "Arise! So-called untouchables, the real sustainers of life, awake and reflect over your past, you were the backbone of Guru Gobind Singh's army. Shivaji was able to achieve all that with your participation, which made him ever shining in history. Your sacrifices are worthy of being embedded in golden letters. The way in which you sustain us and add to our comforts ought to make us feel grateful to you. It is we who fail to appreciate you." The Land Alienation Act (banning transfer of land to non-agriculturist communities, defined as per caste) does not permit you to buy land even if you manage the necessary amount of cost. The way you are being oppressed had prompted Miss Mayo of U.S.A. to label you "less than man." As a matter of fact, without your own efforts, you shall not be able to move ahead.

"Those who would be free must themselves strike the first blow." It must be kept in mind that every one belonging to the privileged class, strives to enjoy his own rights, but would try his utmost to keep oppressing those below him, and keeping the underprivileged under his heel. Thus, might is held to be right. Waste no time and unite to stand on your own feet and challenge the existing order of society. Let it then be seen as to who dares to deny your due. Do not be at the mercy of others and have no illusions about them. Be on guard so as not to fall in the trap of officialdom, because far from being your ally it seeks to make you dance to its own tunes. The capitalist bureaucratic combine is, truly speaking responsible for your oppression and poverty. Hence always shun it. Be on guard about its tricks. This is then the way out. You are the real working class. Workers unite – you have nothing to lose but your chains. Arise and rebel against the existing order. Gradualism and reformism shall be of no avail to you. Start a revolution from a social agitation and gird up your loins for political and economic revolution. You and you alone are the pillars of the nations and its core strength. Awake, O sleeping lions! Rebel, raise the banner of revolt.

— Vidrohi
