

CHAPTER IX

CONTEMPT FOR BUDDHISTS AS THE ROOT OF UNTOUCHABILITY

I

THE Census Reports for India published by the Census Commissioner at the interval of every ten years from 1870 onwards contain a wealth of information nowhere else to be found regarding the social and religious life of the people of India. Before the Census of 1910 the Census Commissioner had a column called "Population by Religion". Under this heading the population was shown (1) Muslims, (2) Hindus, (3) Christians, etc. The Census Report for the year 1910 marked a new departure from the prevailing practice. For the first time it divided the Hindus under three separate categories, (i) Hindus, (ii) Animists and Tribal, and (iii) the Depressed Classes or Untouchables. This new classification has been continued ever since.

II

This departure from the practice of the previous Census Commissioners raises three questions. First is what led the Commissioner for the Census of 1910 to introduce this new classification. The second is what was the criteria adopted as a basis for this classification. The third is what are the reasons for the growth of certain practices which justify the division of Hindus into three separate categories mentioned above.

The answer to the first question will be found in the address presented in 1909 by the Muslim Community under leadership of H.H. The Aga Khan to the then Viceroy, Lord Minto, in which they asked for a separate and adequate representation for the Muslim community in the legislature, executive and the public services.

In the address¹ there occurs the following passage :-

“The Mohamedans of India number, according to the census taken in the year 1901 over sixty-two millions or between one-fifth and one-fourth of the total population of His Majesty’s Indian dominions, *and if a reduction be made for the uncivilised portions of the community enumerated under the heads of animist and other minor religions, as well as for those classes who are ordinarily classified as Hindus but properly speaking are not Hindus at all, the proportion of Mohamedans to the Hindu Majority becomes much larger.*² We therefore desire to submit that under any system of representation extended or limited a community in itself more numerous than the entire population of any first class European power except Russia may justly lay claim to adequate recognition as an important factor in the State.

“We venture, indeed, with Your Excellency’s permission to go a step further, and urge that the position accorded to the Mohamedan community in any kind of representation direct or indirect, and in all other ways effecting their status and influence should be commensurate, not merely with their numerical strength but also with their political importance and the value of the contribution which they make to the defence of the empire, and we also hope that Your Excellency will in this connection be pleased to give due consideration to the position which they occupied in India a little more than hundred years ago and of which the traditions have naturally not faded from their minds.”

The portion in italics has a special significance. It was introduced in the address to suggest that in comprising the numerical strength of the Muslims with that of the Hindus the population of the animists, tribals and the Untouchables should be excluded. The reason for this new classification of ‘Hindus’ adopted by the Census Commissioner in 1910 lies in this demand of the Muslim community for separate representation on augmented scale. At any rate this is how the Hindus understood this demand.³

Interesting as it is, the first question as to why the Census Commissioner made this departure in the system of classification is of less importance than the second question. What is important is to know the basis adopted by the Census Commissioner for separating the different classes of Hindus into (1) those who were hundred per cent Hindus and (2) those who were not.

1 For the text of the address see my *Pakistan* p. 431

2 Italics not in the original.

3 This operation came soon after the address given by Muslim community to Lord Minto in 1909 in which they asked for a separate and adequate representation for the Muslim community. The Hindu smelt a rat in it. As the Census Commissioner observed :—

“Incidentally, the enquiry generated a certain amount of heat, because unfortunately it happened to be made at a time when the rival claims of Hindus and Mohammedans to representation on the Legislative Councils were being debated and some of the former feared that it would lead to the exclusion of certain classes from the category of Hindus and would thus react unfavourably on their political importance”. Part I. p. 116.

The basis adopted by the Census Commissioner for separation is to be found in the circular issued by the Census Commissioner in which he laid down certain tests for the purpose¹ of distinguishing these two classes. Among those who were not hundred per cent Hindus were included castes and tribes which :—

- (1) Deny the supremacy of the Brahmins.
- (2) Do not receive the Mantra from a Brahmin or other recognized Hindu Guru.
- (3) Deny the authority of the Vedas.
- (4) Do not worship the Hindu gods.
- (5) Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests.
- (6) Have no Brahmin priests at all.
- (7) Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temples.
- (8) Cause pollution (a) by touch, or (b) within a certain distance.
- (9) Bury their dead.
- (10) Eat beef and do no reverence to the cow.

Out of these ten tests some divide the Hindus from the Animists and the Tribal. The rest divide the Hindus from the Untouchables. Those that divide the Untouchables from the Hindus are (2), (5), (6), (7), and (10). It is with them that we are chiefly concerned.

For the sake of clarity it is better to divide these tests into parts and consider them separately. This Chapter will be devoted only to the consideration of (2), (5), and (6).

The replies received by the Census Commissioner to questions embodied in tests (2), (5) and (6) reveal (1) that the Untouchables do not receive the Mantra from a Brahmin; (2) that the Untouchables are not served by good Brahmin priests at all; and (3) that Untouchables have their own priests reared from themselves. On these facts the Census Commissioners of all Provinces are unanimous.²

Of the three questions the third is the most important. Unfortunately the Census Commissioner did not realize this. For in making his inquiries he failed to go to the root of the matter to find out: Why were the Untouchables not receiving the Mantra from the Brahmin? Why Brahmins did not serve the Untouchables as their family priests? Why do the Untouchables prefer to have their own priests? It is the 'why' of these facts which is more important than the existence of these facts. It is the 'why' of these facts which must be

1. See Census of India (1911). Pan 1. p. 117

2. See Census of 1911 for Assam p.40; for Bengal, Bihar and Orisa p. 282; for CP.p.73;

investigated. For the clue to the origin of Untouchability lies hidden behind it.

Before entering upon this investigation, it must be pointed out that the inquiries by the Census Commissioner were in a sense one-sided. They showed that the Brahmins shunned the Untouchables. They did not bring to light the fact that the Untouchables also shunned the Brahmins. Nonetheless, it is a fact. People are so much accustomed to thinking that the Brahmin is the superior of the Untouchables and the Untouchable accepts himself as his inferior; that this statement that the Untouchables look upon the Brahmin as an impure person is sure to come to them as a matter of great surprise. The fact has however been noted by many writers who have observed and examined the social customs of the Untouchables. To remove any doubt on the point, attention is drawn to the following extracts from their writings.

The fact was noticed by Abbe Dubois who says¹ :

“Even to this day a Pariah is not allowed to pass a Brahmin Street in a village, though nobody can prevent, or prevents, his approaching or passing by a Brahmin’s house in towns. The Pariahs, on their part will under no circumstances, allow a Brahmin to pass through their *paracherries* (collection of Pariah huts) as they firmly believe it will lead to their ruin”.

Mr. Hemingsway, the Editor of the Gazetteer of the Tanjore District says :

“These castes (Parayan and Pallan or Chakkiliyan castes of Tanjore District) strongly object to the entrance of a Brahmin into their quarters believing that harm will result to them therefrom”.²

Speaking of the Holeyas of the Hasan District of Mysore, Captain J.S.F. Mackenzie says:-

“Every village has its Holigiri as the quarters inhabited by the Holiaris, formerly agrestic serfs, is called outside the village boundary hedge. This, I thought was because they were considered as impure race, whose touch carries defilement with it”³

Such is the reason generally given by the Brahmins who refuse to receive anything directly from the hands of a Holiar, and yet the Brahmins consider great luck will wait upon them if they can manage to pass through the Holigiri without being molested. To this Holiaris

for Madras p. 51; for Punjab p. 109; for U.P. p. 121; for Baroda p.55. for Mysore p.53; for Rajputana pp. 94—105; for Travancore p.198

1. Hindu Manners and Customs (3rd Edition) p. 61 f.n.

2. Gazetteer of Tanjore District (1906) p. 80.

3. Indian Antiquary 1873 11.65.

have a strong objection, and, should a Brahmin attempt to enter their quarters, they turn out in a body and slipper him, in former times, it is said, to death. Members of the other castes may come as far as the door, but they must not enter the house, for that would bring the Holiar bad luck. If, by chance, a person happens to get in, the owner takes care to tear the intruder's cloth, tie up some salt in one corner of it, and turn him out. This is supposed to neutralise all the good luck which might have accrued to the trespasser, and avert any evil which ought to have befallen the owner of the house.

What is the explanation of this strange phenomenon? The explanation must of course fit in with the situation as it stood at the start, *i.e.* when the Untouchables were not Untouchables but were only Broken Men. We must ask why the Brahmins refused to officiate at the religious ceremonies of the Broken Men? Is it the case that the Brahmins refused to officiate? Or is it that the Broken Men refused to invite them? Why did the Brahmin regard Broken Men as impure? Why did the Broken Men regard the Brahmins as impure? What is the basis of this antipathy?

This antipathy can be explained on one hypothesis. It is that the Broken Men were Buddhists. As such they did not revere the Brahmins, did not employ them as their priests and regarded them as impure. The Brahmin on the other hand disliked the Broken Men because they were Buddhists and preached against them contempt and hatred with the result that the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables.

We have no direct evidence that the Broken Men were Buddhists. No evidence is as a matter of fact necessary when the majority of Hindus were Buddhists. We may take it that they were.

That there existed hatred and abhorrence against the Buddhists in the mind of the Hindus and that this feeling was created by the Brahmins is not without support.

Nilkant in his *Prayaschit Mayukha*¹ quotes a verse from Manu which says :—

“If a person touches a Buddhist or a flower of Pachupat, Lokayala, Nastika and Mahapataki, he shall purify himself by a bath.”

The same doctrine is preached by Apararka in his *Smriti*.² Vradha Harit goes further and declares entry into the Buddhist Temple as sin requiring a purificatory bath for removing the impurity.

1 Edited by Gharpure, p.95.

2 *Smriti Sammuchaya* I. p. 118.

How widespread had become this spirit of hatred and contempt against the followers of Buddha can be observed from the scenes depicted in Sanskrit dramas. The most striking illustration of this attitude towards the Buddhists is to be found in the *Mricchakatika*. In Act VII of that Drama the hero Charudatta and his friend Maitreya are shown waiting for Vasantasena in the park outside the city. She fails to turn up and Charudatta decides to leave the park. As they are leaving, they see the Buddhist monk by name Samvahaka. On seeing him, Charudatta says :-

“Friend Maitreya, I am anxious to meet Vasantsena ...

Come, let us go. (After walking a little) Ah ! here’s an inauspicious sight, a Buddhist monk coming towards us. (After a little reflection) well, let him come this way, we shall follow this other path. (Exit.)

In Act VIII, the monk is in the Park of Sakara, the King’s brother-in-law, washing his clothes in a pool. Sakara accompanied by Vita, turns up and threatens to kill the monk. The following conversation between them is revealing :

“Sakara- Stay, you wicked monk.

Monk- Ah! Here’s the king’s brother-in-law! Because some monk has offended him, he now beats up any monk he happens to meet.

Sakara- Stay, I will now break your head as one breaks a radish in a tavern. (*Beats him*).

Vita- Friend, it is not proper to beat a monk who has put on the saffron-robcs, being disgusted with the world.

Monk- (*Welcomes*) Be pleased, lay brother.

Sakara- Friend, see. He is abusing me.

Vita- What does he say?

Sakara- He calls me lay brother (*upasaka*). Am I a barber?

Vita- Oh! He is really praising you as a devotee of the Buddha.

Sakara- Why has he come here?

Monk- To wash these clothes.

Sakara- Ah! you wicked monk. Even I myself do not bathe in this pool; I shall kill you with one stroke.”

After a lot of beating, the monk is allowed to go. Here is a Buddhist Monk in the midst of the Hindu crowd. He is shunned and avoided. The feeling of disgust against him is so great that the people even shun the road the monk is travelling. The feeling of repulsion is so intense that the entry of the Buddhist was enough to cause the exit of the Hindus. The Buddhist monk is on a par with the Brahmin. A Brahmin is immune from death-penalty. He is even free from corporal punishment But the Buddhist monk is beaten and assaulted

without remorse, without compunction as though there was nothing wrong in it.

If we accept that the Broken Men were the followers of Buddhism and did not care to return to Brahmanism when it became triumphant over Buddhism as easily as other did, we have an explanation for both the questions. It explains why the Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priest and do not even allow them to enter into their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism. On this reasoning it is possible to conclude that one of the roots of untouchability lies in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhist.

Can the hatred between Buddhism and Brahmanism be taken to be the sole cause why Broken Men became Untouchables? Obviously, it cannot be. The hatred and contempt preached by the Brahmins was directed against Buddhists in general and not against the Broken Men in particular. Since untouchability stuck to Broken Men only, it is obvious that there was some additional circumstance which has played its part in fastening untouchability upon the Broken Men. What that circumstance could have been? We must next direct our effort in the direction of ascertaining it.

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