

## Untouchability and Caste

**Question:** Can you give a solution to this practice of untouchability? Can you suggest to the *pujaris* to direct the people not to do so? Will you suggest that either by law or by society the *pujaris* should be directed to advise the people not to practise the caste system?

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** What I feel is that untouchability is abolished by law in our country; untouchability is ruled out by the fundamental law of the land, which is the Constitution. Untouchability has been campaigned against by Mahatma Gandhi, who made it a plank of his national movement. The elimination of untouchability is a national duty and obligation. Besides, it is the statutory obligation. That being the position, it remains to be implemented in practice. Social obscurantism and the vested interests, however, motivated as they are today, have to be rooted out. The ways and means are the application of the law, by means of moral propagation, by means of social engineering, by means of the achievement of the revolutionary movement, the united movement of the people, among whom the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are only a small proportion, this is the way. Apart from this, nothing can be said.

**Question:** What are the steps to eradicate untouchability? One is the reservation and various concessions extended to them. I wish to have the speaker's comment on the recent trend, which appears in two different forms. One is the recent UP Government removing certain reservation facilities; the second is one editorial recently in the *Indian Express* about casteism and the reaction on the part of the Brahmins.

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** It is exactly the question which has been agitating many minds and is being discussed in Parliament also, about the non-implementation of social legislation. The economic legislation is as important as the anti-untouchability programme. There seems to be a hard bottleneck somewhere in the administration that in spite of the law being what it is, and the obligation under the law being what it is, the implementation of the legislation does not happen. I quoted the words of Mr. Jagjivan Ram, who has been a Minister for more than 35 years or so. He did not do it while in power and now he is complaining. There is no answer. Nobody seems to know whether it is the bureaucracy, or the politician, who intervenes and protects the person who practises untouchability. If public opinion is a little more alert, then something more can be done. After all, all over the world, this has gone on and we have got to work together to eliminate it. It has to be rooted out. It is a sort of gangrene, which has to be cut out and nothing but social surgery would do the trick. Many of our people might not be as impatient as I am. They might like to have a more respectable situation where the solution will come from applying the law. The law is there and yet the law is not implemented. So many things

can be done in our country if the law is acted upon, if our land reforms and such other things were implemented, so many problems could be solved. But they are not implemented. This is the kind of bottleneck which is seen, not only in our country but in many other countries. I do not know if human psychology is something which is so resistant to any kind of real change, change which means the good of the people but it cannot be halted; I do not believe it can be done. I do not lose faith in human nature. If Indian human nature asserts itself and you and I represent Indian human nature, we could reform ourselves to the extent of being able to guarantee minimum human rights to our own people. This may not be done just like that but it has to be done by concrete administrative-cum-political-cum-social action, and that is something for which I think this lecture is also meant.

**Question:** Professor Mukerjee has said:

“Somehow, Ambedkar with all his talent, had not really been able to give his following the needed cohesion, the sense of togetherness...”

I want to submit that for the emancipation of the downtrodden or oppressed people, who are socially or economically weak, there are two broad ways—Marxism and Buddhism. Whatever he said about Buddhism can also be said in favour of Marxism. In Indian politics Marxism can be accepted as a system for the improvement of the economic condition of the downtrodden. Will you try to explain the point whether Ambedkar accepted Buddhism as one of the major ways of emancipation of his people and, if so, how?

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** I had indicated that Ambedkar had studied Marxism, according to his own statement. He did not agree with the basics of Marxism, as expounded by some people. He was a liberal, an intelligent, highly educated liberal, whose attitude to Marxism should be understood by sophisticated people.

**Question:** Is it correct to say that Ambedkar made a mistake by converting a social problem into a political problem, unlike Gandhiji?

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** Gandhiji, as far as I can understand, made a synthesis of his own. Political, economic, social and spiritual amelioration to him was a compound something, which has to be all together. He did not have a compartmental view of the whole matter. As far as I understand, Ambedkar had a more intellectual, sophisticated approach and he knew the political and economic implications of untouchability and he campaigned for their removal. But, at the same time, he was over-whelmed, as far as I can see, by his own experience as a member of one of the untouchable communities. His anger and impatience was the result of it. He, therefore, began to work in a more compartmentalised fashion, than Gandhiji did. Gandhiji started on a much wider canvas while Ambedkar, being an ‘untouchable’ himself who shared the agony and anxiety of all untouchables, had perhaps a compartmental vision without a basic social and economic approach to the whole matter.

**Question:** In connection with the perpetuation of caste, what are your views about the practice of using the caste at the end of the name? Secondly, what are your views about

Gandhiji's stand on the Communal Award and separate electorates in 1932? Does it show sympathy for the untouchables?

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** I have no simplistic solution to the problem of caste. I am not very particularly enthused by the notion that by stopping the practice of recording a fact of life, whether we like it or not, that of one following a particular caste, religion or denomination or whatever, merely by dropping the surname, we can strike at the root of the problem. It has to be tackled in a different way. With regard to the second question, possibly the gentleman was not present here yesterday, because a reference was made to Gandhiji taking up the cause of untouchables only after 1932 or so, because of the failure of the Round Table Conference. In fact, he undertook a fast unto death much earlier, in 1924-25. The Vaikom Satyagraha I have referred to in detail. Even earlier, when he was staying in Sabarmati Ashram, before it was wound up, he had adopted an untouchable girl as his own daughter. He had done so many things like that. Gandhiji had a long record of work for the cause of the untouchables. He had disciples like Thakar Bapa, who had continued his work. So, this has nothing to do with the failure of the Round Table Conference.

**Question:** You have said that there is a gangrene and surgery is needed and no medicine will do any good. I agree with you 100 per cent. But don't you think by revival of Buddhism as a replacement to Hinduism, Dr. Ambedkar had performed the surgery, though he could not be successful in reforming the Indian society within about three months because he died after three months? But his objective was to make the whole of India Buddhist. Had that been done, don't you think the Indian society would have found a solution to the caste system?

**Professor H. N. Mukerjee:** We have every respect for Dr. Ambedkar. I have tried to make my position clear. Whether I agree with him or not is a different matter. But merely by changing one's religion, one cannot bring a solution, particularly to the kind of problem that we have in our country. That is why I say the conversion to Buddhism was a gesture, a moral gesture, with certain conceptual connotations of its own. Buddhism is a magnificent religion but, somehow it was eased out of India. If by some miracle Buddhism is brought back again, well and good. But things do not happen in real life like that. I have said that Dr. Ambedkar's taking recourse to the method of conversion to Buddhism and recommending his followers to do the same was a pathetic gesture, morally to be applauded, perhaps, and sympathized with certainly, but it can only be taken as a gesture, and nothing more than that. He died an unhappy and disappointed man. It is a tragedy for our whole country that such a great man, who had a tremendous mission to perform, died so.

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