

LETTER TO A. V. ALEXANDER ABOUT THE PROPOSALS OF CABINET MISSION

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22, Prithviraj Road,
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Dear Mr. Alexander,

It is a pity that your efforts to bring about a settlement between the Congress and the League should have failed. I know you deserve every sympathy and every gratitude. At the same time, I cannot help saying that the Mission's effort to settle reminds me of an old Baniya who being without a son to inherit his wealth married a young girl with the hope of begetting a heir. The bride conceived but the bridegroom was stricken with a fell-disease. He, however, refused to die without having a look at the baby and would not wait for delivery which was far off. He was so impatient that he called the doctor, asked him to open the stomach of his wife and let him see whether it was a boy or a girl. The result of the operation was that both the baby and the mother died. If I may say so, the Mission wanted to do very much what the Baniya did. You may not be aware but there are many who, like me, feel that the Mission was engaged in bringing about a forced delivery earlier than the natural period of gestation.

2. To my mind, it is only right to say that the Hindus and the Muslims are today mentally incompetent to decide upon the destiny of this country. Both Hindus and Muslims are just crowds. It must be within your experience that a crowd is less moved by material profit than by a passion collectively shared. It is easier to persuade a mass of men to sacrifice itself collectively than to act upon a cool assessment of advantages. A crowd easily

loses all sense of profit and loss. It is moved by motives which may be high or low, genial or barbarous, compassionate or cruel, but is always above or below reason. The common sense of each is lost in the emotion of all. It is easier to persuade a crowd to commit suicide than to accept a legacy. It is not for me to advise you how you should proceed. The Mission has found greater wisdom and higher inspiration in the Bhangi Basti and in 10 Aurangzeb Road. I would be the last person to say anything in depreciation of such wisdom and inspiration. But I do think that if the Mission were not to exhibit the pathetic spectacle of an old man in a hurry, a phrase used by Chamberlain to describe Gladstone engaged in his campaign for Irish Home Rule and allow that in diplomacy is called 'Cooling period' they will find that they have an easier situation to deal with.

3. That is a matter for the Mission, for the major parties and those who have put their faith in the major parties. I am concerned in knowing how you propose to deal with the problem of the Untouchables and their demand for constitutional safeguards. In the official statement issued by the Mission on the last day of the Simla talks, it is said that the Mission will announce the next step it proposes to take within a few days after they return to Delhi. Obviously, the eyes of all the Scheduled Castes are turned towards this announcement. What the Mission will do will ultimately decide their fate. The decision of the Mission will either open to the Untouchables the path of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness or it will drive a nail in their coffin. The question being one of life and death it would not be wrong if I were to engage your attention for a few minutes with the problem of the Untouchables.

4. The problem of the Untouchables is a formidable one for the Untouchables to face. But fortunately it is simple to understand if only the following facts are borne in mind. The Untouchables are surrounded by a vast mass of Hindu population which is hostile to them and which is not ashamed of committing any inequity or atrocity against them. For a redress of these wrongs which are matter of daily occurrence, the Untouchables have to call in the aid of the administration. What is the

character and composition of this administration? To be brief, the administration in India is completely in the hands of the Hindus. It is their monopoly. From top to bottom it is controlled by them. There is no Department which is not dominated by them. They dominate the Police, the Magistracy and the Revenue Services, indeed any and every branch of the administration. The next point to remember is that the Hindus in the administration are not merely non-social, they are positively anti-social and inimical to the Untouchables. Their one aim is to discriminate against the Untouchables and to deny and deprive them not only of the benefits of law, but also of the protection of the law against tyranny and oppression. The result is that the Untouchables are placed between the Hindu population and the Hindu-ridden administration, the one committing wrongs against them and the other protecting the wrong-doer instead of the victims.

5. Against this back-ground, what can *Swaraj* of the Congress variety mean to the Untouchables? It only means one thing, namely, that while today it is only the administration that is in the hands of the Hindus, under *Swaraj* the Legislature and Executive will also be filled with Hindus. It goes without saying that *Swaraj* would aggravate the sufferings of the Untouchables. For, in addition to their having to face an hostile administration, the Untouchables will have to face an hostile or indifferent Legislature, a callous Executive and an administration uncontrolled and unbridled in venom and in harshness in its inequitable attitude towards the Untouchables. To put it differently, under *Swaraj* of the Congress variety, the Untouchables will have no way of escape from the destiny of degradation which the Hindus and Hinduism have fixed for them.

6. I hope this will give you some idea as to why the Untouchables have been insisting that the only way by which the Untouchables can prevent this *Swaraj* from becoming a calamity to them is to have their representatives in the Legislature so that they may keep on protesting against wrongs and injustices done to them by the Hindus, to have their representatives in the Executive so that they may make plans for their betterment and to have

representatives in the services so that the administration may not be wholly hostile to them. If you accept the justice of the demand of the Untouchables for constitutional safeguards, you will have no difficulty in understanding why the Untouchables want separate electorates. The Untouchables will be a minority in the Legislature. They are destined to remain a minority. They cannot overcome the majority which being communal in its making is, so to say, fixed and pre-ordained. All they can do is to place themselves in position to be able to determine the terms on which they will be prepared to work with the majority and not be compelled to accept the terms prescribed by the majority, and secondly, if the majority refuses to work with them and declines to redress their wrongs, they would at least be free to utter their protest against the majority on the floor of the Legislature. How are the Untouchables to maintain their freedom to protest ? Only if their representatives in the Legislatures do not owe their election to the votes of the majority. This is the basis of their demand for separate electorates.

7. No safeguards are going to be of any value to the Untouchables unless the Untouchables get a separate electorate. Separate electorate is the crux of the matter. I have before me a copy of the representation submitted to the Cabinet Mission by three Congress Harijans who were interviewed by the Mission on the 9th April 1946. They were no better than the three tailors of Tooty Street who had the audacity to present an address to the Parliament saying: "We the people of England." Apart from this, it is instructive to note that there is no difference between the demands put forth by me on behalf of the Scheduled Castes Federation and the demands put forth by these Congress Harijans. The only difference that exists relates to the question of electorates. I do not know how you interpret the demands of the Congress Harijans. They are not really demands. They represent what the Congress is prepared to give to the Untouchables by way of political safeguards. This is not merely my understanding. It is my knowledge. For I have been informed by person who knows the mind of the Congress that if I was prepared to accept joint electorates, the Congress on its part would be quite prepared to concede all other demands of mine.

You must be wondering why should the Congress be prepared to concede all the demands of the Scheduled Castes and object only to one namely, separate electorates. There will be no wonder if you know what game the Congress is playing. It is a very deep game. Realising that there is no escape from giving the Untouchables some safeguards, the Congress wants to find out some way by which it can make them of no effect. It is in the system of joint electorates that the Congress sees an instrument of making the safeguards of no effect. This is the way Congress is insisting upon joint electorates. For joint electorates means giving the Untouchables office without power. What the Untouchables want is office with power. This, they can only get through separate electorates and that is why they are insisting upon it.

8. I believe the case in favour of separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes is a cast-iron case. Every other party except the Congress accepts it. The arguments in favour of separate electorates have been set out by me in my letter of 3rd May 1946 addressed to Lord Wavell which he must have shown to you and it is therefore unnecessary to repeat them here. The question is what the Mission is going to do with this demand of the Scheduled Castes. Are they going to make the Untouchables free from political yoke of the Hindus? Or, are they going to throw them to the wolves by favouring the system of joint electorates in order to make friends with the Congress and the Hindu majority whom it represents? The Scheduled Castes are entitled to ask His Majesty's Government that before the British abdicate, His Majesty's Government shall make sure that *Swaraj* does not become a strangle-hold for the Untouchables.

9. Allow me to say that the British have a moral responsibility towards the Scheduled Castes. They may have moral responsibilities towards all minorities. But it can never transcend the moral responsibility which rests on them in respect of the Untouchables. It is a pity how few Britishers are aware of it and how fewer are prepared to discharge it. British Rule in India owes its very existence to the help rendered by the Untouchables. Many Britishers think that India was conquered by the Clives, Hastings, Cootes and so on. Nothing can be a greater mistake. India was

conquered by an army of Indians and the Indians who formed the army were all Untouchables. British Rule in India would have been impossible if the Untouchables had not helped the British to conquer India. Take the Battle of Plassey which laid the beginning of British Rule or the battle of Kirkee which completed the conquest of India. In both these fateful battles the soldiers who fought for the British were all Untouchables.

10. What have the British done to these Untouchables who fought for them? It is a shameful story. The first thing they did was to stop their recruitment in the army. A more unkind, more ungrateful and more cruel act can hardly be found in history. In shutting out the Untouchables from the Army the British took no note that the Untouchables had helped them to establish their rule and had defended it when it was menaced by a powerful combination of native forces in the Mutiny of 1857. Without any consideration as to its effects upon the Untouchables the British by one stroke of the pen deprived them of their source of livelihood and let them fall to their original depth of degradation. Did the British help them in any way to overcome their social disabilities? The answer again must be in the negative. The schools, wells and public places were closed to the Untouchables. It was the duty of the British to see the Untouchables, as citizens, were entitled to be admitted to all institutions maintained out of public funds. But the British did nothing of the kind and what is worst, they justified their inaction by saying that Untouchability was not their creation. It may be that Untouchability was not the creation of the British. But as Government of the day, surely the removal of Untouchability was their responsibility. No Government with any sense of the functions and duties of a Government could have avoided it. What did the British Government do? They refused to touch any question which involved any kind of reform of Hindu society. So far as social reform was concerned, the Untouchables found themselves under a Government distinguished in no vital respect from those native Government under which they had toiled and suffered, lived and died, through all their weary and forgotten history. From a political standpoint, the change was nominal. The despotism of the Hindus continued as ever before. Far from being curbed by the British High Command, it

was pampered. From a social point of view, the British accepted the arrangements as they found them and preserved them faithfully in the manner of the Chinese tailor who, when given an old coat as a pattern, produced with pride an exact replica, rents and patched and all. And what is the result? The result is that though 200 years have elapsed since the establishment of the British Rule in India, the Untouchables have remained Untouchables, their wrongs remained unredressed and their progress hampered at every stage. Indeed, if the British Rule has achieved anything in India it is to strengthen and reinvigorate Brahmanism which is the inveterate enemy of the Untouchables and which is the parent of all the ills from which the Untouchables have been suffering for ages.

11. You have come here to announce that the British are abdicating. It cannot be wrong for an Untouchable to ask "to whom are you leaving this legacy of authority and power?" To the protagonist of Brahmanism, which means to the tyrants and oppressors of the Untouchables. Such a method of liquidating the British Empire in India need not raise any qualms of conscience among members of other parties. But what about the British Labour Party? The Labour Party claims to stand for the unprivileged and the down-trodden. If it is true to its salt, I have no doubt that it will stand by the sixty millions of the Untouchables of India and do everything necessary to safeguard their position and not allow power to pass into the hands of those who by their religion and their philosophy of life are unfit to govern and are, in fact, the enemies of the Untouchables. It will be no more than bare act of atonement on the part of the British for the neglect of the Scheduled Castes whose trustees they always claimed to be.

12. What has led me to unburden myself at such length is the anxiety caused by the apparent silence of the Mission over the question of constitutional safeguards raised by the Untouchables? This anxiety has been deepened by the attitude taken by the Mission towards the pledges given to the Untouchables and to the minorities by His Majesty's Government. The attitude of the Mission in regard to these pledges reminds one of Lord Palmerston who said, "We have no

permanent enemies; We have no permanent friends; we have only permanent interest." You can well imagine what a terrifying prospect it would present to the Untouchables if the impression was created that the Mission was adopting this Palmerston maxim as its guide. You came from the underprivileged classes of Great Britain and I have full faith that you will do your best to prevent a possible betrayal of the 60 millions of India's underprivileged. That is why I have thought of placing their case before you. If you will allow me to say, the Untouchables have got a feeling that they have no greater friend in the Mission than Yourself.

I am,

Yours Sincerely,
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

The Rt. Hon'ble Mr. A.V. Alexander,
C.H.M.P., Member, Cabinet Mission,
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