

A SOCIAL CENTRE FOR THE UNTOUCHABLES IN BOMBAY

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was continuously making efforts to generate the funds for the movement of Untouchables to bring the human dignity in terms of social equality to the Indian Community. He was planning to establish a Centre, so as to execute and monitor the activities of the Untouchables. He appealed probably in 1949, to the Princes and the people of India.—Editors.

To
The Princes and People of India
Funds for
A Social Centre for the Untouchables in Bombay
The Scheme needs Rs. 3,25,000/-
Won't You Help ?
An Appeal By
The Hon'ble Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, M.A., Ph.D., D. Sc.,
Bar-at-Law,
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The New Movement among the Untouchables

The down-trodden and degraded condition of the Untouchable—who number today 70 millions of India population—has been one of the major problems of India. The work of raising them to the level of other communities has engaged the attention of many Hindu reformer for ages past. But the phenomenon of the Untouchables taking upon themselves the responsibility of improving their own lot is quite a new one. It is their won struggle for equality and began only 25 years ago.

This struggle has passed through several stages and the movement has gathered strength in spite of repeated rebuffs and constant opposition. The message of self-reliance has reached even the lowest strata; the backwaters of out-of-the way villages and lonely hamlets have been stirred; and the sleepy hollows where once rank superstition, utter self-debasement and abysmal ignorance reigned are now throbbing with new life. The right spirit has

been roused and a real movement has been started. A tremendous force for raising the status both of the Untouchables and this country can be evoked if this movement based on self-respect and self-reliance is efficiently organised. It is on behalf of this social movement that I make the present appeal.

People not intimately acquainted with my activities may be surprised at my present move on behalf of a social movement. They have come to look upon me as a politician. As a matter of fact politics has never been my obsession. It has been my on and off activity. As a student of history I have been profoundly impressed by the view that however important political forces may be in the regeneration of a community, social, economic and moral forces are far more vital and that political forces are only a means to the social, economic and moral regeneration of a people. I have from the very beginning laid greater stress on social movement than on political movement. A very large part of 25 years of my public life has been mainly devoted to the cause of social uplift of the Untouchables. I mention this only to correct the impression that I am only a politician. For it is a wrong impression. I want the public to realize that I have played no insignificant part in giving momentum to the new movement and fostering its growth. In support of my statement I cannot do better than quote Mr. B. G. Kher, a Congressman and former Prime Minister of Bombay, who replying to my speech in the Bombay Legislative Assembly on the Ministers' Salary Bill on 23rd August, 1937 said :-

“Further (Dr. Ambedkar) made a great deal of competency, a point about which there cannot be two opinions. I am obliged to the honourable member for referring to the competency of the personnel of this Cabinet and for giving us his true opinion. I have a very high opinion of his competency. I also know that he has been doing such service to the Depressed Classes as no one else has been able to do (Hear, hear). May I know from the honourable what salary he gets for this service? I know that the service he has been rendering to the cause of the Depressed Classes cannot be bought by any amount of money - (Hear, hear). What

the honourable member is doing for the cause of his community cannot be measured by any amount of money. Competency does not depend at all on the salary that one may get. What pecuniary gain does my honourable friend get, may I know, for the very competent service that he is rendering to his community ?” *

I am glad to be able to rely on this reference to me from the Congress quarters. It shows that I have mainly devoted myself to social work in the past.

The Need for a Social Centre

It is my desire that the noble work to which Mr. Kher made reference should be put on a lasting foundation and I am sure that, that must be the view of all those interested in the cause of the Untouchables. There can be no two opinions that if movement is to succeed, it must have at its command three things, (1) a Central headquarter, (2) a well-trained body of devoted workers, and (3) financial stability. Only with these means the movement can be placed on a sound and permanent footing.

Of these three, the establishment of a Social Centre as Central Headquarter must be regarded as the most fundamental. For once a Social Centre is established it will help to co-ordinate all social activities necessary for keeping up the movement, under the scheme which I have framed. It will also provide income to meet the expenditure for running the social activities and maintain a body of devoted workers on full time salary basis.

Suitability of Bombay

There is no doubt that the Untouchables of every Province must have a Social Centre. Indeed it is my plan to provide one each. A beginning must however be somewhere and I have come to the conclusion that Bombay is a place where a beginning may well be made. The spearhead of this movement has been provided by Bombay. It is therefore, in the fitness of things that the foundations of a systematic and permanent organization should be laid in the city of Bombay. For these reasons I have selected Bombay to begin with. It is proposed to establish a Social Centre in Bombay which will serve not only as a model for social, economic and

* Bombay Legislative Assembly Debates 1937, Vol I, P. 272.

educational activities for the uplift of the Untouchables but also as a centre radiating new ideas and co-ordinating the different activities into a harmonious whole.

The scheme of the proposed Social Centre, an outline of which is given later on in this Appeal, will show that it contains all the elements necessary to make the Centre a popular resort for the Untouchables-based on the lines of Social Settlements existing in Western Countries - to raise their standard of social and cultural life by bringing about a wholesome change in their customs and general outlook on life. It will create unity of aim and action among them and place the work of social regeneration on a permanent footing. The main activities which the Untouchables themselves are carrying on at present in Bombay City can be brought together at this centre. The serious handicap caused by want of a suitable place where all the main activities of the Untouchables can be located will be removed by such a Centre.

Centre will be a Public Trust

The scope and functions of the Centre will be governed by a Registered Trust Deed and the funds will be managed by a Board of Trustees.

The aims and objects of the Centre will be those mentioned below :-

- (a) Relief from distress and poverty.
- (b) Advancement of education.
- (c) Relief from tyranny and oppression.
- (d) Securing and safeguarding civil rights and privileges.
- (e) Eradication of social evils.
- (f) Spread of general knowledge and enlightenment with a view to eradicating superstitious practices and beliefs.
- (g) Securing and advancing social and religious well-being.
- (h) Promoting organised effort for social and economic betterment.
- (i) Securing legislative sanction to measures removing civil, social, economic and religious disabilities, disadvantages and discrimination.
- (j) Securing the removal of Untouchability.

Functions and Activities of the Centre

The Centre proposes to maintain a body workers devoted to the cause of the Untouchables, whose activities will be so planned as to give full effect to the aims and objects of the Centre. Below is given an outline of the activities of the proposed Centre :-

1. Offices —

The workers carrying on the various activities hitherto meet and transact their work either in rented buildings or at their own dwelling places. With a view to affording facilities to these activities and to co-ordinating them at a central place, the offices of all such institutions will be accommodated at the Centre.

2. Quarters for the workers of the Centre —

Hitherto there has been a band of selfless voluntary workers who are engaged in carrying on the activities in their spare time. It is now contemplated to knit such workers together and give them a well-channelled scope to devote all their time and energy to the cause of the Untouchables and the removal of their grievances and handicaps.

3. Public Hall —

The necessity of a public hall for the Untouchables has been an acute one. It is intended to construct a fairly large hall accommodating an audience of about 2,500. The hall will be used for holding public meetings, women's and students' gatherings, recreational, educational and other social functions.

4. Library and Reading Room —

It is necessary to provide the Untouchables with facilities for the cultivation of their minds with a view to creating among them a sense of appreciation of ideas, art and broad human interests. It is also necessary to provide them with means of engaging their attention during leisure hours to something higher and nobler than is to be found in their drab, dreary life. For this nothing can be more efficacious to serve this objective than the institution of libraries in Untouchable quarters. This will be one of most important activities of the Centre. In addition to this it is

proposed to have a Central Library for students wishing to study the problems of the Untouchables. The problem of the Untouchables is vast enough to engage the energies and attention of many for years to come. There is, however, hardly any facility at present for studying the problem in its proper perspective and in all its manifold ramifications. It is therefore intended to collect the requisite material for such a study by establishing a well-equipped Library and a Reading Room at the proposed Centre.

5. Publications Branch—

The Untouchables are steeped in ignorance and superstition. The evil customs and usages practised by them are appalling. One of the most urgent necessities is to emancipate them from these evil customs and usages. The best way is to issue literature of the sort published by the Rationalist Association. For this purpose it is also proposed to maintain a small printing Press.

6. Volunteers Organization—

Thousands of Untouchables youths all over the country, markedly in the Bombay Presidency and the Central Provinces, have spontaneously formed themselves into organised bands of volunteers called the Samata Sainik Dal. The object of this movement is to inculcate the spirit of discipline and spread the message of the new era among the Untouchables. It is intended to centralise this all important activity and spread it to other parts of the country.

7. Propaganda Performances—

As in the case of the Samata Sainik Dal, a number of Untouchable youths in the Bombay Presidency have formed clubs and stage dramatic performances, at marriage celebrations and other religious and social functions at several places callings themselves Jalsa Mandals. These are amateur dramatic clubs giving performances of self composed plays depicting the evils of baneful social customs on improvised stage before illiterate villagers. It is intended to organise on a sound basis this very useful activity for dissolving old and disseminating new ideas among the masses and to guide it and make it more effective.

Cost of the Centre

According to the proposed plan the requirements of the Centre are detailed below :-

I.	Land - 156' × 132' about - 2,280 sq.yds. value (already taken on lease)	.. Rs. 37,000/-
	Ground rent per year	.. Rs. 2,200/-
II.	Structures :	
1.	Hall-Building consisting of a ground and two upper floors. Ground Floor :—Hall 120' x 62' (with 10' wide Verandah and gallery inside having seating accommodation for about 2,500 persons) Approximate cost.	.. Rs. 75,000/-
	Two Upper Floors:—32 single room tenements 16 on each floor.	.. Rs. 75,000/-
2.	East Wing Building :—Ground and 2 upper floors, 3 double room tenements on each floor -9 in all	.. Rs. 26,500/-
3.	West Wing Building : Ground and 2 upper floors, 3 double room tenements on each floor -9 in all	.. Rs. 26,500/-
4.	Front Building :— Ground and 2 Upper Floors :— Ground Floor :—Printing Press, Gymnasium and Office. Three Upper Floors :— Offices on the 1st floor and 13 double room tenements on each of the remaining 2 floors.	.. Rs. 85,000/-
	Total	.. Rs. 2,88,000/-
	Cost of Land	.. Rs. 37,000/-
	Grand Total	.. Rs. 3,25,000/-

The cost of the Centre is estimated at Rs. 3,25,000/-. The estimate is of course based on prices prevailing in normal times.

These structures are designed to serve a three-fold purpose. The first is to house all activities for the promotion of the well-being of the Untouchables under one roof in order to bring about co-ordination and prevent dissipation of effort. The second purpose is to provide a place for the Untouchables to which they can look as a centre of knowledge and inspiration, a place which will provide a meeting ground for the Untouchables for exchanging ideas, for performing social and religious function and act as a centre of culture in which they can take pride. The third and the most important purpose is to provide the Centre with a permanent source of income to maintain itself and to sustain its activities. Most of the buildings are intended and planned for being rented out. They will bring rent which will keep the Centre going and make it self-supporting.

An Appeal to the Princes and People of India

It is a universally recognised fact that the present condition of the Untouchables is the most serious blot, from the humanitarian point of view, on Hindu Civilization and constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to an all-round progress of the Indian nation. The problem needs all the courage, ingenuity, resources and organising power of all the parties concerned for its solution. In spite of the efforts of social reformers and politicians the progress hitherto achieved is far from satisfactory. In fact, it may be safely asserted, that only the fringe of the problem has so far been touched. The Untouchables, considered as a mass, are as backward as ever. Their aspirations for social, economic, educational and political advancement are thwarted at every step, and the habit of depending upon outside help which is being insidiously cultivated may render the Untouchables unfit to fight their own battles. The force which will sweep all the obstacles from their path and really emancipate them from their age-long bondage can, I am sure, come only from within. It is because this new movement of the Untouchables is a movement from within that I feel sure that will help and encouragement it will be a success.

It may be said that if the Untouchables are anxious to undertake the work of their salvation they should also take up the responsibility of financing it. I am glad to say that the Untouchables

of Bombay are fully alive to this aspect of their movement. They have already come forward to raise a fund for the building up of the Social Centre by per capita subscription. Every man and woman is prepared to make a contribution to this great cause. Some have already paid and many more will do so before long. But it is equally true that left to their own resources the Untouchables will not be able to raise the whole sum. It will be cruel to ask them to depend upon themselves. The task of building up the Centre cannot succeed without the help of the Princes and People of India. To tell the Untouchables to bear their-own burden may be correct. But will that be considerate ? Have the Princes and People of India no responsibility for the miserable lot of the Untouchables ? If they have is it right that they should refuse to help the Untouchables on the ground that the Untouchables desire to take up the work of their salvation upon themselves ? I am sure that the Princes and People of India have a better regard for the spirit of self-respect shown by the Untouchables than such an attitude would indicate. I am sure there is in them a more acute sense of righteous indignation against the inequities heaped upon the Untouchables and a keener desire to give them the means to enable them to overcome these inequities.

The uplift of the Untouchables must be a joint undertaking in which the Untouchables will supply the resolution and the inspiration for the movement, the sweat and the toil for the movement, and the Indian community must supply the money required for the movement. It is for this reason that I appeal to the Princes and People of India for financial help for the movement.

The Princes and People of India will not, I am sure, fail to realise what tremendous and irresistible force the elevation of the Untouchables will supply to the national regeneration and reconstruction of India. The Social Centre will of course so organise the Untouchables that they will be able to rise socially and culturally above their present level, attain the status of human beings and live on terms of social equality with the rest of the Indian Community. But I am sure that will not be the only benefit arising from the activities of the Social Centre. The Centre will make them active, true and patriotic citizens ready to stand by the cause of the country.

It is on these grounds that I am appealing to all to help me to build up of the Centre. It has become a truism that without raising the Untouchables the country cannot rise and that in their salvation lies the salvation of the country. I am tired of repeating truisms. The time for uttering truisms is gone. The time for action has come. Deeds and not words are wanted. My appeal to the Princes and People of India is made in all earnestness and I am confident that they will respond to it with large hearted generosity.

22, Prithviraj Road,
New Delhi.

Sd/- **B. R. Ambedkar**

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