

CHAPTER 15

CIVILIZATION OR FELONY

I. Another cross section view of India's population. II. Sunken classes seen through it: (a) Primitive Tribes, (b) Criminal Tribes and (c) Untouchables. III. Effect of Hindu Civilization on the condition of these classes. IV. Difference in the problems of these classes.

The population of India is generally classified on a linguistic or on religious basis. These are the only two ways of classifying the people of India which have been persistently in vogue for a long time. The effect is that outsiders get the impression that, what is of interest and importance to know about the peoples of India is the religions they profess or the languages they speak. Limited by this interest, they remain content with a knowledge they get about the religions and languages that are prevalent in India. All that the outsider cares to hold in his head is that, in India there are people who are either Hindus or Mahomedans, if he is interested in religion or that there are people in India some of whom speak Marathi, some speak Gujarathi, some Bengali and some Tamil, etc.

Of the two ways of classifying people of India the religious classification is the one which is more impressive and arresting for the foreigner. He is more interested in the religions than in the languages. But even he is not aware of all the religious communities in India. He knows only of Hindus and Mahomedans. He sometimes hears of the Sikhs, very seldom of Christians although they are a growing community and never of the Buddhists who are of course non-existent so far as India of today is concerned¹.

The impression of the foreigner is that there are only Hindus and Musalmans in India and that there are none others worth bothering about. That this should be his impression is quite natural. The air is filled with the din and noise of the Hindu-Moslem conflict. How grave

¹There is a very feeble attempt at revival carried on by the Maha Bodhi Society of Calcutta. (This and other information is taken from Census of India, 1931, Vol. 1 Part. 3)

the conflict is, can be seen from the number of Hindu-Moslem riots that have taken place in recent years and the casualties and deaths that resulted from them.

But this struggle is a struggle for establishing an empire. There are Hindus who are agitating for establishing in India a Hindu Raj with Mahomedans as subject only. There are Mahomedans who are dreaming of Pan Islamism and of making India a part of a Muslim Empire with a choice for the Hindus between the sword and the Koran. In between these two extremists, there are sober persons who are for a state in which both Hindus and Muslims can live as equal partners. Whether the extremists will succeed or the moderates will succeed time alone can show. In the meantime the extremes in both the ; camps are making headlines by their blood baths. But, be that as it may, I venture to think that there are many who will not feel much interest in this struggle between the Hindus and the Mahomedans. ; After all it is a struggle for mastery for dominance. It is a struggle for liberation. It is a struggle for establishing an empire of one over the other. They will be more interested in the struggles of the down trodden, of those who are fighting to obtain the title deeds to respectable humanity. In describing the old quarrel between the Whigs and Tories in England, Francis Place in describing the political policy of the Whigs said, they were out to crush the king on the one hand and the people on the other hand and establish the aristocracy of the governing class. Those Hindus and Musalmans who are now fighting have the same policy in Indian politics. They want to establish their classes from them as the governing body. The masses whether of the Hindus or of the Musalmans are merely used for establishing the ascendancy of the classes. This struggle that is going on is really a struggle of the classes. It is not a struggle of the masses.

Those who are interested in the struggle of the masses must learn to look at the population of India from another point of view. They must cease to look at it purely from the point of view of religion. They must look at the population of India from the social and economic point of view. This does not mean that one need not care to know how religion has affected the economic and social life of the people of India. Indeed no study of the Indian people, be they Hindus or Musalmans, can give an adequate picture of their life if religion is kept out of consideration. Because religion is supreme in India as was the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages in Europe. Bryce¹ has described the dominance of the Church over the lives of the people in terms that are worth recording "A life in the Church, for the Church, through the

¹Holy Roman Empire. P. 367.

Church; a life which she blessed in mass at morning and sent to peaceful rest by the vesper hymn; a life which she supported by the constantly recurring stimulus of the sacraments, relieving it by confession, purifying it by penance, admonishing it by the presentation of visible objects for contemplation and worship, this was the life which many of the Middle Ages conceived of as the rightful life of the man; it was the actual life of many, the ideal of all”.

The dominance of religion on the life of the people of India today is no whit less than the dominance of the Church over the lives of the people in the Middle Ages. It would therefore be a mistake to leave religion out of consideration. But it is equally true to say that a purely religious point of view would give only a superficial picture. What is important to know is how the masses and the classes in India live? What are the social and economic terms of their associated life? To what extent are these influenced by religion? The answer to this question is given by the condition in which we find certain classes who fall within the Hindu fold.

II

It is a pity that Prof. Max Muller did not visit India. On seeing the contrast between theory and practice he might have explained the contrast. For the present the contrast remains a riddle.

This is so in spite of the doctrine of Bramha, asserted by the Brahmins to be residing and pervading every human being. If there is Bramha in a Brahmin so also it is in a Primitive man, in a Criminal Tribes man and so also in an Untouchable? How are these two facts to be reconciled—the theory of Bramha and as against it the existence of the Primitive Tribes, the Criminal Tribes and the Untouchables?

This sunken humanity falls into three distinct categories. One such category is comprised of people who are called Primitive Tribes. Communities listed as Criminal classes form a second and separate category and the third category is the one which covers what are called the Untouchables.

The total population of persons who fall into these three categories is by no means small. The population of the Primitive Tribes in India according to the Census of 1931 comes in round figures to 25 millions. The total population of the Criminal classes now listed as Criminal is somewhere about 4½ millions. The total population of the Untouchables according to the Census of 1931 is 50 millions in India as a whole. The total of these classes comes to 79½ millions. And the question is what is the position of these 79½ million souls?

First as to the Primitive Tribes. In what state of civilization are they?

The name Primitive Tribes is expressive of the present state of people who are called by that name. They live in small scattered huts in forests. They live on wild fruits, nuts and roots. Fishing and hunting are also resorted to for the purpose of securing food. Agriculture plays a very small part in their social economy. Food supplies being extremely precarious they lead a life of semi-starvation from which there is no escape. As to clothes they economize them to a vanishing point. They move almost in a state of complete nakedness. There is a tribe which is known as “Bonda Porajas” which means “naked Porajas”. Of these people it is said that, the women wear a very narrow strip which serves as a petticoat almost identical with what is worn by the Momjak Nagas in Assam, the ends hardly meeting at the top on the left thigh. These petticoats are woven at home out of the fibre of a forest tree. Girls wear a fillet of beads and of palmyra leaf and an enormous quantity of beads and neck ornaments extremely like those worn by many Komjak women. Otherwise the women wear nothing. The women shave their heads entirely Of the Chenchus, a tribe residing near Farhabad in the Nizam’s Dominions it is said that “their houses are conical, rather slight in structure made of bamboos sloping to the central point and covered with a thinnish layer of thatch..... They have very little indeed in the way of material effects, the scanty clothes they wear, consisting of a langoti and a cloth in the case of men and a short bodice and a petticoat in the case of women, being practically all, besides a few cooking pots and a basket or two which perhaps sometimes contains grain. They keep cattle and goats and in this particular village do a little cultivation, elsewhere subsisting on honey and forest produce which they sell”. Regarding the Morias another Primitive Tribe, it is stated the men generally wear a single cloth round the waist with a flap coming down in the front. They also have a necklace of beads and when they dance, put cock’s plums and peacock’s feathers in their turbans. Many girls are profusely tattooed, especially on their faces, and some of them on their legs as well. The type of tattooing is said to be according to the taste of the individual and it is done with thorns and needles. In their hair, many of them stick the feathers of jungle cocks and their heads are also adorned with combs of wood and tin and brass.

These Primitive Tribes have no prohibition against eating anything, even worms and insects and in fact there is very little meat that they will not eat, whether the animal has died a natural death or has been killed four days or more before by a tiger.

The religion of these Primitive Tribes is the worship of demons of all denominations and dead ancestors of all antiquity. Witchcraft, sorcery, animal and human sacrifice make up their religion. Without education, with no idea of Science or of the knowledge of the working of nature, steeped in ignorance and superstition, these Primitive Tribes have been living on the outskirts and in close conformity with civilization in a savage stage which has been their lot for ages. Instead of marching along, they are where they have been all along doing nothing but marking time.

The Criminal Classes at one time included such well organized confederacies of Professional Criminals as the Pindharies and the Thugs.

The Pindharies were a predatory body of armed gangsters. Their organization was an open military organization of freebooters who could muster 20,000 fine horse and even more. They were under the command of brigand chiefs. Chitu, one of the most powerful commanders had under his single command 10,000 horse, including 5,000 good cavalry, besides infantry and guns. The Pindharies had no military projects for employing their loose hands of irregular soldiery, which developed into bodies of professional plunderers. The Pindharies aimed at no conquests. Their object was to secure booty and cash for themselves. General loot and rapine was their occupation. They recognized no rulers. They were subject of none. They rendered loyalty to none. They respected none and plundered all high and low rich and poor without fear or compunction.

The Thugs¹ were a well organized body of professional assassins, who in gangs of from 10 to 200 travelled in various guises throughout India, worked themselves into the confidence of Wayfarers of the wealthier class and, when a favourable opportunity occurred, strangled them by throwing a handkerchief or noose round their necks and then plundered and buried them. All this was done according to certain ancient and rigidly prescribed forms and after the performance of special religious rites, in which was the consecration of the pickaxe and the sacrifice of sugar. They were staunch worshippers of Kali, the Hindu Goddess of destruction. Assassination for gain was with them a religious duty, and was considered a holy and honourable profession. They had in fact no idea of doing wrong, and their moral feelings did not come into play. The will of the goddess by whose command and in whose honour they followed their calling was revealed to them through a very complicated system of omens. In obedience to these, they often travelled hundreds of miles in company with, or in the wake of their

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica. 11th Ed.. Vol. XXVI. p. 896.

intended victims before a safe opportunity presented itself for executing their design; and when the deed was done, rites were performed in honour of that tutelary deity, and a goodly portion of the spoil was set apart for her. The Thugs had also a jargon of their own, as well as certain signs by which its members recognized each other in the remotest part of India. Even those, who from age or infirmities could no longer take an active part in the operations used to aid the cause as watchmen, spies or dressers of food. It was owing to their thorough organization, the secrecy and security with which they went to work, but chiefly to the religious garb in which they shrouded their murders, that they could continue for centuries to practise their craft. The extraordinary fact was that Thuggee was regarded as a regular profession by the Indian Rulers both Hindu and Mahomedans. The Thugs paid taxes to the State and the State left them unmolested.

It was not until the British became rulers of the country that any attempt was made to suppress the Thugs. By 1835, 382 Thugs were hanged and 986 were transported or imprisoned for life. Even as late as 1879 the number of registered Thugs was 344 and the Thuggee and the Dacoity department of the Government of India continued to exist until 1904 when its place was taken by the Central Criminal Intelligence Department.

While these open and professional criminals have been suppressed and are no more to exact their toll and disturb the peace, there are still in India communities whose occupation is crime and who are listed by Government as Criminal Tribes.

The Criminal Tribes live in the plains in close proximity, if not in the midst of, civilized life. Because they subsist by organized robbery and dacoity, they are for this reason proscribed by the Government of India as Criminal Tribes. Hollius in his "Criminal Tribes of the United Provinces" gives an account of their activities. They live entirely by crime. A few may be ostensibly engaged in agriculture but this is only to cover up their real activities. Their nefarious practices found most scope in dacoity or robbery by violence, but being a community organized for crime nothing came amiss to them. On deciding to commit a dacoity in any particular locality, spies would be sent out to select a suitable victim, study the general habits of the villagers and the distance from any effective aid, and enumerate the number of men and firearms. The raid usually took place at midnight. Acting on the information given by the spies, men would be posted at various points in the village and by firing off their guns, attract attention from the main gang which would attack the particular house or houses previously appointed. The gang would usually consist of 30 to 40 men.

It is essential to emphasize the great part played by crime in the general life of these peoples. A boy is initiated into crime as soon as he is able to walk and talk. No doubt the motive is practical to a great extent in so far as it is always better to risk a child in petty theft, who if he were caught, would probably be cuffed, while an adult would immediately be arrested. An important part is also played by women, who, although they do riot participate in the actual raids, have many heavy responsibilities. Besides disposing of most of the stolen property, they are also expert shoplifters.

Like the Criminal Tribes the Untouchables also live in the midst of civilized Hindu Society and possess a degree of culture and morality which completely separate them from the Primitive Tribes and the Criminal Tribes. The Untouchables have the culture¹ of the Hindu Community. They observe the religious rites of the Hindu Community. They recognize the sacred as well as the secular laws of the Hindus. They celebrate the Hindu festivities. But they derive no benefit from this. On the contrary they are segregated and shunned because their physical contact is held by the Hindus to cause pollution. There is therefore an interdict on all social intercourse with them except for unavoidable purposes. They live on the outskirts of a village and not in the midst of it. Every village has its Untouchable quarters, they are attached to the village but are not a part of the village. Segregated from the rest of the Hindu population they are bound down to a code of behaviour which is appropriate to a servile state. According to this code, an Untouchable may not do anything which raise him above his appointed station in life. He should not dress in style superior to that of his status, nor should the untouchable woman adorn herself with ornaments after the fashion of the higher class Hindu women. He should not have a house better or bigger than the houses of the rest of the Hindus in the village. In any case he must not have a tiled roof over his house. An Untouchable must not sit in the presence of a Hindu and must always salute him first. An Untouchable must not wear clean clothes, must not use brass or copper pots and must not wear gold or silver ornaments. When some one dies in the family of a Hindu, an Untouchable must go miles to convey the message of the death to the relatives of the family, no matter how far away they might be living, because a Hindu in a village feels disgraced in the eyes of his relatives if he has to communicate such messages by postal communication. An Untouchable must accompany the women folk of the Hindus on their journey from their homes to their parents and *vice versa*. Their dignity requires that they should have a retinue and the Untouchable is the only available class from which such a retinue can

be drawn without any cost. At every ceremony at the house of a Hindu, the Untouchables must come and do menial work. An Untouchable must not own and cultivate land and lead an independent life. For his livelihood he must depend upon stale remnants of food left over by the Hindu households and upon meat of cattle that die in the village. These remnants of food he must collect from door to door. For he must go on his begging round every evening. Similarly an Untouchable must carry the dead animals out of the village. Indeed he alone must carry them because no Hindu will agree to do scavenging. An Untouchable should not take to such services as would give him authority and power over caste Hindus. He must be humble and must not ask for more than his lot under this code. It is true that some of the Untouchables have risen above the low status prescribed by this customary code of conduct and have acquired high place, but the majority of them are still socially in the most servile position and ~ economically in abject poverty.

Such is the condition of the 79½ millions of people. The problem of these deadened, if not dead, souls is no small problem. The total population of these three classes comes to over 60% of the population of the United States but exceeds the population of the whites in the British Empire by 9½ millions. It also exceeds the population of Japan by 9½ millions. It exceeds the population of Italy by 37 millions. It exceeds the population of Germany by 13½ millions and of France by 37½ millions. It is ten times the population of Belgium and twenty times the population of Denmark. What a colossal total of sunken humanity?

III

The saddening and if, one may say, annoying part of the story is that the state of these unfortunate human beings should be what it is although they are surrounded and fed by a high civilization. But it must strike any impartial observer that there must be something very radically wrong with a civilization which has failed to elevate to their manhood 79½ millions of human beings.

Civilization as comprising and accumulated store of knowledge of man and nature, of arts and crafts, an ethical code regulating the conduct of man towards his fellows, a social code laying down the forms and conventions to be observed by individuals, a civil code prescribing the rights and duties of the rulers and the ruled and a religious creed relating the natural to the supernatural—is a rare prize. It has not been the good fortune of all races to develop it in all its fullness. Many have stood where they were at the start. Many took one or two steps and have been at a halt. Others have only revolved round and round. The primitive races of Australia and Polynesia, when they

were first discovered a few generations ago, were found to have developed articulate speech and to know how to make fire. They had not advanced beyond the middle stage of savagery. The Alliapascous, a Primitive Tribe of the Hudson Bay Territory and the Indians of the valley of Columbia had not gone beyond the stage of the Bow and the Arrow. They knew nothing of pottery, domestication of animals or of the smelting of iron. The civilization of Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria and even of Rome and Greece had only been a revolving civilization. Their progress and achievements are only the elaboration of the details of methods and intentions handed down by man when he was in a Barbaric state. They added nothing revolutionary to the sum total of civilization to which they were heirs. They merely did better what used to be done crudely by their predecessors. Nor have the stages of advancement followed in quick succession. That man was for long ages a savage before he made sufficient progress to be called a Barbarian admits of no doubt. Equally little in doubt is it that other long ages of Barbarism have preceded the final ascent to the lowest stage of civilization. The precise period of time covered by these successive 'ages' is of course only conjectural; but something like one hundred thousand years may perhaps be taken as a safe minimum estimate.

Civilization is indeed no easy gain. But civilization is a very vital thing, not for one generation but also for the next. The civilization of one generation, when inherited becomes the equipment of the next. This social heritage is absolutely essential for each generation. All progress will die out if this social heritage is destroyed. As has been well put, "If the earth were struck by one of Mr. Wells' comets, and if in consequence every human being now alive were to lose all the knowledge and habits which he had acquired from preceding generations (though retaining unchanged all his own powers of invention and memory, and habituation) nine-tenths of the inhabitants would be dead in a month and 99 per cent of the remaining tenth would be dead in six months. They would have no language to express their thoughts but vague reverie. They would not read notices or drive motor cars or horses. They would wander about, led by the inarticulate cries of a few naturally dominant individuals, drowning themselves, as thirst came on, in hundreds at the riverside landing places. Men could not invent in time to preserve their lives, methods of growing food or taming animals or making fire or clothing themselves. Life would have to be begun over again from the primitive stage. Like the primitive races a generation which has lost its social heritage would have to begin life on wild fruits and worms until they had accumulated a new social heritage. After some thousands of generations they would

probably possess some thing which would be recognized as language, and perhaps some art of taming animals and cultivating land. They might or might not have created what we should call a religion or a few of our simpler mechanical inventions and political expedients. They might or might not have such general ideas as law, liberty, justice. This is the difference which social heritage makes and the difference is no doubt vast.

It is true that civilization is not the privilege of all and even to those who are fortunate to have it, it is a matter of slow growth marked by long and monotonous halts. But it is also true that to those who are possessed of civilization, their civilization may be a hindrance rather than a help. It might have gone on a wrong track, it might have based itself on false values and false premises. Such a civilization might easily cause stagnation of the Community and the stunting of the individual. It would be better to be without civilization than to be burdened and enshakled by such a civilization.

It is the boast of every patriotic Hindu that the Hindu or the Vedic Civilization is the oldest in the world. One often hears with firesome repetitions a Hindu stating with a certain degree of malicious pride that India had reached a very high degree of civilization when other people were leading a primitive life and moving naked. One also hears a Hindu say that his civilization has inherent strength because it has survived while all other ancient civilization such as Egypt, Babylon, Judea, Rome and Greece have vanished. Such a view however legitimate misses the main point. The main point is not whether the civilization is ancient and whether it has survived.¹ The main point is what are the merits of a civilization? What is its worth, if it has survived, on what plain? In other words the principal question is, is this Hindu civilization, the social heritage a burden or a benefit? What does it offer by way of growth and expansion to classes and to individuals?

What is the contribution of Hindu Civilization to the knowledge of man and nature? Many patriotic Hindus like to believe that the knowledge of man and nature began with the Hindus. Granting that it is so it certainly did not advance beyond the most rudimentary stage. Can any Hindu doubt that the Hindu Philology, right or wrong, has remained where Panini and Katyayana left it? Can he deny that Philosophy right or wrong has remained where Kapila and Gautama left it? Can he doubt that literature remained where Vyasa and Valmiki left it. In Metaphysics the Hindus are said to have reached the

¹ See my 'Annihilation of Caste'

stage of perfection. This is what Prof. Har Dayal has to say of Hindu Metaphysics¹ —

“Metaphysics has been the curse of India. It has blighted her history and compassed her ruin. It has converted her great men into miserable quibblers, and led them into useless channels of inquiry and effort. It has been the dangerous will-o’-the-wisp of Indian intellect during many centuries. It has elevated sophistry to the rank of an Art, and substituted vain fancies for a knowledge. It has condemned Indians intellect to run in the same old roove for hundreds of years. It has blinded her seers and led them to mistake phantoms for realities Arrogant, pretentious, verbose and purblind, it has taken its cackling for an oracle and its fantastic word towers for solid piles of thought masonry.....”

“.....The Upanishads claim to expound ‘that by knowing which every thing is known’. This mediaeval quest for ‘the absolute’ is the basis of all the superior metaphysics of India. The treatises are full of absurd conceits, quaint fancies, and chaotic speculations. And we have not yet learned that they are worthless. “Samadhi” or trance is regarded as the acme of spiritual progress ! How strange it is that a capacity for swooning away should be considered the mark of wisdom ! It is very easy to lose consciousness if one has strong emotions and a feeble intellect. That is why ladies faint so often on the slightest provocation. But in India Samadhi is the eighth stage of Yoga, which only ‘*paramahans*’ can reach. These be thy Gods, O, Israel! To look upon an abnormal psychological condition produced by artificial means as the sign of enlightenment was a folly reserved for Indian Philosophers.”

In the domain of science, Arts and crafts the contribution of the Hindu Civilization is of the most primitive character. Except in some spheres such as weaving, spinning, etc., the Hindu Civilization has not evolved any technical equipment which can aid man in his struggle against nature to make a bare living that can be said to be higher than that of the brute. It is because of the complete absence of scientific and technical equipment and with all the transcendental nonsense that is being perpetrated that famines are desolating the land in all ages. Ignorance, superstition and disease which affect the mind, malaria and plague diseases which affect the body, have hung like a pall over the country throughout the ages.

In the field of Religion and Ethics the Hindus have made their greatest efforts. Of their contributions, these are the most elaborately developed. They are undoubtedly the most vital to man for the simple reason that they help to install in man the springs of thought and

¹ Modern Review. July 1912.

action. They are responsible for the outlook which man has on life. They are responsible for the attitude one holds towards his fellow man. They prescribe principles which govern conduct, mould character and implant in man that mysterious thing called conscience which acts as his sentinel and prevents him from going wrong.

It is when one comes to examine this Hindu Civilization in the matter of its religious content, the way of life it prescribes, that one begins to doubt whether this Hindu Civilization is at all an advantage to the generations who are fated to inherit it. What does this civilization offer to the 25 millions of Primitive Tribes who are living on its frontiers ? What does it offer to the 5 millions of Criminal Tribes who are living in the midst of that civilization? What does it offer to the 50 millions of Untouchables who are not only living in the midst of that civilization but are required to sustain it ? What would the Primitive Tribes say of a civilization which has made no effort to adopt them in its fold ? What would the Criminal Tribes say of a civilization which has driven them to take to criminal ways for earning their livelihood ? Would it be unjust if they said that this is not Civilization, this is infamy ?

As to the Untouchables, theirs has been a fate of degradation and destitution in the past and for whom under the Hindu Civilization there seems to be no escape in the future. Even Indians do not seem to realize the extent of degradation and destitution that is involved in this system of Untouchability. The observations of the Committee appointed by the Government of Bombay to inquire into the grievances of the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes in 1928 are very pertinent. It said.

“There is nothing strange in the idea that an unclean person or thing causes repulsion which underlies the idea of pollution. But what is regrettable about it as applied to the (UNTOUCHABLES), is its irrationality. It stamps an individual as untouchable by the mere accident of his birth. A person born Untouchable, remains Untouchable however superior he may be in personal cleanliness to the so-called touchable, and there is no way open to him by which he can escape his fate. What is surprising in all this is that an Orthodox Hindu, notwithstanding the differences between his religious notions and mode of living and outlook in life and those of the Mahomedans, Parsis and Christians treat them as touchables. This has resulted in further aggravating the position of the (Untouchables). For this unjust discrimination on the part of the Orthodox Hindus, in some cases being influenced by the Orthodox Hindus especially in villages, even the Mahomedans, Parsis and

Christians observe untouchability towards the (Untouchables) though their religions teach contrariwise. What we are concerned most to point out are the evils attributable to it in so far as Untouchability includes isolation and inferiority. But there are evils specifically attributable to untouchability as such. Pressed to its logical limit, in an Orthodox Hindu Society it would prevent the (Untouchables) from obtaining entry into a public school though it is maintained at the expense of the state, it would prevent them from entering the public services though they may be qualified for it, except for the services customarily allotted to them. It would also prevent them from taking water from the public watering places maintained out of public funds. Looked at from this point of view untouchability is not merely a social problem. It is a problem of the highest political importance and affects the fundamental question of the civic rights of the subjects of the state.”

This states the hardships only of the Untouchables. But untouchables are not the only people who are subjected to this life of ignominy. There are classes who are placed in a worse position. Untouchables are those who cause pollution only by a physical touch. There are people who cause pollution if they come within a certain distance. They are known as unapproachables. Again there are people who are in a worse position than the unapproachables. They cause pollution if they come within sight. They are known as unseeable. It is said of the Nayadis¹—a people who fall into the category of the unapproachables, “that they are the lowest caste among the Hindus—the dogeaters. They are the most persistent in their clamour for charity, and will follow at a respectful distance, for miles together any person walking, driving or boating. If any thing is given to them, it must be laid down, and after the person offering it has proceeded a sufficient distance, the recipient comes timidly forward, and removes it.” Of the same people Mr. Thurston says “The subject (i.e. the Nayadis) whom I examined and measured at Shoranur, though living only about three miles off had, by reason of the pollution which they traditionally carry with them to avoid walking over the long bridge which spans the river, and follow a circuitous route of many miles”.

In the Tinnevalley District of the Madras Presidency, there is a class of unseeables called Purada Vannas. Of them it is said, “that they are not allowed to come out during day time because their sight is enough to cause pollution. These unfortunate people are ‘compelled’ to follow the nocturnal habits, leaving their dens after dark and scuttling home at the false dawn like the badger, hyaena, aordvark.”

¹ Malabar Manual.

What must be the hardships of the unapproachables and unseeables ? How must they be passing their lives ? If their sight or their approach even is not tolerated, what work can they obtain ? What else can they do except to beg and live on dog's meat ? Surely no civilization can be guilty of greater cruelty ! It is indeed a great mercy that the population of the unapproachables and of the unseeables is so small. But are 50 millions of Untouchables entitled to any civilization ?

An Untouchable cannot escape his fate for he cannot pass off as a Touchable. In the village where he resides he is of course known and there is no room for impersonation while he is there. If he leaves his village and comes to a town there is a chance for him to pass off as Touchable. But he knows what would be his fate if he were discovered.

The following incident which was reported in the papers will give some idea of the risk involved in any attempt to impersonate:

** Orthodoxy Run Mad.

Alleged Barbarious Treatment of "Untouchables": Crime of being Mahars.

Mr. Keshavji Ranchhodji Vaghela from Ahmedabad has informed Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, President, Bahishkrit Hitkarani Sabha as follows:

One Bapoorao Laxman and his brother Kaurao have been residents of Ahmedabad during the last six years. They used to mix with some people from the Deccan belonging to Maratha caste. Kaurao's two sons, viz, Damoo and Laxman, used to take part in the Bhajan parties of the Marathas. The latter, however, recently came to know that the brothers Damoo and Laxman were Mahars by caste and in order to ascertain this, two Mahars employed in the parcel train between Surat and Ahmedabad were specially called to identify Damoo and Laxman. After it was ascertained that Damoo and Laxman were Mahars they were called at a Bhajan party at Kalupur, Bhandari Pole, at midnight on the 11th instant. Asked as to what caste they belonged to, Damoo and Laxman replied that they were Somavanshis. This reply enraged the Marathas, who freely abused them for having defiled their persons and places. The Mahar brothers were assaulted by the Marathas. One of the brothers had a gold ring on his person. It was forcibly taken away from him and sold for Rs. 11. Out of this amount Rs. 6 was paid to the Mahar who had been called from Surat to identify the brothers. Damoo and Laxman entreated and Marathas were requested to allow them to return to their homes, but the latter refused to do so unless a fine of Rs. 500 was paid. On the Mahar brothers

** Bombay Chronicle 25th Feb. 1938.

pleading their inability to pay such a heavy sum, one of the Marathas suggested that the Mahar brothers should be fined only Rs. 125. But then one of the Marathas opposed the proposal for fine saying that they should not be satisfied with fine, but should punish the Mahars severely for their crime of concealing their caste. Having decided upon the course, the Mahar brothers were detained and at about 9 o'clock in the morning they were subjected to barbarous indignities, their moustaches in the left side and eyebrows on the right side were shaved, their bodies besmeared with soot mixed in oil and also with dirt, garlands made of old shoes were put around their necks, and one of them was asked to hold a broom in his hand and the other to hold a placard on which it was written that the punishment was meted out to the culprits for venturing to touch high caste people. The Mahar brothers were taken in procession consisting of about 75 people, a drum being beaten in the front.

A complaint has been lodged with the Police by the said two Mahar brothers. The accused in their statement have admitted that Damoo and Laxman were treated in the alleged manner, but pleaded that the complainants had willingly agreed to undergo the punishment. Obviously Damoo and Laxman were helpless when they were abused, assaulted and threatened with severe punishment and actually subjected to barbarous indignities. This case has created a great sensation among the people belonging to the so called Untouchables castes, and efforts are being made to give proper legal aid to the complainants. But the rules of this Hindu Civilization are so meticulous in regard to untouchability as to leave no possibility for an Untouchable to pose as a Touchable. Consequently there exist rules in certain areas where Untouchables are required to bear a black thread so as to be easily identifiable and to proclaim by word of mouth that he is an Untouchable to prevent a Touchable touching him in ignorance and thereby getting himself polluted. In the town of Dwarka (in the Bombay Presidency) which is famous as being the shrine of the great Hindu God Krishna it is a rule that every Untouchable while walking in the streets has to clap his hands and say "Post, Post" so as to proclaim the fact that he is an Untouchable and let the Touchables beware of him. The following is recorded of the Cherumans of the Madras Presidency:

"Very low is indeed the social position of these miserable beings. When a Cheruman meets a person of superior caste he must stand at a distance of thirty feet. If he comes within this prohibited distance, his approach is to cause pollution, which is removed only by bathing in water. A Cheruman cannot approach a Brahmin village or

temple or tank. If he does so, purification becomes necessary. Even while using the public road, if he sees his lord and master, he has to leave the ordinary way and walk, it may be in the mud, to avoid his displeasure by accidentally polluting him. To avoid polluting the passerby, he repeats the unpleasant sound, "O, Oh, O"—In some places i.e. Palghat, one may see a Cheruman with a dirty piece of cloth spread on the road side, and yelling in a shrill voice, "Ambrane, Ambrane, give me some pice and throw them on the cloth". His position is intolerable in the Native States of Cochin and Travancore, where the Brahman influence is in the ascendent, while in the Palghat Taluka the Cherumans cannot, even to this day enter the bazaar. In Malabar it is stated that ** "The man of high caste shouts occasionally as he goes along, so that the low caste man can go off the road, and allow him to pass unpolluted. And those of the lowest castes shout, as they go, to give notice of their Pollution bearing presence, and learning the command of the man of high caste, move away from the road. It is common to see people of inferior caste travelling parallel to the road, but not daring to go along it".

What a degradation for these unfortunate souls who have been turned by this Hindu Civilization into social lepers! To be called an Untouchable is enough of a misfortune. But to require an Untouchable to proclaim by his own mouth his shame that he is an Untouchable is a cruelty to which in my opinion there is no parallel. What would an Untouchable say of this Hindu Civilization? Would it be wrong if he said that it is felony and not civilization?

That the condition of the Primitive Tribes, of the Criminal Tribes and of the Untouchables is the result of fundamental doctrines of Hindu Civilization there can be no manner of doubt.

Why have there been no missions to bring these Primitive Tribes into the Hindu fold?

Why has crime become an occupation for certain tribes? Why have certain classes been treated as unfit for human association, as Untouchables?

The answer to each of these questions will have reference to some basic principle of the Hindu Civilization.

To the first question the answer is that the caste system prevents the Hindu Religion from becoming a missionary religion and caste is a fundamental part of the Hindu Civilization. To the second question the answer is that the system of Chaturvarna limits the opportunities which a person can have for earning an honourable living. All learned are the preserve of the Brahmins; all warlike services are the monopoly

**Thurston—Tribes and castes of Southern India, Vol. 5, p. 196.

of the Kshatriya class; trade is open only to Vaishya, services to the Shudras. Those outside, there being nothing honourable left, have been driven to dishonourable and criminal ways of earning a livelihood. This is the result of Chaturvarna and Chaturvarna is again a fundamental part of Hindu Civilization.

To the third question the answer is that untouchability is part of the Hindu law as contained in the Smritis which are again a fundamental part of the Hindu Civilization.

IV

It is true that as for the past the state of degradation has been the common fate of all the three categories of these 79½ millions of India's population. But it cannot be said that their future destiny will also be common to them. That is because although their condition is apparently similar, their position is essentially different.

The first thing to note is that the Primitive Tribes and the Criminal Tribes are not afflicted by this system of untouchability. To a Hindu they do not cause pollution. Indeed these Primitive and Criminal Tribes observe untouchability towards the Untouchables. The situation is full of humour when one sees members of these Primitive and Criminal Tribes feeling that they would be polluted if they would touch an Untouchable. They are poor, filthy, superstitious, ignorant, far more than the Untouchables yet they pride themselves as socially superior to the Untouchables. This of course is the result of the contagion which they have from the Hindus. But the point to note is that the Hindu does not treat them as Untouchable. That is an advantage which they have over the Untouchables and which makes their future assured. If the Primitive Tribes have no opportunities for advancement it is because they choose to live in isolation. But once they come out of their forest recesses and take part in civilization, there is nothing that will stand in their way. Similarly the Criminal Tribes have their future assured. Government have established settlements where these Criminal Tribes are kept and taught useful trades. There is no doubt that in a very short time they will be completely weaned from their vicious habits.

The case of the Untouchables stands on quite a different footing altogether. Their disabilities are imposed upon them. Their isolation is really segregation which is enforced upon them. The problem of the Untouchables is different from the problem of the Primitive Tribes because in their case the evils of segregation are aggravated by the fact of untouchability and the result is that while in the case of the

Primitive Tribes the problem is due to geographical isolation combined with lack of desire to avail themselves of the opportunities for betterment, in the case of the Untouchables the problem is due to positive denial of opportunities.

There does not seem to be much hope for the emancipation of the Untouchables, at any rate their emancipation is far more problematical and distant than the emancipation of the Primitive Tribes. The problem of the slaves was one of denial of political or economic rights. If the problem of the Untouchables was one of denial of political and economic rights it could be solved by legal and constitutional methods. The denial of political and economic rights is the result of the social psychology of the Hindus. The problem for the Untouchables arises directly out of the social behaviour of the Hindus. Untouchability will vanish only when Hindus will change their mentality. The problem is how to make the Hindus unlearn their way of life. It is no small matter to make a whole nation give up its accustomed way of life. Besides the way of life the Hindus are accustomed to, is a way which is sanctified by their religion, at any rate they believe it to be so. To change their way of life is almost to change their religion.

How can this happen ? Only when it is realised that what is tragedy for the Untouchables is the crime of the Hindus. How long shall the Untouchables have to wait for this revolution in the religious psychology of the Hindus? Let those who have a gift for prophecy answer. In the meantime it would be desirable to describe their condition and to state the problems which they and their friends have to face.

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