

CHAPTER I

UNTOUCHABILITY AMONG NON-HINDUS

WHO are the Untouchables and what is the origin of Untouchability? These are the main topics which it is sought to investigate and the results of which are contained in the following pages. Before launching upon the investigation it is necessary to deal with certain preliminary questions. The first such question is : Are the Hindus the only people in the world who observe Untouchability? The second is: If Untouchability is observed by Non-Hindus also how does Untouchability among Hindus compare with Untouchability among non-Hindus? Unfortunately no such comparative study has so far been attempted. The result is that though most people are aware of the existence of Untouchability among the Hindus they do not know what are its unique features. A definite idea of its unique and distinguishing features is however essential not merely for a real understanding of the position of the Untouchables but also as the best means of emphasising the need of investigating into their origin.

It is well to begin by examining how the matter stood in Primitive and Ancient Societies. Did they recognize Untouchability? At the outset it is necessary to have a clear idea as to what is meant by Untouchability. On this point, there can be no difference of opinion. It will be agreed on all hands that what underlies Untouchability is the notion of defilement, pollution, contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that defilement.

Examining the social life of Primitive Society¹ in order to find out whether or not it recognized Untouchability in the sense mentioned above there can be no doubt that Primitive Society not only did believe in the notion of defilement but the belief had given rise to a live system of well-defined body of rites and rituals.

¹ The facts relating to pollution among non-Hindus are drawn from "*Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*", Vol. X, Article Purification, pp. 455-504.

Primitive Man believed that defilement was caused by

- (1) the occurrences of certain events;
- (2) contact with certain things; and
- (3) contact with certain persons.

Primitive Man also believed in the transmission of evil from one person to another. To him the danger of such transmission was peculiarly acute at particular times such as the performance of natural functions, eating, drinking, etc. Among the events the occurrence of which was held by Primitive Man as certain to cause defilement included the following :—

- (1) Birth
- (2) Initiation
- (3) Puberty
- (4) Marriage
- (5) Cohabitation
- (6) Death

Expectant mothers were regarded as impure and a source of defilement to others. The impurity of the mother extended to the child also.

Initiation and puberty are stages which mark the introduction of the male and the female to full sexual and social life. They were required to observe seclusion, a special diet, frequent ablutions, use of pigment for the body and bodily mutilation such as circumcision. Among the American Tribes not only did the initiates observe a special dietary but also took an emetic at regular intervals.

The ceremonies which accompanied marriage show that marriage was regarded by the Primitive Man as impure. In some cases the bride was required to undergo intercourse by men of the tribe as in Australia or by the chief or the medicine man of the tribe as in America or by the friends of the grooms as among the East African Tribes. In some cases there takes place the tapping of the bride by a sword by the bridegroom. In some cases, as among the Mundas, there takes place marriage to a tree before marriage with the bridegroom. All these marriage observances are intended to neutralize and prepare the individual against the impurity of marriage.

To the Primitive Man the worst form of pollution was death. Not only the corpse, but the possession of the belongings of the deceased were regarded as infected with pollution. The widespread custom of placing implements, weapons, etc., in the grave along with the corpse

indicates that their use by others was regarded as dangerous and unlucky.

Turning to pollution arising out of contact with objects Primitive Man had learned to regard certain objects as sacred and certain others as profane. For a person to touch the sacred was to contaminate the sacred and to cause pollution to it. A most striking example of the separation of the sacred and the profane in Primitive Society is to be found among the Todas, the whole of whose elaborate ritual and (it would not be too much to say) the whole basis of whose social organisation is directed towards securing the ceremonial purity of the sacred herds, the sacred dairy, the vessels, and the milk, and of those whose duty it is to perform connected rites and rituals. In the dairy, the sacred vessels are always kept in a separate room and the milk reaches them only by transfer to and fro of an intermediate vessel kept in another room. The dairyman, who is also the priest, is admitted to office only after an elaborate ordination, which in effect is a purification. He is thereby removed from the rank of ordinary men to a state of fitness for sacred office. His conduct is governed by regulations such as those which permit him to sleep in the village and only at certain times, or that which entails that a dairyman who attends a funeral should cease from that time to perform his sacred function. It has, therefore, been conjectured that the aim of much of the ritual is to avert the dangers of profanation and prepare or neutralise the sacred substance for consumption by those who are themselves unclean.

The notion of the sacred was not necessarily confined to objects. There were certain classes of men who were sacred. For a person to touch them was to cause pollution. Among the Polynesians, the tabu character of a Chief is violated by the touch of an inferior, although in this case the danger falls upon the inferior. On the other hand, in Efate, the 'sacred man' who comes into contact with Namin (ceremonial uncleanness) destroys his sacredness. In Uganda, before building a temple, the men were given four days in which to purify themselves. On the other hand, the Chief and his belongings are very often regarded as sacred and, therefore, as dangerous to others of an inferior rank. In the Tonga island, anyone who touches a Chief contacted tabu; it was removed by touching the sole of the foot of a superior chief. The sacred quality of the chief in Malaya Peninsula also resided in the Royal Regalia and anyone touching it was invited with serious illness or death.

Contact with strange people was also regarded as a source of Untouchability by the Primitive Man. Among the Bathonga, a tribe in South Africa, it is belived that those who travel outside their own country are peculiarly open to danger from the influence of foreign spirits and in particular from demoniac possession. Strangers are tabu because, worshipping strange gods, they bring strange influence with them. They are, therefore, fumigated or purified in some other way. In the Dieri and neighbouring tribes even a member of the tribe returning home after a journey was treated as a stranger and no notice was taken of him until he sat down.

The danger of entering a new country is as great as that which attaches to those who come from thence. In Australia, when one tribe approaches another, the members carry lighted sticks to purify the air, just as the Spartan kings in making war had sacred fires from the altar carried before them to the frontier.

In the same manner, those entering a house from the outside world were required to perform some ceremony, even if it were only to remove their shoes, which would purify the incomer from the evil with which otherwise he might contaminate those within, while the threshold, door-posts and lintel—important as points of contact with outer world—are smeared with blood or sprinkled with water when any member of household or of the community has become a source of pollution, or a horse-shoe is suspended over the door to keep out evil and bring goodluck.

Of course, the rites and ceremonies connected with birth, death, marriage, etc., do not positively and unequivocally suggest that they were regarded as sources of pollution. But that pollution is one element among many others is indicated by the fact that in every case there is segregation. There is segregation and isolation in birth, initiation, marriage, death and in dealing with the sacred and the strange.

In birth the mother is segregated. At puberty and initiation there is segregation and seclusion for a period. In marriage, from the time of betrothal until the actual ceremony bride and bride-groom do not meet. In menstruation a woman is subjected to segregation. Segregation is most noticeable in the case of death. There is not only isolation of the dead-body but there is isolation of all the relatives of the dead from the rest of the community. This segregation is evidenced by the growth of hair and nail and wearing of old clothes by the relatives of the dead which show that they are not served by

the rest of the society such as the barber, washerman, etc. The period of segregation and the range of segregation differ in the case of death but the fact of segregation is beyond dispute. In the case of defilement of the sacred by the profane or of defilement of the kindred or by intercourse with the non-kindred there is also the element of segregation. The profane must keep away from the sacred. So the kindred must keep away from the non-kindred. It is thus clear that in Primitive Society pollution involved segregation of the polluting agent.

Along with the development of the notion of defilement, Primitive Society had developed certain purificatory media and purificatory ceremonies for dispelling impurity.

Among the agents used for dispelling impurity are water and blood. The sprinkling of water and the sprinkling of blood by the person defiled were enough to make him pure. Among purificatory rites were included changing of clothes, cutting hair, nail, etc., sweat-bath, fire, fumigation, burning of incense and fanning with the bough of a tree.

These were the means of removing impurity. But Primitive Society had another method of getting rid of impurity. This was to transfer it to another person. It was transferred to some one who was already tabu.

In New Zealand, if anyone touched the head of another, the head being a peculiarly 'sacred' part of the body, he became tabu. He purified himself by rubbing his hands on fernroot, which was then eaten by the head of the family in female line. In Tonga, if a man ate tabued food he saved himself from the evil consequences by having the foot of a chief placed on his stomach.

The idea of transmission also appears in the custom of the scapegoat. In Fiji, a tabued person wiped his hands on a pig, which became sacred to the chief, while in Uganda, at the end of the period of mourning for a king a 'scapegoat' along with a cow, a goat, a dog, a fowl and the dust and fire from the king's house was conveyed to the Bunyoro frontier, and there the animals were maimed and left to die. This practice was held to remove all uncleanness from the king and queen.

Such are the facts relating to the notion of pollution as it prevailed in Primitive Society.

Turning to Ancient Society the notion of pollution prevalent therein was not materially different from what was prevalent in Primitive Society. There is difference as to the sources of pollution. There is difference regarding purificatory ceremonies. But barring these differences the pattern of pollution and purification in Primitive and Ancient Society is the same.

Comparing the Egyptian system of pollution with the Primitive system there is no difference except that in Egypt it was practised on an elaborate scale.

Among the Greeks the causes of impurity were bloodshed, the presence of ghost and contact with death, sexual intercourse, childbirth, the evacuation of the body, the eating of certain food such as pea-soup, cheese and garlic, the intrusion of unauthorised persons into holy places, and, in certain circumstances, foul speech and quarrelling. The purificatory means, usually called *kaopoia* by Greeks, were lustral water, sulphur, onions, fumigation and fire, incense, certain boughs and other vegetative growths, pitch, wool, certain stones and amulets, bright things like sunlight and gold, sacrificed animals, especially the pig and of these specially the blood and the skin; finally, certain festivals and festival rites particularly the ritual of cursing and the scapegoat. One unusual method was the cutting of the hair of the polluted person or sacrificial communion with the deity.

A striking feature of the Roman notion of pollution and purification is to be found in the belief of territorial and communal pollution and purification. Parallel to the *lustratio* of the house is the periodical purificatory ritual applied to a country district (Pagi). The *lustratio pagi* consisted in a religious procession right round its boundaries, with sacrifice. There seems to have been in ancient days a similar procession round the walls of the city, called *amburbium*. In historical times special purification of the City was carried out when a calamity called for it, e.g. 'after the early disasters in the Second Punic War. The object of all such expiations was to seek reconciliation with the gods. Lustral ceremony accompanied the foundation of a colony. The *Therminalia* protective of boundaries, and the *Compitalia* of streets in the City were also probably lustral in their origin. Down to the late period, priests called *Luperci* perambulated in the boundaries of the earliest Rome, the settlement on the Palatinate. Earlier there was an annual solemn progress round

the limits of the most ancient territory of the Primitive City. It was led by the Archaic priesthood called the *Arval* brotherhood. The ceremony was called *ambravalia* and it was distinctly piacular. When Roman territory was expanded no corresponding extension of the lustral rite seems ever to have been made. These round-about piacular surveys were common elsewhere, inside as well as outside Italy and particularly in Greece. The solemn words and prayers of the traditional chant, duly gone through without slip of tongue, seem to have had a sort of magical effect. Any error in the pronouncement of these forms would involve a need of reparation, just as in the earliest Roman legal system, the mispronunciation of the established verbal forms would bring loss of the lawsuit.

Other forms of quaint ancient ritual were connected with the piacular conception. The *Salii*, ancient priests of Mars, made a journey at certain times round a number of stations in the City. They also had a 'cleaning of the weapons' and a 'cleaning of the trumpets' which testify to a primitive notion that the efficiency of the army's weapons required purification. The 'washing' (lustrum) with which the census ended was in essence military; for it was connected with the *Comitia Centuriata*, which is merely the army in civil garb. *Lustratio exercitus* was often performed when the army was in the field, to remove superstitious dread which sometimes attacked it at other times, it was merely prophylactic. There was also a lustration of the fleet.

Like all Primitive people the Hebrews also entertained the notion of defilement. The special feature of their notion of defilement was the belief that defilement was also caused by contact with the carcass of unclean animals, by eating a carcass or by contact with creeping things, or by eating creeping things and by contact with animals which are always unclean such as "every beast which divideth the hoof, and is not cloven footed, nor cheweth the cud...whatsoever goeth upon his paws, among all manner of beasts that go on all four". Contact with any unclean person was also defilement to the Hebrews. Two other special features of the Hebrew notion of defilement may be mentioned. The Hebrews believed that defilement might be caused to persons by idolatrous practices or to a land by the sexual impurities of the people.

On the basis of this survey, we can safely conclude that there are no people Primitive or Ancient who did not entertain the notion of pollution.