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MR. GANDHI AND THE EMANCIPATION OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

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THE EMANCIPATION OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

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Mr. GANDHI
AND THE
EMANCIPATION
OF THE
UNTOUCHABLES

By

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PREFACE

In response to the invitation of the Chairman of the Indian section of the Institute of Pacific Relations, I wrote in August last year a Paper on the Problem of the Untouchables of India for the Session of the Conference which was due to be held on December 1942 at Mont' Trambulant in Quebec in Canada. The Paper is printed in the proceedings of the Conference. Ever since it became known that I had written such a Paper, the leaders of the Untouchables and Americans interested in their problem have been pressing me to issue it separately in the form of a book and make it available to the general public. It was not possible to refuse the demand. At the same time I could not without breach of etiquette publish the paper until the proceedings of the Conference were made public. I am now told by the Secretary of the Pacific Relations Conference that the proceedings have been made public and there can be no objection to the publication of my Paper if I desired it. This will explain why the Paper is published nearly 10 months after it was written.

Except for a few verbal alterations the Paper is printed as it was presented to the Conference. The Paper will speak for itself. There is only one thing I would like to add. It is generally agreed among the thoughtful part of humanity that there are three problems which the Peace Conference is expected to tackle. They are (1) Imperialism, (2) Racialism, (3) Anti-semitism and (4) Free Traffic in that merchandise of death popularly called munitions. There is no doubt these are the plague glands in which nation's cruelty to nation and man's inhumanity to man have their origin. There is no doubt that these problems must be tackled if a new and a better world is to emerge from the ashes of this terrible and devastating war. What my fear is that the problem of the Untouchables may be forgotten as it has been so far. That would indeed be a calamity. For the ills which the Untouchables are sufferings if they are not as much advertised as those of the Jews, are not less real. Nor are the means and the methods of suppression

used by the Hindus against the Untouchables less effective because they are less bloody than the ways which the Nazis have adopted against the Jews. The Anti-semitism of the Nazis against the Jews is in no way different in ideology and in effect from the Sanatanism of the Hindus against the Untouchables.

The world owes a duty to the Untouchables as it does to all suppressed people to break their shackles and to set them free. I accepted the invitation to write this Paper because I felt that it was the best opportunity to draw the attention of the world to this problem in comparison to which the problem of the Slaves, the Negroes and the Jews is nothing. I hope the publication of this Paper will serve as a notice to the Peace Conference that this problem will be on the Board of Causes which it will have to hear and decide and also to the Hindus that they will have to answer for it before the bar of the world.

22, Prithviraj Road
New Delhi
1st September 1943.

B. R. AMBEDKAR

CHAPTER I

TOTAL POPULATION OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

THE Decennial Census in India was at one time a very simple and innocent operation which interested only the Malthusians. None else took interest in it. Today the Census is a matter of a first rate concern to everybody. Not only the professional politician but the general public in India regards it as a matter of very grave concern. This is so because Politics in India has become a matter of numbers. It is numbers which give political advantage, to one community over another which does not happen anywhere else in the world. The result is that the Census in India is deliberately cooked for securing political advantages which numbers give. In this cooking of the Census the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs have played their part as the chief chefs of the kitchen. The Untouchables and the Christians, who are also interested in their numbers, have no hand in the cooking of the Census, for the simple reason that they have no place in the administrative services of the country which deal with the operations of the Census. On the other hand the Untouchables are the people who are quartered, cooked and served by the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs at every Decennial Census. This has happened particularly in the last Census of 1940. The Untouchables of certain parts of the Punjab were subjected to systematic tyranny and oppression by the Sikhs. The object was to compel them to declare in the Census returns that they are Sikhs even though they are not. This reduced the number of the Untouchables and swelled the number of the Sikhs. The Hindus on their part carried on a campaign that nobody should declare his or her caste in the Census return. A particular appeal was made to the Untouchables. It was suggested to them that it is the name of the Caste that proclaims to the world that they are Untouchables and if they did not declare their caste name but merely said that they were Hindus, they would be treated just like

other Hindus and nobody would know that they were really Untouchables. The Untouchables fell a victim to this stratagem and decided not to declare themselves as Untouchables in the Census return but to call themselves merely as Hindus. The result was obvious. It reduced the number of Untouchables, and swelled the ranks of the Hindus. To what extent the cooking of the Census has taken place it is difficult to say. But there can be no doubt that the degree to which cooking was resorted to was considerable. The Census has been cooked all over. But it is the Untouchables who have suffered most from the cooking of the Census. That being so, the Census figure regarding the total population of the Untouchables in British India cannot be accepted as giving a correct total. But one cannot be far wrong if it was said that the present number of the Untouchables in British India is round about 60 million people.

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CHAPTER II

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

MOST parts of the world have had their type of what Ward calls the lowly. The Romans had their slaves, the Spartans their helots, the British their villeins, the Americans their Negroes and the Germans their Jews. So the Hindus have their Untouchables. But none of these can be said to have been called upon to face a fate which is worse than the fate which pursues the Untouchables. Slavery, serfdom, villeinage have all vanished. But Untouchability still exists and bids fair to last as long as Hinduism will last. The Untouchable is worse off than a Jew. The sufferings of the Jew are of his own creation. Not so are the sufferings of the Untouchables. They are the result of a cold calculating Hinduism which is not less sure in its effect in producing misery than brute force is. The Jew is despised but is not denied opportunities to grow. The Untouchable is not merely despised but is denied all opportunities to rise. Yet nobody seems to take any notice of the Untouchables—some 60 millions of souls—much less espouse their cause.

If there is any cause of freedom in this Indian turmoil for independence it is the cause of the Untouchables. The cause of the Hindus and the cause of the Mussalmans is not the cause of freedom. Theirs is a Struggle for power as distinguished from freedom. Consequently it has always been a matter of surprise to me that no party and no organisation devoted to the cause of freedom has so far interested itself in the Untouchables. There is the American Weekly called "The Nation". There is the British Weekly called "Statesman". Both are powerful. Both are friends of India's freedom. I would mention the American Labour and British Labour among organized bodies among the supporters of India's freedom. So far as I know none of these have ever championed the cause of the Untouchables. Indeed what they have done is what no lover of freedom would do. They have just identified themselves with the Hindu body calling itself the Indian National Congress.