

HINDUS SHOULD NOT BE INDIFFERENT TO CONVERSION OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

Regarding conversion, "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar consulted his colleagues from different provinces in the matter of choosing the proper religion for conversion. He had now decided to embrace Sikhism. His friends and colleagues felt that Dr. Ambedkar should seek the support of the Hindu Sabha leaders in their conversion to Sikhism; for, the Hindu Sabha leaders believed that Sikhism was not an alien religion. It was an off-spring of Hinduism and therefore the Sikhs and the Hindus intermarried and the Sikhs were allowed to be members of the Hindu Mahasabha.

Accordingly, Dr. Moonje, the spokesman of the Hindu Mahasabha, was invited to Bombay. In the presence of two other friends, Dr. Ambedkar had a talk with Dr. Moonje at Rajgriha, on June 18, 1936, at half past-seven that night. Dr. Ambedkar cleared all issues and had a free talk with Dr. Moonje. Next day the purport of Dr. Ambedkar's views was reduced to a statement and was given to Dr. Moonje who approved of it personally."¹

The following is the statement:—

The Hindus cannot afford to be indifferent to the movement of conversion which is gaining ground among the Depressed Classes. It would undoubtedly be the best thing from the standpoint of the Hindus if the Depressed Classes were to be persuaded to drop the idea of conversion. But if that is not possible, then the Hindus must concern themselves with the next move which the Depressed Classes will take, because their move is bound to have serious consequences upon the destiny of the country. If they cannot be persuaded to stay, the Hindus must help if they cannot lead them, to embrace a faith which will be least harmful to the Hindus and to the country.

It seems very unlikely that the Depressed Classes will formulate a new religion. Most probably, they will embrace one of the existing faiths. At any rate the Hindus can well proceed on that assumption. The first question is what is the faith that the Depressed Classes are likely to embrace? Obviously, the one most advantageous to them.

¹: Keer. P. 277.

There are three faiths from among which the Depressed Classes can choose. (1) Islam, (2) Christianity and (3) Sikhism. Comparing these three, Islam seems to give the Depressed Classes all that they need. Financially, the resources behind Islam are boundless. Socially, the Mohammedans are spread all over India. There are Mohammedans in every Province and they can take care of the new converts from the Depressed Classes and render them all help. Politically the Depressed Classes will get all the rights which Mohammedans are entitled to. Conversion to Islam does not involve loss of such political rights as the right to special representation in the Legislatures, right to services, etc. Christianity seems equally attractive. If Indian Christians are too small numerically to provide financial resources necessary for the conversion of the Depressed Classes, the Christian countries such as America and England will pour their immense resources in if the Depressed Classes show their readiness to embrace Christianity. Socially, the Christian community is numerically too weak to render much support to the converts from the Depressed Classes but Christianity has the Government behind it. Politically, Christianity will give them the same rights which Islam gives. Like the Muslims, Indian Christians are also recognised by the Constitution for special representation in the Legislature and in the services. Compared to Christianity and Islam, Sikhism has few attractions. Being a small community to forty lakhs, the Sikhs cannot provide the finance. They are confined to the Punjab and as far as the majority of the Depressed Classes are concerned, the Sikhs can give them no social support. Politically, Sikhism is at a positive disadvantage as compared with Islam or Christianity. Outside the Punjab, the Sikhs are not recognised for special representation in the Legislature and in the services.

The second question is, looking at these three alternative faiths purely from the standpoint of the Hindus, which is the best—Islam, Christianity or Sikhism? Obviously Sikhism is the best. If the Depressed Classes join Islam or Christianity, they not only go out of the Hindu religion but they also go out of the Hindu culture. On the other hand, if they become Sikhs they remain within the Hindu culture. This is by no means a small advantage to the Hindus.

What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam the number of Muslims will be doubled and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity, the numerical strength of Christians becomes five to six crores. It will help to strengthen the hold of the British on this country. On the other hand, if they embrace Sikhism they will not harm the destiny of the country but they will help the destiny of the country. They will not be denationalised. On the contrary they will be a help in the political advancement of the country. Thus it is in the interest of the country that the Depressed Classes, if they are to change their faith, should go over to Sikhism.

The third question is, if it is in the interest of the Hindus, that the Depressed Classes should go over to Sikhism, are the Hindus prepared to make Sikhism as good an alternative to the Depressed Classes as Islam or Christianity is? If they are, then obviously they must try to remove the difficulties which lie in the way of Sikhism, as compared with Islam and Christianity. The deficiencies are financial, social and political. The Hindus cannot help Sikhs to remove the social difficulty. But they can certainly help the Sikhs to remove the financial and political difficulties. Of these, it is most urgent to remove the political difficulty, because it might become an obstacle in the way of the Sikhs. The solution of the political difficulty is fortunately a very small matter. All that is necessary is to add to the list of Scheduled Castes in each Province, other than the Punjab, the word 'Sikh' as that of a person from the Depressed Classes who becomes a convert to Sikhism will not lose his political rights, that he would have had if he remained a Depressed Class. Under the Communal Award, communities have been given the liberty to agree to any change in the Award and the government has bound itself to alter the Award in accordance with the agreement.

This change can, therefore, easily be brought about if the Hindus so desire by mutual agreement with the Depressed Classes. This does not involve any radical change in the Poona Pact. It does not

require any apportionment of seats. The seats assigned to the Depressed Classes under the Poona Pact will remain the same. The only change that will be introduced is that non-Sikh Depressed Classes and the Depressed Classes who have gone to Sikhism will both be free to compete. It merely removes a difficulty from the Depressed Classes who become Sikhs.

Those Hindus who might oppose this suggestion must answer the following questions :

1. The seats assigned to the Depressed Classes under the Poona Pact cannot come back to the Hindus. They will go to the Muslims or Christians if the Depressed Classes become Muslims or Christians because if by conversion of the Depressed Classes the population of the Muslims or Christians increases then the Muslims and Christians are bound to ask for increased representation in the legislature. Thus, if these seats are to go, why not allow these seats to go to the Sikhs ?

2. If under the Constitution the Depressed Classes cannot lose political rights by becoming a Muslim or a Christian why should a Depressed Class on becoming a Sikh be made to lose his political rights? This is placing a premium on conversion to Islam and Christianity, and penalty on conversion to Sikhism. This is driving the Depressed Classes to the Muslim or Christian folds. Is it in the interest of the Hindus to allow this to be so?

3. It may be that the Depressed Classes will not lose their political rights by becoming converts to Sikhism, because even under the Poona Pact the Scheduled Castes Order-in-Council, their rights to special representation is not made dependent upon their professing the Hindu religion. Their representation is made dependent upon their being members of certain castes and tribes. But why give the Sikhs cause for complaint and create bad blood against the Hindus?

4. The proposal to add Sikhs to the list of Scheduled Castes in the different provisions for political recognition cannot be said to be strong proposal. On the other hand, not to give such a recognition would appear queer.

If Sikhs in the Punjab can be recognised for political purposes, why should Sikhs in other provinces not be so recognised?

If the Depressed Classes of the Punjab can not lose their rights on becoming Sikhs, why should the fate of the Depressed Classes in other Provinces on becoming Sikhs be made different?"

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