

WHEN BUDDHA STOPPED ANIMAL SACRIFICES, COWS WERE SANCTIFIED BY THEM

“Untouchability Was Punishment For Sticking to Buddhism” Brahmins’ Adaptability

A novel theory on the origin of Untouchability was expounded by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Leader of the Independent Labour Party, in the course of a talk with our representative.

Untouchability, it may be mentioned, is an institution or social practice that is the exclusive property of India and does not exist anywhere else in the world. In more than one sense it is an institution that is unnatural and runs counter to human psychology and social forces. The reasons for the origin of Untouchability that can carry conviction, therefore, must be such as will override all social and psychological considerations.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, Untouchability is of comparatively recent origin and could not possibly have existed in *Vedic* times or for centuries after that period. There is certainly no mention of Untouchability anywhere in the *Vedas*. How did it come into existence then ?

Semi-Tribal State

Dr. Ambedkar pictures a period when some of the people had only recently settled down to agricultural life while others were in a nomadic state moving about from place to place with their flocks of sheep and cattle.

The former with their encumbrances of landed property, houses, crops, etc., and higher state of civilisation than that of the pastoral tribes naturally did not want their peaceful life to be disturbed by the pastoral tribes. Nor were they a match for the pastoral tribes who were not burdened with any immovable property and were for obvious reasons physically hardier and more robust.

To guard their property against the depredations of the wandering tribes therefore the agricultural villages engaged the services of

men from the pastoral class whose tribes had been broken up by internecine wars. These men were allotted pieces of land and houses just outside the villages and their main duty—as is their main duty today—was to maintain law and order.

This duty of defending the villages against pastoral tribes they discharged for generations. The relations between the villagers proper and the protectors of the villagers living on the village fringe were normal human relations without any conception of Untouchability. How did it come in then ?

For that, according to Dr. Ambedkar, we have to look to the rise of Buddhism in India.

Buddhism, says Dr. Ambedkar, swept the land as no physical conqueror had ever done in India's history. Within a few generations almost the entire country especially the masses and the trading classes went over to Buddhism.

Brahminism was in the grip of mortal fear. In fact, it would have been wiped out had it not been for the shrewd adaptability of the Brahmins who were prepared to throw overboard every social and religious institution which they had championed for centuries and on which they had flourished for ages if only *Brahminism* could be saved. What did the Brahmins do ?

Mass Appeal of Buddhism

There were three cardinal teachings of *Buddha* that appealed to the masses. His gospel of social equality, his demand for the abolition of the "*Chaturvarna*" system, his doctrine of non-violence and his condemnation of elaborate religious ceremonials and sacrifices which impoverished the masses and created among them a repugnance for religious ceremonies.

The Brahmins of this period, according to Dr. Ambedkar, were far from being vegetarians. They were the most gluttonous meat eaters, sacrificing cows and other animals by thousands, presumably to pacify the Gods, but really to pacify their own greed for meat.

Truth Behind Vedic Sacrifices

The Brahmin demand for meat on such an unbounded scale impoverished the peasants who had to find the cows for the sacrifices and were consequently deprived of milk and its by-products, which were their staple means of livelihood.

The proof of the limits to which these blood sacrifices had been carried on can be found even to this day in the lurid descriptions of the ceremonials in the *Vedas* which show but scant regard for any sort of humanitarian considerations. And so when *Buddha* came out preaching abolition of animal sacrifices and religious ceremonials the masses to whom the new doctrines appealed both economically and ethically eagerly accepted them and scrapped *Brahminical* teachings.

How did *Brahminism* save itself from the surging tide of *Buddhism* ? It straight-way gave up all the sacrificial and ceremonial part of *Hinduism*. The cow that was slaughtered so far was, to outbid *Buddha*, covered with the highest sanctity.

The meat-eating *Brahmin* became a strict vegetarian. Wine bibbing came to an end. *Hinduism* assumed a puritanical covering.

Compromise with Kshatriyas

In order to prevent the *Kshatriyas* going over to *Buddhism* the *Brahmins* offered them equality with themselves. There is actually a verse in one of the religious book, apart from scores of other references, observed Dr. Ambedkar, wherein it is stated that just as two policemen have to stand on two sides of a prisoner to prevent his escape so also have the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* to act together to prevent the *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* getting out of their hands.

How Cow became Sanctified

The cow being sanctified, sacrificial ceremonials brought to an end and a large number of other *Buddhist* teachings being incorporated in *Hinduism*, the masses who had gone over to *Buddhism*, were slowly weaned back. The one great teaching

that the Brahmins did not accept was the theory of equality and abolition of the “*Chaturvarna*” caste system. But they did one thing. They, for the time being, put the *Kshatriyas* on the same level as themselves, relegated the Gods of *Brahmin* birth to the background, installed *Kshatriya* Gods in their places and came to other time-serving compromises.

Unexpected Development

A development of a most unexpected nature which would have been utterly abhorrent to *Buddha* took place in the process of *Brahminical* campaign of accommodation and compromise. Sacrifice of cows was stopped by *Buddha*. The animal was sanctified by the *Brahmins*. The Hindu society in general accepted the sanctification and stopped killing of cows. So did the present-day Untouchables. But the Untouchables being too poor to use fresh meat or beef at any time continued their age-old practice of eating the carcasses of dead cows.

Neither *Buddha* nor the *Brahmins* had forbidden consumption of carcasses. The ban was only against slaughtering live cows. But the present day Untouchables had committed one great crime. Being the poorest of the poor and socially on the lowest rung of ladder they stuck to *Buddhism* the longest. It required a mighty big force exerted over a long period of years to bring them round. When nothing else would work, social ostracism and Untouchability were applied.

Their practice of eating dead cows was exploited against them. It was something that naturally repelled the Hindu mind. It was obnoxious. The *Brahmin* could use the situation to his advantage without much difficulty. And so Untouchability was imposed on the entire class. It was really a punishment for sticking to *Buddhism* when others had deserted it. And so Untouchability continues today in spite of education and all modern ideas of freedom and social equality.”¹

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¹. The Bombay Chronicle : dated 24th February 1940.