

## THE UNTOUCHABLES

by M. K. Gandhi

*Gandhi was deeply concerned with the problem of untouchability almost as soon as he returned to India from South Africa. He increasingly considered the elimination of untouchability as part of the national campaign for freedom. In 1921, at Ahmedabad, he made the following memorable address before a convention of the untouchables—the Suppressed Class Conference.*

I REGARD untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This idea was not brought home to me by my bitter experiences during the South African struggle. It is not due to the fact that I was once an agnostic. It is equally wrong to think, as some people do, that I have taken my views from my study of Christian religious literature. These views date as far back as the time when I was neither enamoured of, nor was acquainted with, the Bible or the followers of the Bible.

I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him, why I was forbidden to touch him. If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion, that it was impossible that it should be so. I was a very dutiful and obedient child and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents, I often had tussles with them on this matter. I told

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my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

While at school I would often happen to touch the “untouchables,” and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch was to cancel the touch by touching any Mussalman passing by. And simply out of reverence and regard for my mother I often did so, but never did so believing it to be a religious obligation. After some time we shifted to Porbandar, where I made my first acquaintance with Sanskrit. I was not yet put to an English school, and my brother and I were placed in charge of a Brahmin, who taught us *Ramraksha* and *Vishnu Punjar*.<sup>7</sup> The texts “*jale Vishnuh*” “*sthale Vishnuh*” (there is the Lord [present] in water, there is the Lord [present] in earth) have never gone out of my memory. . . . I could never believe then that there was any text in the *Ramraksha* pointing to the contact of the “untouchables” as a sin. . . .

The *Ramayana* used to be regularly read in our family. A Brahmin called Latha Maharaj used to read it. He was stricken with leprosy, and he was confident that a regular reading of the *Ramayana* would cure him of leprosy, and, indeed he was cured of it. “How can the *Ramayana*,” I thought to myself, “in which one who is regarded now-a-days as an untouchable took Rama across the Ganges in his boat, countenance the idea of any human beings being untouchable on the ground that they were polluted souls?” The fact that we addressed God as the “purifier of the polluted” and by similar appellations, shows that it is a sin to regard any one born in Hinduism as polluted or untouchable—that it is satanic to do so. I have hence been never tired of repeating that it is a great sin. I do not pretend that this thing had crystallized as a conviction in me at the age of twelve, but I do say that I did then regard untouchability as a sin. I narrate this story for the information of the *Vaishnavas* and Orthodox Hindus.

I have always claimed to be a *Sanatani*<sup>8</sup> Hindu. It was not that I am quite innocent of the scriptures. I am not a profound scholar of Sanskrit. I have read the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* only in

translations. Naturally therefore, mine is not a scholarly study of them. My knowledge of them is in no way profound, but I have studied them as I should do as a Hindu and I claim to have grasped their true spirit. By the time I had reached the age of 21, I had studied other religions also.

There was a time when I was wavering between Hinduism and Christianity. When I recovered my balance of mind, I felt that to me salvation was possible only through the Hindu religion and my faith in Hinduism grew deeper and more enlightened.

But even then I believed that untouchability was no part of Hinduism; and that, if it was, such Hinduism was not for me.

True, Hinduism does not regard untouchability as a sin. I do not want to enter into any controversy regarding the interpretation of the *shastras*.<sup>9</sup> It might be difficult for me to establish my point by quoting authorities from the *Bhagwat*<sup>10</sup> or *Manusmriti*. But I claim to have understood the spirit of Hinduism. Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability. It has degraded us, made us the pariahs of the Empire. Even the Mussalmans caught the sinful contagion from us; and in South Africa, in East Africa and in Canada, the Mussalmans no less than Hindus came to be regarded as pariahs. All this evil has resulted from the sin of untouchability.

I may here recall my proposition, which is this: So long as the Hindus wilfully regard untouchability as part of their religion, so long as the mass of Hindus consider it a sin to touch a section of their brethren, Swaraj is impossible of attainment. *Yudhishtira*<sup>11</sup> would not enter heaven without his dog. How can, then, the descendants of that *Yudhishtira* expect to obtain Swaraj, without the untouchables? What crimes, for which we condemn the Government as satanic, have not we been guilty or toward our untouchable brethren?

We are guilty of having suppressed our brethren; we make them crawl on their bellies; we have made them rub their noses on the ground; with eyes red with rage, we push them out of railway compartments—what more than this has British Rule done? What charge, that we bring against Dyer and O'Dwyer,<sup>12</sup> may not others,

and even our own people, lay at our doors? We ought to purge ourselves of this pollution. It is idle to talk of Swaraj so long as we do not protect the weak and the helpless, or so long as it is possible for a single Swarajist to injure the feelings of any individual. Swaraj means that not a single Hindu or Muslim shall for a moment arrogantly think that he can crush with impunity meek Hindus or Muslims. Unless this condition is fulfilled, we will gain Swaraj only to lose it the next moment. We are no better than the brutes until we have purged ourselves of the sins we have committed against our weaker brethren.

But I have faith in me still. In the course of my peregrinations in India, I have realized that the spirit of kindness of which the Poet Tulsidas sings so eloquently, which forms the corner-stone of the Jain and Vaishnava religions, which is the quintessence of the *Bhagavat* and which every verse of the Gita is saturated with—this kindness, this love, this charity, is slowly but steadily gaining ground in the hearts of the masses of this country. . . .

If it can bring any comfort to you, my untouchable brethren, I would say that your question does not cause so much stir as it used to do formerly. That does not mean that I expect you to cease to have misgivings about the Hindus. How can they deserve to be not mistrusted having wronged you so much? Swami Vivekananda<sup>13</sup> used to say that the untouchables were not depressed, they were suppressed by the Hindus who in turn had suppressed themselves by suppressing them.

I suppose I was at Nellore<sup>14</sup> on the 6th of April. I met the untouchables there and I prayed that day as I have done today. I do want to attain *Moksha*.<sup>15</sup> I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavor to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, or *Shudra*, but as an *Atishudra*.<sup>16</sup> . . .

I love scavenging.<sup>17</sup> In my Ashram, an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad is doing the scavenger's work in order to teach the Ashram

scavenger cleanliness. The lad is no reformer. He was born and bred in orthodoxy. He is a regular reader of the Gita and faithfully performs *Sandhyavandana*.<sup>18</sup> His pronunciation of Sanskrit verses is more faultless than mine. When he conducts the prayer, his soft sweet melodies melt one into love. But he felt that his accomplishments were incomplete until he had become also a perfect sweeper and that if we wanted the Ashram sweeper to do his work well, he must do it himself and set an example.

You should realize that you are cleaning Hindu society. You have therefore to purify your lives. You should cultivate the habits of cleanliness, so that no one may point his finger at you. Use alkali-ash or earth, if you cannot afford to use soap, to keep yourselves clean. Some of you are given to drinking and gambling which you must get rid of. You will point your finger at the Brahmins and say even they are given to these vices. But they are not looked upon as polluted and you are. You must not ask the Hindus to emancipate you as a matter of favor. Hindus must do so, if they want, in their own interest. You should, therefore, make them feel ashamed by your own purity and cleanliness. I believe that we shall have purified ourselves within the next five months. If my expectations are not fulfilled, I will think that, although my proposition was fundamentally correct, yet I was wrong in my calculation; and I will again say that I had erred in my calculation.

You claim to be Hindus; you read the *Bhagavat*; if, therefore, the Hindus oppress you, then you should understand that the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion but in those who profess it. In order to emancipate yourselves, you shall have to purify yourselves. You shall have to get rid of evil habits like drinking.

If you want to ameliorate your condition, if you want to obtain Swaraj, you should be self-reliant. I was told in Bombay that some of you are opposed to the N.C.O.<sup>19</sup> and believe that salvation is only possible through the British Government. Let me tell you that you will never be able to obtain redress by discarding Hindu Religion and courting the favor of a third party. Your emancipation lies in your own hands.

I have come in contact with the untouchables all over the country and I have observed that immense possibilities lie latent in them of which neither they nor the rest of the Hindus seem to be aware. Their intellect is of virginal purity. I ask you to learn spinning and weaving, and if you take them up as a profession, you will keep poverty from your doors. As regards your attitude towards the *Bhangis*,<sup>20</sup> I will repeat what I said at Godhra. I cannot understand why you should yourselves countenance the distinction between *Dheds*<sup>21</sup> and *Bhangis*. There is no difference between them. Even in normal times their occupation is as honorable as that of lawyers or Government servants. . . .

The Hindus are not sinful by nature; they are sunk in ignorance. Untouchability must be extinct in this very year. Two of the strongest desires that keep me in flesh and bone are the emancipation of the untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled, there is Swaraj, and therein lies my own *Moksha*. May God give you strength to work out your salvation.

## HINDUISM

• by M. K. Gandhi

*Gandhi could never disentangle his religious from his political interests, and when he was most deeply immersed in politics, he was often also most deeply concerned with religion. In 1921, in the midst of a major struggle with the British, he wrote an essay on Hinduism which was published in Young India.*

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