

SCHEDULED CASTE REFUGEES NEGLECTED

After partition, in Bengal and in Punjab, communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims arose on a scale never experienced in the past. Both the communities suffered badly. But the ill-effects of that dissension were felt even by a large number of Untouchables living in those areas, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had received a number of letters describing sufferings undergone by the Untouchables by the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Jats. He, therefore, wrote a letter (dated 18th December 1947) to the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, informing him of the sufferings of the Untouchables and requesting him to give relief to the Scheduled Caste refugees—Editors.

“New Delhi,

The 18th December 1947.

My dear Shri Jawaharlal,

I have been receiving so many complaints from the Scheduled Castes evacuees who come over from Pakistan to India as well as from those who have been looked up by the Pakistan Government and prevented from coming over to India. I feel that the time has come for me to draw your attention to their sufferings. For the purpose of giving you an idea of what is happening and what is required to be done, I am setting out below the causes of their sufferings and the measures that should be adopted to remove them.

I

(1) The Pakistan Government are preventing in every possible way the evacuation of the Scheduled Castes from their territory. The reason behind this seems to me that they want the Scheduled Castes to remain in Pakistan to do the menial job and to serve as landless labourers for the land holding population of Pakistan. The Pakistan Government is particularly anxious to impound the sweepers whom they have declared as persons belonging to Essential Services and whom they are not prepared to release except on one month's notice.

(2) The organisation known as the M.E.O. has been of some use in helping the Scheduled Castes refugees who are anxious to evacuate. I, however, understand that the Pakistan Government is not permitting the M.E.O. to get into direct touch with the Scheduled Castes who want to evacuate. Consequently, the process of evacuating the Scheduled Castes is going very slowly, and in some places it is at a standstill. I am also told that the M.E.O. is going to be closed very soon. If this happens then the evacuation of the Scheduled Castes from Pakistan would be quite impossible.

(3) What is necessary to do is :—

- (i) to ask the Pakistan Government not to place any obstacles in the way of the evacuation of the Scheduled Castes,
- (ii) to allow the M.E.O. to get into direct touch with Scheduled Castes and wish to evacuate,
- (iii) to maintain the M.E.O. till all the Scheduled Castes are evacuated.

(4) So far the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation has appointed only one officer from the Scheduled Castes to West Punjab. But other Provinces of Pakistan such as N. W. F. P., Sind and Bhawalpur are left over and for which no such officer has been appointed. The Ministry should be directed to make appointments to these areas forthwith to that special officers could tour the Pakistan area and find out the places where the Scheduled Castes are prevented by the Pakistan Government from coming over.

II

With regard to those Scheduled Castes who have come over from Pakistan to Eastern Punjab, they have also sent their complaints. They are far more numerous than those coming from persons who are impounded in Pakistan. I have their gist below :—

(i)

(1) The Scheduled Castes evacuees who have come to Eastern Punjab are not living in the refugees camps established by the

Government of India. The reason is that the officers in charge of these refugees camps discriminate between the Caste Hindu refugees and the Scheduled Caste refugees.

(2) It appears that the Relief and Rehabilitation Department has made a rule that it is only that refugees who are staying in the Relief Camps can receive rations, clothing, etc. On account of their not staying in the Refugee Camps for the reason mentioned above, the Scheduled Castes refugees are not getting any relief. This is a great hardship.

(3) As discrimination cannot be prevented, it is necessary to modify the rule so that the Scheduled Caste refugees living outside the camps should also be entitled to relief in the same way and to the same extent as refugees living in camps.

(ii)

(1) In the allotment of lands made by the Government of Eastern Punjab the interests of the Scheduled Castes are completely overlooked. The administration of Eastern Punjab being entirely in the hands of the Caste Hindus, there is nobody either to take a personal interest in the rehabilitation of the Scheduled Castes evacuees nor is there any agency appointed by the Government of India especially charged with the duty of bringing to the notice of the Eastern Punjab Government that the interests of Scheduled Castes are overlooked.

(2) It is, therefore, essential that there should be a number of officers appointed by the Government of India to work in East Punjab charged with the special duty of seeing that the allotment of land is fairly made and that the Scheduled Caste refugees get their legitimate share.

(3) I have given to the Honourable Mr. Neogy a list of persons for being appointed for this purpose who, so far as I know, are best qualified to carry out this work.

(4) (a) It is a notorious fact that the Sikhs and the Jats who occupy a very prominent position in East Punjab are compelling the Scheduled Castes who are residents of East Punjab to evacuate their original homes in order to appropriate their houses or their

landed property. The Scheduled Castes are unable to obtain any redress from the tyranny and oppression practised upon them by the Sikhs and the Jats to carry out their purposes for the simple reason that the Magistracy and the Policy in East Punjab are wholly manned by the Sikhs and Jats who quite naturally protect the wrong doers who are their Kith and Kin and pay no attention to the complaints of the Scheduled Castes.

(b) It is, therefore, absolutely essential that the Government of East Punjab should be compelled to recruit at least 300 Scheduled Castes in their Civil Police. It was recently published in the newspapers that the East Punjab Government had recruited some 300 Scheduled Castes in their Police Force. On enquiry I found that this recruitment has been made for the purpose of the Frontier Constabulary and not for the ordinary Civil Police Force. What the Scheduled Castes need for the purpose of their protection is recruitment to the Civil Police of East Punjab. I am informed that the Civil Police Force of East Punjab does not include even a single Scheduled Caste person.

(5) (a) The Land Revenue system of East Punjab divided the residents of village into two classes *Zamindars* and *Kaminas*. In the category of the *Zamindar* are included those families who have an exclusive right to own land situated inside the village boundary. The *Kaminas* have no right to buy or to own land situated in the village of which they are residents. Even the sites on which their houses are situated belong to the *Zamindars*, with the result that the *Zamindars* if they combine can compel the *Kaminas* to leave the village by asking them to remove their houses. This rule places the *Kaminas* of every village at the mercy of the *Zamindars*. The Scheduled Castes in all the villages in East Punjab are classed as *Kaminas* and are therefore living in complete servitude of the *Zamindars* of the village.

(b) It is, therefore, necessary that the East Punjab Government should be called upon to abolish this distinction by altering their Land Revenue system and making it similar to the Ryotwari System under which all villagers are placed on equal footing so far as the capacity to own land is concerned.

(6) (a) In the Province of East Punjab there operates what is called the Land Alienation Act which is intended to protect the agriculturists from the money lenders. But there cannot be slightest doubt that it is a most vicious piece of legislation inasmuch as it contains a definition of Agriculturist which is communal and not occupational. According to this law, a person is an agriculturist if he belongs to a community which is declared by the Government as an agricultural community. The old Punjab Government took particular care not to declare the Scheduled Castes as an agricultural community although every member of the Scheduled Castes is either a cultivator of land or an agricultural labourer. The result is that the Scheduled Castes in East Punjab are debarred from buying or acquiring landed property and are compelled to lead the life of landless labourers dependent upon the Hindu, Sikh and Jat landowners for their livelihood. This is a cruel piece of legislation and I think ought not to be allowed to remain on the Statute Book.

(b) The East Punjab Government should be to amend the definition of the term 'agriculturist' and make it occupational so that everybody who earns his livelihood by agriculture irrespective of his caste and creed becomes an agriculturist entitled to own and acquired landed property.

I have enumerated all the difficulties of the Scheduled Castes which have been brought to my notice and the remedies, which I think, if adopted, will remove them. Some of the remedies lie in the hands of the Government of India and the rest in the hands of the Government of East Punjab. There can be no question of applying such remedies as lie in the hands of the Government of India if it has the will to do so. Even with regard to those remedies which lie in the hands of the Government of East Punjab, the Government of India need not feel helpless. For, since the Government of India is paying the cost of rehabilitation, it has a moral right to compel the Government of East Punjab to adopt particular measure which the Government of India thinks necessary for a fair and equal treatment of all classes of people. That is the reason why I have not hesitated to include for action by the

Government of India such remedies as lie in the hands of the Government of East Punjab. So far all care and attention has been bestowed by the Government of India on the problem of the Muslims. The problem of Scheduled Castes has either been supposed not to exist, or deemed to be so small as not to require special attention. Although some people do not like to mention the problem of the Scheduled Castes nonetheless those of us who are concerned with the Scheduled Castes know that: the problem exists and it is such more acute than the problem of the Muslims. Many a times I had thought of drawing the attention of the public to the neglect by the Government of India of the problem of the Scheduled Caste refugees both in Pakistan and in India. For obvious reasons I have refrained from doing so. Owing to your pre-occupation with other matters, I have made no complaint regarding your silence about this question. But I am afraid time has come when I must insist upon your giving personal attention to this problem by issuing directions to the Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation and to the Minister without Portfolio to relieve the Scheduled Castes of their sufferings either by adopting the remedies I have suggested in this letter or by devising better remedies to effectuate the purposes I have set out. I shall be grateful if you will give this matter your immediate attention.

Yours sincerely,

(Sd/)—B.R. AMBEDKAR.

The Hon'ble Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru,
Prime Minister of India,
New Delhi.”¹

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru responded to the abovementioned letter thus :

“Prime Minister,
India.

P.M.
New Delhi,
The 25th December 1947.

My dear Dr. Ambedkar,

I have your letter of the 18th December about the evacuation of Scheduled Caste people from Pakistan to India.

¹ : Reprinted, Khairmode, Vol. 10, Pp. 26-32.

We have been trying our utmost to help in the evacuation of the Scheduled Castes from Pakistan, notably Sind, where they have been prevented from coming away. Our High Commissioner there is in continuous contact with this problem.

As regards the other problems raised by you they have to be dealt with by the East Punjab Government. We shall certainly advise them in the matter and see to it that every help is given to the Scheduled Caste evacuees.

We have had some difficulty in dealing with the East Punjab Government in regard to many matters chiefly because the multitude of the problem it faces. I shall gladly give my personal attention to this subject and am requesting the Minister without Portfolio to look into this matter specially.

Yours Sincerely,

(Sd/—) Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.”¹

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¹ : Reprinted, Khairmode, Vol. 10, Pp. 32-33.