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Author(s): Gerard Baader

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# THE DEPRESSED CLASSES OF INDIA

## Their Struggle for Emancipation

BY GERARD BAADER, S.J.

ACCORDING to the Hindu creed, the origin of the Depressed Classes—also known as pariahs, outcastes, Untouchables, Harijans—lies in the divine law of *Karma*, the just retribution of the individual soul for its good or bad acts during successive reincarnations. The pariahs are reaping the bitter fruit of sin in past lives; they are by divine ordinance or dispensation condemned to degrading occupations. Therefore they, as everybody else, have to accept their lot; by humbly serving the higher castes, by prayer, worship, observance of the special rules laid down for them, they can now sow the seeds for a better rebirth, if fate should so ordain it (Hindus deny—many explicitly, all implicitly—the freedom of the will). *Karma*, with its iron sceptre, rules the universe and makes it move, down to the tiniest parts, with a precision from which escape is impossible. The world, as it exists, with its good and evil, its happiness and misery, its apparent love and apparent injustice, must be accepted; that a change is possible, that a change might be for the benefit and to the liking of some, is not a reason why a change should be made. The injunctions of Hinduism are often as cruel to the individual Caste Hindu as to the mass of the Depressed Classes. Here is an instance which occurred in May, 1934. “It is reported from Jattarodid, suburb of Nagpur, that a Caste Hindu woman accidentally fell into a well while drawing water. Hearing the cries for help, two Harijan (Mahar) youths rushed to the spot and attempted to dive into the well to save her life. They were, however, prevented by Caste Hindu women from doing so, on the ground that the water of the well would be polluted by contact with the would-be rescuers. The girl in the meantime was drowned.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Examiner*, May 14, 1934.

The real origin of the Depressed Classes is, like the history of the entire caste system, a question much disputed among India's best historians. Race, conquest and occupation seem to have been the main factors in the first stages of the development ; later the spirit of the Brahmanic religion and philosophy entered and turned the natural divisions into the elaborate caste system of "supernatural" rigidity. The great majority of the Untouchables represent original peoples who had been the masters of India before the Dravidas and the Aryans invaded their country and subdued them. Subsequent invasions submerged some of them still more without obliterating them. The more migratory tribes among them, though they may have as low a standard of morality and intelligence as the rest, have, as a rule, kept above the stratum of untouchability and acquired their recognized ranks within the Hindu social hierarchy. It is very likely that the "massa damnata" of the pariahs was swelled considerably by high-born Hindus who lost their caste through defilement or official excommunication ; it was also swelled by the offspring of illegitimate unions between members of higher and lower castes or outcastes.

Such subdued and ostracized people were reduced by their conquerors and masters to an ever more servile status. They became the menial servants in the household and the diggers in the fields. Bit by bit the more unpleasant duties were assigned to them. They were made the sweepers and scavengers of town and village, the flayers of dead animals, and the leather-workers in general. Their masters' abhorrence of the unpleasant tasks may have hardened into contempt of persons forced, and in course of time willing, to perform them. On the other hand, the pariahs, treated as sub-human beings for ages, assumed in some instances what might almost be called a sub-human character, yielding to all the animal instincts in man's nature, losing all sense of human dignity and self-respect under the stifling fatalism of the *Karma* doctrine. Their abject servility and dishonesty, their rude manners and unclean habits rendered them more and more repulsive to their masters. These shunned their company, avoided their quarters, were loath even so much as to touch them or to come within the

reach of their breath. Gradually an impenetrable barrier of rules and practices grew up between the ruling classes and these serfs. In the various parts of India and at different times there were, and still are, many degrees and shades of untouchability. Some are considered simply "untouchable," others "unapproachable," others even "unseeable."

To touch such an outcaste means moral defilement; water and food become impure by his touch or by his very shadow. The "unapproachable" of Southern India—like the lepers of ancient Judea—must warn a Brahmin of his presence, and get out of the way if possible. The very house of the Brahmin becomes unclean at his approach. The high-caste man at his meal, catching the sound of an outcaste's voice, will desist from eating. A pariah's touch or look suffices to desecrate idols and temples. Therefore the shrines and temples of the other Hindus are closed to them, and so are the common burning-*ghats*. Let us hear the evidence of some prominent Indians. G. K. Devadhar, in his Presidential Address at the Indian National Social Conference, 29 December 1933, said :—

Here, in Southern India, in some parts some roads around certain shrines are barred against these human beings, whereas they are open for dogs and donkeys to tread upon. And I know, as a matter of fact, that when a demand was made to higher authorities to close down some of the roads opened by the municipalities round some temples, the grounds put forth were that they became polluted for the worshippers to cross over them after bath in the tank outside the temple area, on the other side of the road, because the Depressed Classes were allowed to tread upon these roads, while no objection was taken to their being trampled upon by objectionable and dirty animals like donkeys."<sup>1</sup>

The wells and common bathing places are likewise inaccessible to the outcastes. Dr. Ambedkar, the present leader of India's fifty or sixty million Untouchables, reminded his fellow outcastes in his address to the Mahar Conference at Bombay, 31 May 1936, of recent cases of beating by Caste Hindus, just because the outcastes have obtained the right to

<sup>1</sup> D.C., p. 26. D.C. stands for : *The Depressed Classes. A Chronological Documentation* (Kurseong).

send their children to government schools, to use the public wells. . . .

Beating has also been occasioned by your wearing better clothes and ornaments, and by the use of copper vessels for fetching water [instead of earthenware jars]. There have been, and there still are, instances of beating by Caste Hindus because of the purchase and use of land, because of the failure to remove carcasses of bullocks and cows, and because of declining to eat them ; similarly, because some Untouchables have taken to shoes and sandals, are seen in the open streets, and have failed to salute the Caste Hindus . . . . There are hypocrites who give sugar to ants and refuse water to the dying.<sup>1</sup>

The outcastes are denied every sort of education. Naturally the schools of Caste Hindus are outside their reach ; into the government schools, which are supposed to be open to all, they are hardly admitted, and if they manage to get in, they are treated with such contempt and subjected to such indignities that they have often to stay away for some time or leave the school altogether. Of his own school-days Dr. Ambedkar paints a sad picture :—

You can imagine how much I could learn when I tell you that I had to sit with boys of my community outside the school house. Depressed Classes boys of all standards had to sit together ; no one dared to teach them ; the teacher would simply ask if we had read our lessons. I read in the Satara High School. Here I had to sit on a separate bench. Fain would I have studied Sanskrit, but the Sanskrit teacher would not have me.<sup>2</sup>

Such has been the state of about sixty million Indians—that is, nearly one-fifth of the total population of the country—for many centuries. They did not think of voicing their grievances ; for they knew it was useless and believed it was sinful. They remained the mute suffering victims of tyranny and superstition. But now—to use the words of Mr. R. S. Nekaljay, President of the All-India Depressed Classes Conference at Amraoti, 27 April 1930, “the cry of the dumb millions of this vast continent of India, oppressed socially,

<sup>1</sup> D.C., p. 94. In order to gain religious merit, pious Hindus feed certain animals, like cows, snakes, monkeys, ants. On the other hand, their superstition forbids them to give water to a dying person.

<sup>2</sup> *Apostles*, Sept., 1936, p. 7.

economically, politically, and religiously for centuries, has reached the throne of the Creator of the universe"—

We have to express our grateful thanks to Him for bringing into India a nation from those Isles of Liberty and Freedom whose very civilization is built upon the principles of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. . . . Now that we have a voice, a common platform, let us take the fullest opportunity to denounce, without let or hindrance, the atrocities committed on us in the name of religion. . . . The High-Caste Hindus do not shed blood (of animals), but they kill millions of people slowly, inch by inch, every moment of their lives and then go to the Ganges to take a purification bath, and after the bath they say that they are as pure and innocent as a new-born babe and are fit to go to heaven immediately. . . . In Europe also the strong had oppressed the weak and had enslaved them to servitude. Luckily for the slaves, for the serfs and for the oppressed, the religion of Christ, born in Asia, went over to Europe—instead of to Asia—and levelled down all imaginary and artificial distinctions based on one's birth. In India the Philosophies of *Maya* and *Karma*, evolved by the selfish Brahmins to oppress millions of people, have had full sway . . .<sup>1</sup>

The 'dumb millions' are awakening; they are in a state of volcanic eruption. Their long pent-up indignation is breaking forth in violent denunciations and impassioned protests voiced by their leaders. Who are these leaders, the champions in the present struggle against Untouchability? Some have arisen not only from among the Untouchables, but also from among the recognized Castes. Among the latter are men like Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

When Mr. Gandhi, during his life as a lawyer in South Africa (1893-1915), keenly realized the degrading effects of colour prejudice upon the political, social, and economic conditions of his countrymen in those parts, he took up their cause in public and in private with great fervour and personal sacrifices. In various ways he strove to arouse their self-respect and to raise them in the esteem of their neighbours and employers. He organized, led and won—mainly through the support of poor Indian miners—an eight years' campaign of passive resistance for the repeal of the Asiatic Act, which subjected Indians to humiliating restrictions and disabilities; the heavy tax on Indian labourers was abolished. Gandhi

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<sup>1</sup> D.C., Appendix B.

had become the poor man's champion and made the poor man's dress his only wear. It was also in South Africa that he studied the practice and the teachings of Christianity in its Protestant form. Henceforth he read many Christian books on religion, was fascinated by the personality of Christ in the Gospels, and found much inspiration in the Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy's book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* made a deep and lasting impression on him; its idea of "non-violence," blended with the Indian doctrine of *Ahimsa*<sup>1</sup>, was to dominate all his thought and action.

In his struggle for a better treatment of the Indian coolies in Africa, Gandhi became painfully conscious of the fact that their brethren at home, the outcastes, who formed nearly one-fifth of Mother India's children, were treated no better by their own countrymen and co-religionists—suffered, in fact, much greater wrongs from them in every respect. The Mahatma realized that a country bearing the stigma of Untouchability could not claim a place of honour among the other nations of the world. In Africa he conceived his campaign for the removal of this dark blot from his country. Though he does not aim at a complete abolition of the caste system, which in his opinion is something inherent in human nature and reduced to a science by Hinduism, he wants the Hindus to take the edge off it by rendering the intercourse between the various castes much easier and more natural, by stopping every sort of oppression, and by refraining from contemptuous treatment of the pariahs. To express and emphasize this new attitude, quite opposed to the traditions of Hinduism, he calls the outcastes by the new name of *Harijans*, "God's own People," which reminds one very much of Christ's Sermon on the Mount and of St. Francis of Assisi.

After his return to India in 1915 Mr. Gandhi established near Ahmedabad his *Ashram*, as a kind of seminary for selected followers, into whom he instilled his principles. He was persuaded by extreme Indian Nationalists that the absolute political independence of India was the surest and quickest remedy for all social evils. This was unfortunate; for the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ahimsa* means the attitude of refraining from killing any living thing.

political campaign distracted him from his social work—and moreover Gandhi is no politician. He started his struggle for *Swaraj*. The greatest difficulty to be overcome was the antagonism between the two largest bodies, the Hindus and the Mohammedans. For a short time the Mahatma succeeded in uniting them; but soon they fell out—to Gandhi's great grief. Another effort at a reunion having failed, Gandhi focussed his whole care upon the Hindu community, which forms about seventy per cent. of India's population. Evidently this large block needed much attention; for it showed clear signs of a split, which threatened to weaken its numbers and prestige considerably. The Untouchables, mainly those in the larger towns, began to organize themselves, with the help of some Europeans, in order to take politics into their own hands. Realizing the greatness of the danger, the Mahatma urged the religious and political Hindu leaders to grant the just demands of the Harijans for religious, social and political equality; but they turned a deaf ear to his entreaties. Neither would the Harijan leaders listen when Gandhi asked them to bide their time in patience.

In the winter of 1930-31 the First Indian Round Table Conference discussed all the various problems of the new Constitution for India and laid down its main principles. The Indian National Congress Party, of which Gandhi was the President, was excluded from this Conference. But the Mahatma was chosen to represent his party at the Second Round Table Conference in London in the end of 1931. There the Minorities Committee, formed by members selected from among the responsible leaders of the communities, could not reach any agreement on the complicated question of communal representation. The Congress Party—the chief body of Gandhi's followers—objected strongly to the idea of separate representation of the minorities, to which the Untouchables belonged. Gandhi's grand reception by the enthusiastic Swarajists at Bombay on his return from London was badly marred when the Harijans, in a procession carrying black flags, manifested their dissatisfaction and protested against him with such vehemence that the police had to protect him.

One of the two representatives of the Depressed Classes minority at the Second Round Table Conference was a certain Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Ph.D., D.Sc. He was born (1893) as an Untouchable, of a Mahar family, but rose in the world owing to his natural ability and, not least, to the liberality of the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda, who sent him with a scholarship to carry on his studies at Columbia University, U.S.A., where he graduated. Afterwards he did some research work in London. At the Second Round Table Conference he strongly repudiated Mr. Gandhi's claim to represent general Indian opinion, and he openly expressed his view that the Untouchables regard the Caste Hindu as their implacable enemy.

The Second Round Table Conference having failed to come to any agreement concerning the representation, in the future Constitution, of the different Indian communities, especially the minorities, the task of solving the tangle was entrusted to the Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald. He, presumably on the advice of the India Office, drew up the so-called Communal Award. This provided that India should be divided into constituencies, arranged not on a purely territorial basis but in accordance with the racial, religious and social divisions of her peoples. Those members of the Depressed Classes who qualified for the franchise were to be entitled to vote not only in general Hindu constituencies but also in special constituencies for the Depressed Classes, to whom a certain number of separate seats would be reserved. The object was, "while securing to them the spokesmen of their own choice in the Legislatures of the Provinces where they are found in large numbers, at the same time to avoid electoral arrangements which would perpetuate their segregation. . . . The anomaly of giving certain members of the Depressed Classes two votes is abundantly justified by the urgent need of securing that their claims should be effectively expressed and the prospects of improving their actual condition promoted."<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi raised vehement protests against this decision, which foiled his cherished plan of effecting a united Hindu

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<sup>1</sup> Explanatory Statement by the Prime Minister, 16 August 1932. D.C., p. 2.

India. From Yerawda Central Prison, Poona, where he was under arrest since January 4, 1932, he wrote to Sir Samuel Hoare and to the Premier, Mr. MacDonald, repeating that the Depressed Classes problem was predominantly moral and religious. Though he had made the cause of the Harijans his own "from his boyhood," he felt obliged in conscience to resist the Communal Award with his life, as he saw in it "the injection of a poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism and to do no good whatever to the Depressed Classes." His only weapon was to declare "a perpetual fast unto death from food of any kind save water with or without salt and soda." This fast would begin at noon of September 20, 1932, and would cease as soon as the British Government withdrew their scheme of separate communal electorates for the Depressed Classes. Whilst the Government allowed the Mahatma all facilities in Yerawda Jail for discussing the Depressed Classes problem with such persons or deputations as he might wish to see, their attitude to the Communal Award remained unchanged—and Gandhi began his fast. To a press representative he declared that he always had identified himself, so far as possible, with the lowest strata among the Untouchables. ". . . . And I am convinced, if they are ever to rise, it will not be by the reservation of seats; it will be by strenuous work done by Hindu reformers in their midst; and it is because I feel that this separation would have killed all prospect of reform that my whole soul rebelled against it."<sup>1</sup>

Public opinion was very much divided. Gandhi's enemies called him a comedian and a hysteric; his friends stood in awe at the heroic fast and the unselfish sacrifice of India's greatest saint. For six days the Hindu nation lay at the feet of its idol and held its breath, whilst the leaders of the oppressors and of the oppressed were meeting in conference at Bombay and Poona alternately, trying to come to a speedy agreement which would satisfy both camps and save the Mahatma from a premature death. The leading figures were Pandit Madanmohan Malavya for the Caste Hindus and Dr. Ambedkar for

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<sup>1</sup> D.O., p. 6.

the Depressed Classes. On September 24, 1932, the fifth day of the fast, they signed the historic POONA PACT.

In this Pact the Depressed Classes renounced separate seats; but out of the seats for the Hindus both in the Provincial and the Central Legislatures there should be seats reserved for them in proportion to their voting strength. Thus in the Central Legislature eighteen per cent.—*i.e.*, 148 of the seats allotted to the general Hindu electorate—should be reserved for the Depressed Classes. “There shall be no disabilities attaching to anyone on the ground of his being a member of the Depressed Classes in regard to any election to local bodies or appointment to the Public Services.” Fair representation of the Depressed Classes in these respects is guaranteed. Further, “in every Province, out of the educational grant, an adequate sum shall be earmarked for providing educational facilities for the members of the Depressed Classes.” Gandhi approved; all the leaders present in Poona signed the agreement, and a cable was sent to the Prime Minister urging him “to withdraw the decision providing for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes to enable Gandhi to break his fast. . . . India shall now anxiously await your immediate action.”<sup>1</sup> On the following day the Conference, reassembled in Bombay, unanimously ratified the Poona Pact and issued the resolution: “Henceforth no one shall be regarded as an Untouchable by reason of his birth, and those who have been so regarded hitherto shall have the same right as the other Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, roads, schools, and other public institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar, leader of the Depressed Classes, thanked Gandhi for having extricated him from a very difficult situation by supporting him and not the extreme Caste Hindus in the discussions preceding the Poona Pact. At the same time he expressed his regret that Gandhi had not shown the same consideration for his point of view at the Second Round Table Conference. When assuring the Conference that the Depressed Classes would be loyal to the Pact, Dr. Ambedkar expressed some apprehension as to whether the entire Hindu

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<sup>1</sup> D.O., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> D.C., p. 9.

community would abide by it. He was not convinced that separate electorates would be injurious to national interests, and he did not believe that joint electorates would solve the problem of absorbing the Depressed Classes in the Hindu community. The Hindu attitude concerning Untouchability itself must undergo a radical change.

When the British Government announced their acceptance of the Poona Pact, Gandhi broke his fast (September 26, 1932), Tagore sang a hymn of triumph, all India rejoiced, the whole world congratulated the Mahatma and the other leaders.

There is no doubt that Mr. Gandhi's fast had very remarkable results. Strong forces for the abolition of Untouchability were set in motion; as by a miracle, the great Hindu community was stirred to its depths. Many temples, hitherto closed to the Harijans, were thrown open to every worshipper indiscriminately—even in the strongholds of Hinduism, like Benares and Jagannath. Public wells and roads became accessible to the Untouchables. On numerous occasions the sincere spirit of brotherhood seemed to manifest itself, as when all the classes of a village or town, from the temple Brahmin down to the scavenger, held a common festival dinner. Many members of the Depressed Classes were deeply affected, and at numerous meetings all over India they passed resolutions expressing their loyal devotion to the Mahatma and favouring joint electorates.

The first important step in carrying out the Poona Pact was taken on September 30, 1932, at Bombay, with the inauguration of the All-India Anti-Untouchability League, which later changed its name to 'Harijan-Sevak-Sangha'—*i.e.* 'Society of the Servants of the Untouchables'—and set up its headquarters at Delhi. The objects of this League were :—

- (1) Propaganda among all classes of Hindus for the removal of Untouchability and a radical change in the mentality of Caste Hindus.
- (2) Constructive work for the educational, economic, and social uplift of the Depressed Classes.

- (3) Immediate active steps "to secure as early as practicable that all public wells, *dharmashalas* (rest-houses for travellers), roads, schools, crematoriums, burning-ghats, and all public temples be declared open to the Depressed Classes"<sup>1</sup>—peaceful persuasion only to be used towards this end.

The Nawab of Bhopal donated Rs. 5,000, and other prominent Hindus promised Rs. 70,000 for the first and as much for the second year towards the funds of the League. Every member holding any office in the League has to give in writing a pledge "that he will not observe Untouchability in his private or public life," and that he will use every legitimate means to have all public disabilities of the Harijans removed as soon as possible.

On November 1, 1932, the Madras Legislative Council unanimously carried a resolution recommending to the Government the recognition of the growing feeling that all disabilities of the Depressed Classes in regard to social intercourse and common worship at temples should be removed; and six weeks later the Benares Hindu University issued a manifesto in which the professors and students professed their belief that every Hindu, irrespective of caste, should have the right and opportunity of worshipping in any temple.

Thus the anti-untouchability campaign seemed to progress with giant strides. Already some enthusiasts were prophesying the speedy realization of a united Hindu India and its ultimate triumph over British rule. They were disillusioned all too soon. For, alarmed at the rapid growth of the movement, the conservative orthodox Hindus (called "*Sanatanists*," i.e., "Partisans of the Eternal, Unchangeable Religion") began a violent counter-propaganda. In letters to the Mahatma himself and to the press they attacked him as a renegade filled with Christian and Mohammedan ideas. Gandhi, still in jail, retorted by suggesting an Anti-Untouchability Day, on which every Caste Hindu should prove, by deeds of brotherly love towards Harijans, that he was willing to overcome Untouch-

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<sup>1</sup> D.C., p. 12.

ability and so do his part in the "mass movement of self-purification" of Hinduism.

About the same time the Third Round Table Conference (17 November till 24 December 1932) agreed to the enfranchisement of ten per cent. of the Depressed Classes in each province.

When the Madras Temple Entry Bill was submitted to the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, he refused to sanction it on the grounds that, before the general Hindu opinion was ascertained, Government could not decide what attitude to adopt. On the other hand, His Excellency permitted the introduction, in the Central Legislative Assembly, of Mr. Ranga Iyer's Temple Entry Bill, emphasizing the need of its widest circulation for the purpose of eliciting public opinion. This reserved attitude of the Government was in strict keeping with Queen Victoria's proclamation on the transfer of the government of India to the Crown, November 1, 1858: "We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be in authority under us that they abstain from all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects on pain of our highest displeasure."<sup>1</sup> The Bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly on March 24, 1933, but postponed to the Autumn Session.

The Indian peasant—and the overwhelming majority of Indians are peasants—does not care much about politics or the nature of the government, so long as they do not interfere with the essentials of his simple life—food and the practice of his religion. But should either be curtailed or seriously endangered, the meek lamb becomes a raving beast bent upon destroying its prey by wily treachery or by brutal force.

Now the very temples, the sanctuaries of every village, were threatened with defilement and desecration, and that not merely by "the harmless whims of a holy fool like Gandhi," which were not to be taken seriously, nor by a paper like the Poona Pact, a political instrument which did not affect the thousands of Indian country towns and villages; no, the violation of temples was to be effected and sanctioned, made

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<sup>1</sup> G. V. Smith, *Oxford History of India*, (1920), p. 729.

universal and permanent, by law. This was a very serious matter which began to rouse the indignation of the Caste Hindus all over India. Feelings on both sides ran higher every day. In numerous meetings and processions the Caste Hindus protested against the proposed Bill and also against the whole Poona Pact, whilst the Harijans under their leaders insisted on their promised rights. Caste people who had taken part in the public dinners and festivals with the pariahs, secretly submitted to the prescribed purification ceremonies. Under the pressure of the *Sanatanists* most of the temples which had been thrown open to all, shut their doors against the Depressed Classes. Regular fights and sieges about temples and wells took place between both parties. The Untouchables had often to seek the protection of the Government against acts of violence.

The stubborn resistance of the Caste Hindus to the removal of Untouchability affected Gandhi deeply. From May 8 to 29, 1933, he undertook an unconditional and irrevocable fast of "purification and prayer" to atone for the greatest sin of Hinduism and to obtain light, strength, and good will for the Caste Hindus. In view of the religious nature and object of the fast, Government had released the Mahatma from Poona Jail. The impression and effect of this fast on the Hindus in general was apparently not very great. Soon Gandhi lost all the sympathies of the orthodox Brahmins of Poona by insisting, in spite of their bitter criticism and violent protests, on the marriage of his son Devadas with a Brahmin girl. This marriage between a lower and a higher, in fact the highest, caste was entirely against the Hindu law and faith. The Poona Brahmins accused the Mahatma of reading the Bible far too much and of fostering Christian tendencies.

On political charges Gandhi was re-arrested on August 1, 1933, and sentenced to one year's simple imprisonment. Sixteen days later he commenced a new fast to induce the Government to set him free so that he might carry on work for the Harijans. Being released on August 23, he started on an All-India tour with the object of making propaganda and collecting funds on behalf of the Untouchables. Meanwhile,

all over India, discussion and agitation for and against Untouchability continued. Pointing out that it was "impracticable and likely to lead to serious disturbance," the Government of India opposed the Temple Entry Bill as a "serious invasion of private rights." Whereupon it was withdrawn by Mr. Ranga Iyer on July 23, 1934.

At long last, on the 10 May 1935, the Poona Pact with the Government Amendment was adopted in the Commons by 152 votes to 35. It is indeed, as the Depressed Classes President Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah called it, the "Magna Carta of the Depressed Classes community." Through it the pariahs have secured equal political rights with the "pure" Caste Hindus; and in it they have a powerful weapon wherewith to attack the very root of their grievances—ritual impurity.

But Dr. Ambedkar, their leader, and many with him were not satisfied. After all, the social condition of the Depressed Classes was still the same, and would change but very slowly as long as they remained, politically and religiously, within the fold of conservative Hinduism. They had lost the separate constituencies provided for them in the Communal Award; within the Hindu community they now formed a minority—inferior to the other Hindus not only in number and religious status, but also educationally, economically, and physically. It was clear that a long, hard struggle was ahead of them.

Dr. Ambedkar, therefore, decided to force the issue. All India was startled on October 13, 1935, when at the Bombay Presidency Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola, in the presence of 10,000 Harijans, he announced as his new solution of the Harijan problem a complete change of religion: "Choose any religion which gives you equality of status and treatment."<sup>1</sup>

When Gandhi heard the unexpected news he said: "The speech attributed to Dr. Ambedkar seems unbelievable . . .," and he added a wise remark: "A change of faith by him will not serve the cause . . . , for millions of unsophisticated and illiterate Harijans will not listen to him."<sup>2</sup> But Dr. Ambedkar remained firm in his decision during the violent storm that

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<sup>1</sup> D.C., p. 41.<sup>2</sup> D.C., p. 42, f.

broke upon him from all quarters. It came from rigid *Santanists*, moderate reform Hindus, the Harijan-Sewak-Sangha, even from the numerous Harijan Conferences, mainly in the North and extreme South of India. The Depressed Classes of the Dekkhan, however, promised allegiance.

At the same time, letters and telegrams of congratulation, and also representatives, were sent to Dr. Ambedkar by various non-Hindu religious bodies. The Mussulmans were especially eager to entice the Depressed Classes within their fold, representing Islam as the most perfect religion of brotherhood in doctrine and practice and holding out to Dr. Ambedkar the prospect of being one of the political leaders of the eighty million Moslems in India. They organized associations and committees to launch an All-India campaign of Mohammedan propaganda among the Depressed Classes. The Buddhists of Calcutta regretted Dr. Ambedkar's intended apostasy; but if he was bent on changing his religion, Buddhism was an ideal faith—very humane and at the same time of Indian origin. Malabar was canvassed by Buddhist missionary monks from Ceylon and by Sikh missionaries from the Punjab, where a strong and steady conversion movement of Harijans to Sikhism had been going on for about fifteen years. On the reception of fifty pariahs from Malabar into the Sikh community, leading orthodox Hindus confessed that they preferred the Untouchables to become Sikhs rather than members of any other religion. Dr. Ambedkar himself expressed his liking for the Sikhs, since they were self-respecting and disapproved of caste distinctions. Among the Depressed Classes of Malabar and other districts a strong movement towards Christianity set in. 250,000 Ezhavas decided to renounce Hinduism.

To bring the issue to a head, about ninety delegates of the Depressed Classes from all India held a conference at Lucknow (22 to 24 May 1936) with the object of considering which creed they would adopt. For, while he did not wish to interfere with any man's conscience, Dr. Ambedkar, whom ill-health prevented from attending the conference, intended to make the conversion a common and simultaneous one. The various creeds of India were invited to expound to the Conference

how they could meet the needs of the Untouchables. On the first day fourteen speakers, representing ten different creeds, were heard with great attention for seven hours. They were yellow-robed Buddhist monks, Moslem Maulvis in long cassocks, retired Civil Service officers, a college president, a wild "John the Baptist" from among the Sikhs, a fat Jain merchant, two Indian Christian clergymen, an Indian Christian lady, an aggressive Arya-Samajist abbot (reformed Hinduism), and some others.

Chandrika Pershad Jigyasu, one of the most influential Depressed Classes leaders, after almost seven hours of speeches, dared to put to the audience, crowded though it was with excitable Mohammedans and Sikhs, the blunt questions: "What did Islam do for us in a thousand years? What did Sikhism do for us? It was after the Christian missionaries had taken the Untouchables into their bosom that others began to take notice of us." Another Depressed Classes delegate stressed the fact that ninety-nine per cent. of the Indian Christians were from among the Untouchables. When a Hindu speaker began to hold forth the promises of his community to the Depressed Classes, he was howled down.

When each religion had had the hour of "free speech" allotted to it, the delegates of the Depressed Classes said they were not in a hurry to make their choice; it was not words but deeds that mattered. Therefore they would watch the various religious bodies and observe the treatment meted out by each to the Untouchables who had joined them; no religion would be considered that did not afford the fullest social and religious equality. At the end the Conference passed some resolutions, of which the most important was:—

The Conference expresses its full confidence in Dr. Ambedkar and promises him its full support. It declares without reserve that the Depressed Classes must renounce Hinduism. The next All-India Depressed Classes Conference will have to decide definitely which religion they are to embrace. The Conference expresses its dissatisfaction with the Harijan movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi.

The Catholic Hierarchy had not sent any official delegates to this conference. Two Jesuits of the Patna Mission and an Indian priest attended the meetings and in private conversa-

tions presented the Catholic Faith to the leaders, showing them what the Catholic Church had done for the Depressed Classes. The acting President, Mr. R. L. Biswas, deplored the Abyssinian war launched by a Catholic nation and, when it was all over, blessed by the Pope. He also wanted to know why a "reformation" had been necessary in the Catholic Church and why the caste-distinction was maintained among the Catholics of South India.<sup>1</sup> Since the Conference several Fathers of the Patna Mission have had interviews with leaders of sectional Depressed Classes groups.

Some Hindus, with a concern for the Untouchables that was not without the suspicion of self-interest, expressed their "fear" lest the Harijans by changing their religion should lose the political rights granted to them by the Poona Pact, which had increased the number of seats allotted to them precisely on the understanding that they would remain within the Hindu fold. The very object of Gandhi's fast and of the Pact had been to maintain and consolidate the unity of Hinduism. Consequently, those of the Depressed Classes who actually gave up Hinduism could not enjoy the promised representation. Dr. Ambedkar defended the opposite view, but Parliamentary circles of Bombay informed him that he himself could not contest the election under the Poona Pact. Thereupon the Hindu leaders spread the report that he was no longer preparing his community for the elections and that he himself had withdrawn from the contest. Eventually he took up the position that the mere intention of giving up Hinduism as a religion did not deprive him of the political rights guaranteed by the Poona Pact; but he had to concede that, after actual conversion to a non-Hindu religion, those privileges would be forfeited.

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<sup>1</sup> Caste is a social distinction as well as a religious one. The Church entered South India centuries before the movement in favour of the Untouchables had begun. Faced with the alternative of either recognizing caste or giving up as useless every attempt at conversion, she very reluctantly permitted the social distinction to continue, but always tried to modify it gradually out of existence. Most of her efforts, however, were frustrated—wholly or in part—by the obstinacy of the higher castes, who threatened her with apostasy and schism. In 1924 the bishops of South India issued an appeal to the Caste Catholics to abandon their ostracism of the lower classes, but without avail. The young Brahmins, in 1933, hailed with enthusiasm a pastoral letter of six South Indian bishops against the caste spirit; but the fact that the same letter caused the apostasy of a considerable number of Catholics shows that prejudice is still strong.

After weeks of discussions Dr. Ambedkar agreed with Dr. B. S. Moonje, President of the Hindu Mahasabha (Great Hindu Council), upon a "formula for the amicable settlement of Dr. Ambedkar's revolt against Hinduism": the Hindu Mahasabha would not object to the conversion of the Depressed Classes, led by Dr. Ambedkar, to Sikhism, nor to the enjoyment by them of the political rights as provided in the Poona Pact. Dr. Ambedkar's reasons are stated to be the following. Conversion to Islam or Christianity would denationalize the Depressed Classes and increase the danger of Moslem domination or strengthen the British position in India; on the other hand, if they turn Sikhs, they will remain full Indians with undivided loyalty and will become a strong factor in the cultural and political advancement of the country—Sikhism being a native religion of India and a sort of reformed Hinduism.

The present position is this: it is hard to foreshadow, with any accuracy, what will become of the Depressed Classes in the near future. We must guard against the great mistake of overestimating the extent of the movement. The sixty millions of Untouchables are mostly illiterate, live in out-of-the-way villages, and are consequently difficult to reach and organize. Many may not even have heard of the movement. Yet the movement is there; large numbers are preparing to leave Hinduism. This is the conviction of many missionaries all over India, and they are hard at work getting ready for the harvest of souls, which has already set in. Though the motives of the would-be converts may be merely social and material uplift, this does not exclude spiritual conversion. Many converts from these pariahs have become model Christians in the past. Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. The whole body will not turn Catholic, but the movement to-day offers unlimited opportunities for the conversion of small groups—opportunities that may not be repeated. One thing is certain. The great temple of Hinduism, which has stood firm against Christ's true Church for so many centuries, is being destroyed—but not by the Church. The very foundations of Hinduism are crumbling.

GERARD BAADER

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