Issue of Untouchability; 1928 (Originally in Punjabi.)

At the Congress session in Kakinada in 1923, Mohammed Ali, in a presidential address suggested that those who were referred to as 'untouchables' (the scheduled castes), should be divided into missionary institutions of Hindus and Muslims. The rich from both communities were prepared to donate money to fortify this caste division, and these 'friends' of the untouchables tried to divide them on the basis of religion. Due to all this, untouchability was a hotly-debated issue and Bhagat Singh, too, wrote an essay 'Achhoot da Sawaal (_e Issue of Untouchability)' during this period. In this essay, he makes an assessment of the power and the limits of the working class and gives concrete suggestions for the progress of the community. The essay was published in Kirti in June 1928 under the pen name of 'Vidrohi'.

In no other country except ours does such a bad state of affairs prevail. Strange and peculiar questions keep arising here. One crucial question is that of the untouchables. The problem is that in a population of 30 crore, there are 6 crore people who are called 'untouchable', i.e., their mere touch will pollute the dharma of the rest. Their entry into temples would displease the Gods. Drawing water from wells would make the water of these wells impure. These questions are being raised in the twentieth century and one is ashamed even to listen to these questions. Our country is very spiritual, yet we hesitate to give the status of a human being to a person, while the West, referred to as completely materialistic, and has been raising the banner of oneness for centuries. They declared equality as a principle in the American and French Revolutions. Today Russia has resolved to eradicate every kind of discrimination, fulfilling the ideals of first May. We are forever bothered about the being of soul and God, and involved in a strident debate about whether we should grant the janeyu, the sacred thread, to the untouchable or do they have the right to study the Vedas and the scriptures or not? We complain that we are not treated well in other countries. The English government does not consider us at par with the English, but do we have the right to make this complaint?

A Muslim gentleman from Sindh, Shri Noor Mohammed, a member of the Bombay Council has spoken at length about this in 1926:
"If the Hindu Society refuses to allow other human beings, fellow creatures so that, to attend public schools, and if… the president of local board representing so many lakhs of people in this house refuses to

allow his fellows and brothers the elementary human right of having water to drink, what right have they to ask for more rights from the bureaucracy? Before we accuse people coming from other lands, we should see how we ourselves behave toward our own people…. How can we ask for greater political rights when (we ourselves) deny elementary rights to human beings?" (Originally in English.)

What he says is absolutely right, but because it has been said by a Muslim, the Hindus will say, 'Look! He wants to convert the untouchables to Islam and assimilate them in their fold.'

If you consider them worse than beasts, then certainly they will embrace other religions where they will be given better rights and where they will be treated like human beings. Then to lament, 'Just see, the Christians and the Muslims are harming the Hindu community!' would be futile.

How true is this statement but everyone is enraged at it. Exactly this anxiety gripped the Hindus as well. Even the Sanatan Dharam scholars have begun to ponder over this problem. At times, those who are known as great revolutionaries joined in. In the conference of the Hindu Mahasabha in Patna, which was held under the aegis of Lala Lajpat Rai as President – an old supporter of the untouchables – a sharp debate began. There were lot of clashes. The problem was whether the untouchables had the right or not to perform yagyopavit, the Hindu ceremony of wearing the sacred thread. And did they have the right to study the scriptures and the Vedas or not? Great, well-known social reformers were incensed but Lalaji made everyone concur; and redeemed Hindu dharma by accepting both these things. Otherwise, just think how shameful it would have been. A dog can sit in our lap. He can roam freely in our kitchen but we become polluted if a human being touches us! Now a great social reformer like Pandit Malviyaji, a great champion of the untouchables, and what not, can be garlanded by a scavenger but considers himself to be impure unless he has a bath with his clothes on afterwards. What a great swindle! Make a temple to worship the God who loves everyone; but if an untouchable enters it, it becomes defiled. God becomes angry. If this is the state of affairs at home, is it seemly to fight for equal rights abroad? Then our behaviour

reveals only an extremity of ingratitude. We shun the very people who do the lowliest of work to provide us with facilities. We can worship beasts but cannot make a human being sit next to us
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Today there is a great deal of hue and cry over this issue. Those ideas are being especially discussed these days. The communal feelings may or may not have done any good to enhance freedom struggle in the country, but at least it has given one advantage. Everyone is anxious to increase the numbers of their community to ask for better rights. The Muslims made a little extra effort. They converted the untouchables to Islam and gave them equal rights. This hurt the pride of the Hindus. Hostility grew, which even led to riots. Gradually even the Sikhs thought that they should not be lea behind. They also began to baptize them. Hindus and Sikhs fought over the taking off of the janeyu and the cutting of hair. Now all three communities are drawing the untouchables into their fold. So there is a lot of hue and cry. On the other side, the Christians are quietly enhancing their status. Anyway, all this activity is erasing this slur on the country.

And when the untouchables saw how everyone was fighting over them and thought of them as fodder, they reflected on why they should not unite by themselves. Whether the English had any hand in this idea or not is not clear, but it is certain that there was considerable use of government machinery in the propagation of this idea. Organizations like Adi Dharma Mandal are a result of this idea. Now another question that arises is what the correct solution to this problem should be. The answer to this is very simple. First of all, it should be decided that all human beings are equal and no one is different either at birth or through division of labour. That is, just because a man has been born in the house of a poor sweeper, he will end up spending the rest of his life cleaning the toilets of others and have no right in the world to progress – all this is rubbish. This is the cruel manner in which our Aryan ancestors treated them, stigmatizing them as low-caste and making them do lowly tasks. Along with this there was an anxiety, lest they revolt. Then the philosophy of reincarnation was propagated to show that it was the fruit of their sins in past lives. So what can be done? Spend your days quietly. By preaching patience to them in this manner, they managed to

silence the unprivileged for a long time. But they committed a grave sin. They erased humanity from human beings. A lot of oppression and cruelty was inflicted. Now is the time to atone for our sins.

Another problem arose along with this. Abhorrence for essential tasks arose in the minds of the people. We spurned the weaver. Today even weavers are considered untouchables. In the region of the United Provinces, even pallbearers are considered untouchable. This has led to a lot of mess being created. This is proving to be detrimental to the process of progress.

Keeping these communities in mind, we need to neither call them untouchable nor think of them as being so. And the problem would be solved! The strategy that Naujawan Bharat Sabha and the youth conference has adopted is quite a good one. We should ask for forgiveness of those who have been called untouchables and consider them to be equal human beings like us, without being given amrit, without reciting the kalma or being purified, and count them among ourselves, to take water from their hands; that is the right course. And to fight amongst ourselves and not to give any rights to them is not the correct approach.

When the propagation of labour-rights began in villages, the government officials tried to mislead the Jat peasants by saying that pampering the low castes would affect their work adversely. And that was enough! The Jat peasants were incensed. Rey must remember that their condition cannot improve till the time they want to keep these poor people by terming them as low born and mean, under their thumb. It is often said that they are not clean. The answer is clear – they are poor. Treat poverty. The poor in the high castes also don't stay clean. Even the pretext of doing dirty work cannot be taken because mothers clean the shit of children and don't become untouchable or of low caste.

But this cannot be accomplished till the time the untouchables organize themselves. We consider it to be a very positive movement that they are organizing themselves voluntarily or because they are equal in numbers to the Muslims and thus asking for equal rights. Either end this problem

of communal discrimination or give them their separate rights. The duty of the Councils and the Assemblies is to ensure complete freedom to these people to use schools and colleges, wells and roads. Not just by lip-service, but actually take them to the wells. Get their children admitted to schools. But in the Legislature where the Bill against child marriage and religion creates such public outrage, how can they muster the courage to assimilate the untouchables within the community?

So we say that they must have their representatives. They must demand more rights for themselves. We clearly say – Rise, brothers who are called Untouchables and are the real servants of the people! Rise, look at your history. You were the real strength of Guru Gobind Singh's army. It was due to you that Shivaji was able to do so much; due to you that his name lives on today. Your sacrifices are etched in golden letters. You are doing us a great favour by rendering your services daily, adding to the comfort of the life of the public and making life possible, and we people do not understand that.

According to the Land Alienation Act, you cannot even buy land by saving money. You are so oppressed that American Miss Mayo describes you as *less than man*. Rise, recognize your strength. Get organised. In reality, without making your own efforts, you will get nothing. Those who would be free must themselves strike the blow. (Originally in English). Those who want freedom must fight for independence. Gradually human beings have developed a habit of wanting greater rights for themselves, but to keep those under them, to remain suppressed. So those who understand the language of punches don't understand words. That is, organise and stand on your own feet and challenge the entire world. Then you will see that no one will dare to deny you your rights. Don't become fodder for others. Don't look at others for help. But beware, don't be trapped by bureaucracy. They don't want to help you at all but to make you their pawns. This capitalist bureaucracy is the real reason behind your slavery and poverty. So make sure that you never join them. Be wary of their wiles. Everything will become all right then.

You are the real working class. Workers unite. You have nothing to lose except chains. Rise and rebel against the present system. Gradual, slow reforms will lead you nowhere.

Create a revolution with a social agitation and tighten your belts for a political and economic revolution. You are the foundation of the country; the real strength. Awake the sleeping lions! Rise and revolt!