

HINDUS ALWAYS REGARDED SCHEDULED CASTES AS 'OUTSIDE THE PALE' OF HINDU SOCIETY

“In an exclusive interview given to ‘Globe’ at Bombay on 20th November 1946, shortly after his return from England where he had been representing the case of India’s 50,000,000 Untouchables, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar said he had found no reason to modify his statement made in London when he drew a gloomy picture of the Indian political scene and forecast a dismal future of the country until they were laid by a real coalition representing all important elements of their national life.

Asked if he considered it advisable in view of Mr. Jinnah’s latest statement and the unsatisfactory state of the country to postpone the meeting of the Constituent Assembly which is fixed for December 9, Dr. Ambedkar said, “The question to my mind is whether the Constituent Assembly would have any moral authority behind it if the Muslims absent themselves from the Constituent Assembly. If the Muslims decide to absent themselves, I don’t know that the Constituent Assembly could do anything if it met on the 9th or any other subsequent date.

WOULD CARRY NO WEIGHT

“Unless the Hindus presume that the Constitution framed by themselves is likely to be accepted by the British Government merely because the session in which they met was called the Constituent Assembly,” he continued, “I don’t see any hope that the formulations by a Constituent Assembly, which consists of Hindus only, would carry any weight.”

To the question, “Do you envisage any concrete fundamental basis on which a settlement can be brought about between the major political parties, including the Scheduled Castes, as represented by the Scheduled Castes Federation?” Dr. Ambedkar replied, “The basis for a settlement between the Scheduled Castes and the other major political parties — that

is the Hindus and Muslims—is not at all difficult if there is good sense and right sense in the Congress.

SCHEDULED CASTES WANT POLITICAL SAFEGUARDS

“All that the Scheduled Castes want are political safeguards, over which there can hardly be any dispute,” he continued, “The principal demand of the Scheduled Castes is that they must have separate electorates, the reason being that without Separate Electorates, all other political safeguards that might be granted to them are useless.

“The Muslim League, so far as I understand, has no objection to separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes. The only objecting party is the Congress which represents the Hindu point of view, and if the Congress could agree to Separate Electorates there will be no reason for any non co-operation between the Congress and the Scheduled Castes.”

CONGRESS - LEAGUE UNBRIDGEABLE DIFFICULTIES

“The question of a settlement between the Congress and the Muslim League stands on a different footing.” Dr. Ambedkar continued, “The differences between them to-day are very wide-almost unbridgeable. The League wants to out up the country and the Congress is opposed to it. I am unable to say how this gulf can be closed and I must leave that question to the Congress and the Muslims League to decide among themselves although the Scheduled Castes, as Indians, are not only interested in the terms of the settlement but are deeply concerned in it.”

Globe’s next question was, “In the interests of unity and understanding can you suggest separate representation for the Scheduled Castes ; is it not possible to have reservation for those sections of the Scheduled Castes who do not owe political allegiance to the Congress by means of proportional representation ?” Replying, Dr. Ambedkar said, “I have already said that if the Congress is agreeable to give the Scheduled Castes the right to be represented in the Legislature, in the Executive, in the Services, then it must, in all honesty, grant separate electorates. Because a separate electorates would alone guarantee to the Scheduled Castes the possibility of their electing to the Legislature, members of their own who could be treated

at all times to fight in the Legislature and in the Executive whenever they did anything which had the effect of nullifying the rights granted to the Untouchables.

BOUND BY PARTY DISCIPLINES

“To grant political safeguards to the Scheduled Castes without granting separate electorates is a fraud which is bound to have the effect of giving by one hand and taking away with the other.

“It will be noticed that the Congress has been able to elect on its ticket representatives of the Scheduled Castes all throughout India in the different Provincial Legislatures.” Dr. Ambedkar continued, “And yet not one of them ever asked a question, moved a resolution or tabled a motion in order to ventilate the grievances of the Scheduled Castes. The reason is that the representatives of the Scheduled Castes elected on the Congress ticket are bound hand and foot by the party discipline of the Congress, and have no freedom of action.

“It would be much better not to have representation at all than to have such representation in the Legislature.” he added.

PROPORTIONATE REPRESENTATION

“With regard to the question whether proportionate representation will be a solution of this dispute, I might say that I have considered the question and I find that it will not work because if we keep the number of members of the Legislature within the bounds now prescribed or which may be regarded as reasonable, nowhere will the Scheduled Castes, be able to have the quota of voter necessary to have their own men elected in the Legislature.”

Dr. Ambedkar next answered the question, “Is it not possible for the Scheduled Castes to merge themselves into the Hindu community on the basis of a charter of common rights, privileges and removal of all social disabilities?”

“The question of a merger of the Scheduled Castes into the Hindu community is really dependent upon the wishes of

the Hindu community.” he replied. “The Untouchables have always wished for it and have tried for it, but they have never succeeded in changing the attitude of the Hindus who have always regarded them as ‘outside the pale’ of Hindu Society.

HINDU ABSORPTION A DREAM

“It is because the Scheduled Castes have come to realise that the assimilation or absorption of the Scheduled Castes into the Hindu community is a vain hope and is only a dream that they have decided to ask for separate electorates.

“If the Hindus can absorb the Scheduled Castes not in the superficial manner in which they want to do by opening temples and canteens, but in the real and substantial sense of the term assimilation, namely inter-marriage and inter-dinning, the Untouchables are always prepared and ready for it.

“It is the Hindu who must convince the Scheduled Castes that when he talks about the merger of the Scheduled Castes into the Hindu fold he means the removal of the bar against intermarriage and inter-dinning.

“Another aspect of the same question,” continued Dr. Ambedkar, “is that in the opinion of the Scheduled Castes their merger into Hindu society would become possible easier only when the Untouchables rise to the same social status which is occupied by the Hindus. In the present degraded condition, no Hindu however great a social reformer may be, will consent to dine with an Untouchable or inter-marry with him, but if, as an effect of the political rights, the Untouchables become better educated, more advanced and begin to occupy the posts of officers and administrators in the State, the chances of intermarriage and inter-dinning between them and the Hindus would be much greater.

IGNORANCE, OBSTINACY

“From this point of view the political safeguards which the Untouchables want are in no sense in conflict with the desire of the Hindus to absorb and assimilate them. Because the Untouchables have Separate Electorates it is difficult to understand

why the Hindus should find any difficulty in absorbing them socially in their fold. It can't prevent them from having intermarriage or inter-dinning and, therefore, the whole attitude of the Congress towards the demand of the Scheduled Castes for separate representation is marked by ignorance and obstinacy."

Commenting on a recent statement made by Rev, Gordon Livingston in which he suggested Untouchables should embrace Christianity rather than Islam, Dr. Ambedkar made the following observations :

HINDUISM'S SHORTCOMINGS

"The thinking section among the Untouchables are convinced that Hinduism, as it exists today, does not furnish to the Untouchables the sort of spiritual home and social communion which religion is intended to furnish to men.

"Secondly, the thinking portion of the Scheduled Castes is of the opinion that it is not easy to uproot humanity as one can uproot and transplant from one soil and to another. It is a difficult operation and cannot be treated as adventure. It has to be a planned action which would take time to formulate and carry out.

"Thirdly, the Untouchables feel that probably—although they have grave doubts in the matter—Hinduism in the course of time will so reform itself that it may become acceptable, and the Untouchables are, therefore, prepared to stay on where they are, provided that during the interval the Untouchables get enough political safeguards so as to withstand the cruelty oppression and injustice that is inherent in Hinduism and from which they have been suffering all these ages, and from which they apprehend they will suffer more than they have if the Hindu majority obtains calumniated political power in its own hands such as would be the case if India become completely independent. If the Hindus refuse to recognise this situation, and does not grant the Untouchables political safeguards they want, I have no doubt that conversion to some other religion by the Untouchables would become an emergent issue.

WHICH RELIGION FOR UNTOUCHABLES ?

“Fourthly, although the thinking portion of the Scheduled Castes are agreed to leave Hinduism I cannot say that there is complete agreement as to which religion they should embrace. The matter is still open.

“Finally, with regard to the question whether Christians should accept the 50,000,000 Untouchables into their fold without a period of preparatory training (as suggested by Rev. Livingston), I should like to say that those who make that objection do not seem to realise that the conversion of the Untouchables would be the only instance in history of a real conversion. Today religion among Christian as well as Non-Christians, is a mere matter of inheritance. The Christian inherits his father's property and along with it his father's religion. He never stops to contrast Christianity with other religions and make his own judgement as to its spiritual value. And historically conversions of Christianity have always been mass conversions and conversions on grounds which had nothing to do with the realisation of the spiritual value at all of the Untouchables convert they will be converted on a thorough examination of different religions and their spiritual and social value. Let nobody, therefore, have any qualms of conscience that the conversion of the Untouchables is anything like a commercial proposition. It is not. If the conversion of the Untouchables brings them any advantages apart from those of a spiritual and social character, they are incidental advantages and not criminal inducement.” Globe.”¹

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¹ : Jai Bheem (Weekly), Madras, dated 25th December 1946.