

CONVERSION IS NECESSARY FOR YOUR EMANCIPATION AND ADVANCEMENT

On Sunday 17th May 1936, the Untouchables of East & South of Thane District arranged a large Conference at Kalyan. It was arranged under the Chairmanship of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to support the declaration of conversion openly. The Untouchables from hundred to hundred fifty villages thronged at the Railway Station to welcome Dr. Ambedkar. When he reached Kalyan Railway Station at 3 p.m. he was greeted by various leaders.

Outside the Railway Station people shouted the slogans “Ambedkar Jindabad, thode din me Bhimraj”. There were about four thousand Untouchables in the procession. The bands and physical shows were arranged in the procession. The whole atmosphere amongst the so called — Dumb — Untouchables was full of love and self-respect.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explained as to why there was no alternative for the conversion of the Untouchables.—
Editors.

“You have assembled here to hear my views about conversion. I, therefore, feel it is necessary to talk to you in detail about the subject.

Some people often raise the question, “Why should we change our religion?” Then I feel an impulse to ask a counter-question, “Why should we not change our religion?”

I would like to relate some instances in my life to explain why conversion is necessary and then it would be easy for you to understand why I chose conversion. You, too, must have had similar experiences in your life.

There are some four or five incidents in my life which have left deep impressions on my mind, and led me to decide in favour of the renunciation of Hinduism and conversion to some other religion. I would like to relate, today, only two or three of these incidents.

I was born at Mhow, Indore, where my father was employed in the army. He held the rank of a Subedar at that time. Since we lived in the cantonment we had little to do with the world outside the military area. I had no experience of 'Untouchability'. When my father retired from service on pension, we shifted to Satara to live there. My mother had passed away when I was barely five years old. Famine broke out in Goregaon, in the District of Satara, and to combat this the Government started 'Famine Relief Employment'. They started digging a watertank and my father was appointed as a pay-master to disburse wages to the workers in the labour camp. He had to join the labour camp at Goregaon and we, the four children, were left behind at Satara. For nearly four to five years in Satara, we had to live only on rice. It was only after coming to Satara that we began to experience what Untouchability was. The first thing which struck me most was that no barber was prepared to cut our hair. This disturbed us. My elder sister who is still alive used to cut my hair sitting on platform out side our house. I could not understand why inspite of the presence of so many barbers, no barber was prepared to cut our hair.

The second incident also relates to that period. Whilst my father was at Goregaon, he used to send us letters. In one letter he invited us to visit Goregaon. The idea that we would be travel ling by train to Goregaon thrilled me very much because I had never seen a train before. With the money sent by my father we got new clothes stitched and my brother, my sister's daughter, and I, set off for Goregaon.

We had sent a letter beforehand but, unfortunately, due to the carelessness or a mistake on the part of our servant, it had not reached my father. We were certain that my father would send a servant to receive us at the railway station. On our alighting from the train we were distressed to find the servant nowhere in sight.

Soon everybody departed and there were no passengers, excepting us, left on the platform. We waited in vain for some three quarters of an hour. The Station Master enquired who we were meeting, what caste we belonged to, and where we wanted to go. We told him that we belonged to the Mahar caste. This

gave him a shock and he retreated some five steps backwards. But seeing us well dressed, he presumed that we belonged to some well-to-do family. He assured us that he would try to get a cart for us. But owing to our being members of the Mahar Caste, no bullock-cart driver was willing to drive us. Evening was approaching and till 6 or 7 p.m., we did not succeed in getting a cart. Finally a cart-man agreed to take us in his cart. But he made it clear at the outset that he would not drive the can for us.

I had been living in the military area and driving a cart was not difficult for me. As soon as we agreed to this condition, he came with his cart and we, all of us children, started for Goregaon.

At a short distance outside the village we came across a brook. The cart driver asked us to eat our food there for no water was available elsewhere on the way. Accordingly, we got down from the cart and ate our food. The water was murky and mixed with dung. In the meantime, the cart driver also returned after having his dinner.

As the evening grew darker, the driver quietly boarded the cart and sat beside us. It became so dark soon, that, neither any flickering lamp nor any human being was visible for miles. Fear, darkness, and loneliness made us cry. It was well past mid-night and we were frightened. So scared were we that we thought we should never reach Goregaon. When we reached a '*Naka*' (toll post) we jumped out of the cart. We made enquiries from the toll-collector (*Nakadar*) whether we could get anything to eat in the vicinity. I spoke to him in Persian. I knew how to speak in Persian and had no difficulty in speaking to him. He replied in a very curt manner and pointed towards the hills. Somehow, we spent the night near the ravine and early in the morning, we set off again on our journey to Goregaon. At last we reached Goregaon on the following day in the afternoon, utterly exhausted and almost half-dead.

The third incident relates to the period when I served in Baroda State. With a scholarship granted by Baroda State, I had gone for education abroad. After returning from England, in accord with the terms of the agreement, I came to serve under the Baroda

Durbar. I could not get a house to live in at Baroda. Neither a Hindu nor any Muslim was prepared to rent out a house to me in the city of Baroda. Failing to get a house in any locality, I decided to get accommodation in a Parsi *Dharamsala*. After having stayed in America and England, I had developed a fair complexion and an impressive personality. Giving myself a Parsi name, 'Adalji Sorabji' I began to live in the Parsi *Dharamsala*. The Parsi manager agreed to accommodate me at Rs. 2 per diem. But soon the people got wind of the fact that His Highness the Maharaja Gaikwad of Baroda had appointed a Mahar boy as an officer in his Durbar, my living in the Parsi *Dharamsala* under an assumed name gave rise to suspicion and my secret was soon out.

On the second day of my stay, when I was just leaving for my office after taking breakfast, a mob of some fifteen or twenty Parsis, armed with *lathis* accosted me, threatening to kill me and demanded who I was. I replied, 'I am a Hindu'. But they were not to be satisfied with this answer. Exasperated, they began to shower abuses on me and bade me vacate the room immediately. My presence of mind and knowledge gave me the strength to face the situation boldly. Politely I asked for permission to stay for eight hours more. Throughout the day I searched for a house to live in, but miserably failed to get any place to hide my head. I approached my friends but all turned me down on some plea or the other, expressing their inability to accommodate me. I was utterly disappointed and exhausted. What to do next ? I just could not decide. Frustrated and exhausted, I quietly sat down at one place, with tears flowing out of my eyes. Seeing no hope of getting a house, and no alternative but to quit, I tendered my resignation and left for Bombay by the night train.

Like these horrified incidents of my life, you too, must have undergone hardships in your life. I would like to ask you all, what is the sense in living in a society which is devoid of humanity, which does not respect you, protect you or treat you as a human being ? Instead, it insults you, humiliates you and never misses an opportunity to hurt you. Any person with an iota of self-respect and decency will not like to remain in this satanic religion. Only those who love to be slaves can remain in this religion.

My father and forefathers were devout Hindus, but they could not get an education owing to the restrictions imposed by the Hindu religion. That religion did not allow them to bear arms. It was not possible under Hinduism even to acquire wealth. While remaining an adherent of this religion my father could not acquire these three things.

I wished to learn Sanskrit but owing to the restrictions imposed by the Hindu religion, it was not possible for me to learn Sanskrit. Now it has become possible for me to acquire education and wealth and also to bear arms.

In view of the fact that the Hindu religion which forced your forefathers to lead a life of degradation, and heaped all sorts of indignities on them, kept them poor and ignorant, why should you remain within the fold of such a diabolical creed ? If, like your forefathers, you too, continue to accept a degraded and lowly position, and humiliation, you will continue to be hated. Nobody will respect you and nobody will help you.

It is for these reasons that the question of conversion has become important for us. If you continue to remain within the fold of Hinduism, you cannot attain a status higher than that of a slave. For me, personally, there is no bar. If I continue to remain an Untouchable, I can attain any position that a Hindu can. Whether I remain a Hindu or not, it makes little difference to me. I can become a Judge of the High Court, a Member of the Legislative Assembly or even a Minister. But, it is for your emancipation and advancement, that conversion appears to be very necessary to me.

To change this degraded and disgraceful existence into a golden life, conversion is absolutely necessary. You will certainly get assistance and co-operation to improve your condition, from friends and well-wishers, I hope. I have to start conversion in order to improve your lot. I am not at all worried about the question of my personal interest or progress. Whatever I am doing today, it is for your betterment and in your interest.

You look upon me as ‘God’ but I am not a god. I am a human being like you all. Whatever help you want from me, I am prepared to give you. I have decided to liberate you from your present hopeless and degraded condition. I am not doing anything for my personal gain. I will continue to struggle for your upliftment and to make your life useful and meaningful. You must realise your responsibility and follow the path which I am showing you. If you follow it earnestly, it would not be difficult to achieve your goal.”¹

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¹: Janata : dated 23rd May, 1936. Published in Marathi. (Translated)