

A Mohammedan visitor to India interprets Gandhi's last two fasts as attempts to keep the Hindus and the Untouchables united against the Moslems.

The Jingo MAHATMA

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'I WAS born into a social class that always oppressed the so-called "Untouchables." My fast will accomplish what I could not accomplish while I took food and drink.' With these words Gandhi vindicated his intention of fasting for twenty-one days during the month of May in behalf of the Untouchables. The whole theme of the guilt of the father, which can be expiated only through the self-imposed suffering of a late-born son, is revealed in this decision of the Indian leader. The mystical motive of redemption here takes precedence over all practical considerations. And that may be the reason why Gandhi's decision has caused confusion and anxiety all over India, but has been rightly understood nowhere, quite unlike his fast last September, which evoked incredible enthusiasm among the Hindu masses of India.

The problem of 'untouchability' is

as old as Indian culture itself. When the Aryan conquerors poured through the northwest mountain passes into the plains of India fifteen hundred years before the Christian era, they confronted a native population belonging to a different race and far superior in numbers, the Dravidians. Although the Aryans soon succeeded in conquering all of India, the danger remained that the thin layer of conquerors would be gradually engulfed by the Dravidian ocean. In order, therefore, to preserve their racial purity, the Indo-Aryans created the caste system, behind whose strict divisions they thought to entrench themselves for all eternity. The higher castes contained the conquerors, but the lower ones were reserved for the native Dravidian population. In the course of thousands of years, what was originally a social system became a religious one. Out of the three or four

castes of early times grew a structure with countless divisions and subdivisions that forced the life of India into a rigid form such as is to be found among no other people.

It was not enough that the Indians were divided into a multiplicity of groups and units strictly cut off from each other. In addition to that, numerous elements of the population were ejected from the entire social structure for innumerable reasons—such, for instance, as the pursuit of certain despised callings or the overstepping of caste laws—and were compelled to live as ‘the Casteless’ or ‘Untouchables,’ far beneath the level of even the lowest caste. They were universally despised and permanently excluded from all the higher possibilities of life. The fundamental principle of Hindu belief, the doctrine of transmigration of souls, cloaked this cruelest of all social customs with a religious mantle. For, if it is not possible for an Untouchable ever to better his lot, he can console himself with the thought that his soul may be reborn into a higher caste in a later reincarnation.

The oldest religious writings of India, the Vedas and Upanishads, do not mention untouchability, for the Aryans brought this literature with them from their homes in Central Asia, where they did not need to isolate themselves from a native population of a different race. This fact is to-day aiding the Indian opponents of untouchability, who strip this monstrous social injustice of all its pseudo-religious habiliments and reveal the origin of untouchability as the attempt of a ruling class to keep the conquered population at a distance forever and to destroy any

desire that the oppressed may have to rise in the world. Such a work of reform is naturally not simple, considering the predominantly conservative mental attitude of the Hindus. Enough time has elapsed since the principle of untouchability was introduced for post-Vedic interpretations to take root in Hindu theology.

Moreover, it is no longer possible to interpret the Vedas coherently. The chief difficulty lies in linguistic problems. The medium of the Vedas, as of all the later authoritative writings of Hinduism, is Sanskrit, the language of the Aryan conquerors of India at the time of the conquest. But recent researches have brought forward important arguments indicating that the language of the true Vedas comes from a pre-Sanskrit era, before the Aryan dialects of Central Asia had been consolidated into classic Sanskrit. Even the smallest traces of those dialects have to-day disappeared, and the arbitrary interpretation of the ancient speech forms of the Vedas along the lines of traditional Sanskrit must in many cases disorder and efface the original concepts. Thus it was possible in the course of fifteen hundred years for a flood of commentary to arise which retained very little of the spirit of the true Vedas, but which constituted the sole approach for the laity to the otherwise lost writings. Consecrated through time, these interpretations came to be considered as orthodox. It is against this kind of orthodoxy that Gandhi is fighting.

II

The opposition of orthodox Hindus can easily be understood. Untouchability is not limited to the lower,

casteless groups; every caste is untouchable for higher castes. Marriage between the castes is impossible; indeed, an orthodox Hindu cannot even eat at the same table with a member of a caste lower than his own. In short, the principle of untouchability—the fear of becoming defiled through contact with a human being of a lower caste and the hope of being ‘better born’ in a later reincarnation—represents the basis of the Hindu conception of man and society. The disappearance of this psychological basis must sooner or later shatter and dissolve the entire caste system. The defenders of the orthodox conception are therefore justified when they tax Gandhi with attempting to destroy society, and, by the same token, Gandhi is not very consistent when he fights to maintain the traditional caste system but opposes untouchability.

In any event, the untouchability of the Casteless (‘Pariahs,’ as they are called in Europe, according to the custom of southern India) is such a ghastly, black injustice that the progress of India as a nation can begin only when it is abolished. In southern India, where the Brahman caste has up to now enjoyed uncontested social superiority, the condition of the Untouchables mocks description. Not only does bodily contact with them defile a caste Hindu; the very shadow of a Pariah can contaminate a Brahman.

But even in other parts of India, where the Untouchables are not treated so completely like dirty animals, they are strictly forbidden to enter temples, to use public wells and buildings, to attend public schools, and so on. Actually, the Untouch-

ables do not stand, as is often assumed, on the lowest stage of the Hindu social structure but are quite outside that structure. They have not even a religion in common with the Hindus, for the temples are closed to them. When the Untouchables of India began in the last decade to understand this astounding condition and to draw practical conclusions from it, the problem instantly assumed prime political significance. For the leaders of the Untouchables began to ask, ‘Is there, after all, any reason why we should consider ourselves part of Hindu society?’

When one realizes that the Untouchables in India are estimated at about fifty millions, one understands what a political loss the Hindus would suffer if these millions were deliberately to place themselves outside Hindu society. Apart from British rule, the problems of modern India can be reduced to a single formula—the antagonism between the Hindus and the Mohammedans. The fact that the country contains two powerful groups which, for psychological and historical reasons, are divided into hostile camps, is decisive.

The Mohammedans are in a minority, about 75 millions in a total population of 350 millions. But they have behind them the living tradition of a rule that lasted more than 700 years, beginning with the campaigns of that mighty sultan, Mahmud of Ghazni, and terminating as the result of British policy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During all these centuries of power and fame, the Mohammedans were in a minority. Indeed, their ratio to the rest of the population used to be even more unfavorable than it is to-day. *Quod erat*

demonstrandum—namely, that the vital power of the Mohammedans is many times superior to that of the Hindus. Of course, only a small fraction of the Mohammedan population of India is composed of the descendants of the Afghan, Turko-Tatar, and Arabian conquerors. Nine out of every ten are descendants of Indians who were converted to Islam. But here again history has proved that an individual's attitude toward life and his mode of living are of greater importance than his racial origin. For these Indian Mohammedans are even today so far superior to their cousins of the Hindu camp in virility, courage, and martial propensities that the fears which the Hindus feel of a possible repetition of Mohammedan rule seem justified.

Since the awakening of Indian nationalism in recent years, this fear has expressed itself in the ever more passionate claim that the Mohammedans are really foreigners in India and that the land belongs to the Hindus. Naturally, most responsible Hindu leaders do not share such views. But it may safely be assumed that the innate hostility of the Hindus to Islam as a religious and social principle is growing rapidly. As a result, the Mohammedans feel a strong and growing distrust of so-called Indian nationalism.

Such, in rough outline, is the relation of the two sections of the population to each other. At the present moment it is important to realize that if the fifty million Untouchables were to set themselves in political opposition to the Hindus the ratio of the Mohammedans to the Hindus would be radically altered. The present ratio of one to three and a half would be-

come a ratio of one to three. Nor does the latter ratio include the fifty million Untouchables, who might under certain circumstances be provoked by the memories of thousands of years of oppression to side with the Mohammedans.

Thus the foreign observer gradually begins to understand that Gandhi's sudden devotion to the reform of untouchability may not spring wholly from a need to right past wrongs but from a desire to save Hindu society and to retain for it the support of a numerically important factor. For it has long been an open secret in India that Gandhi is not the national leader he was once believed to be, but that he is the clear-sighted protagonist of a certain religious and social group among the Indians, namely, the Hindus.

III

The connection between the Untouchables and the caste Hindus during thousands of years resembles the relation of a dog to its master—and not a pet dog but a despised and mistreated cur. Matters continued thus as long as the Untouchables remained in a fatalistic stupor and accepted their destiny as inevitable. But a new era of stimulating foreign influences and education awoke the Untouchables. They developed able leaders who succeeded, through a hard, upstream struggle against social prejudice, in acquiring an education and therewith the means to revolt against the frightful social injustice of untouchability. They are saying to the caste Hindus, 'If you want us to reckon ourselves as part of you, abolish untouchability, open up the

temples to us, and give us free access to public wells, schools, and social institutions; in a word, treat us as human beings.' That is certainly not an unfair request, but the mental constitution of the overwhelming majority of Hindus makes a practical abolition of untouchability in the near future more than doubtful. Even though many Hindus who are nationally conscious have made this an essential point of their political programme, the attitude of the masses remains negative.

It is therefore not surprising that the Untouchables demand certain guarantees before identifying themselves unequivocally with the Hindus. This is particularly true of the so-called 'communal' question. For a number of years British policy has displayed a tendency to grant India, bit by bit, an ever-increasing degree of autonomy. Whether the final aim is to be the complete independence of India, as the Indian extremists demand, or only dominion status like that of Canada or Australia, as responsible British statesmen aver, is not the question here. Unquestionably, the Indians will soon begin to exercise a greater influence on the destiny of their land. A new constitution on a parliamentary basis is being prepared and the electoral question is being hotly discussed.

There is no question yet of a single election for the different social and religious groups of India, the 'communes,' for that would mean that the minorities, headed by the Mohammedans, would have no chance of gaining a number of parliamentary representatives corresponding to their proportion of the population; they would be at the mercy of the major

ity. Hence the minorities demand a separate organization for each commune (the Indian communes are exclusively religious, social, and national units—for example, the Mohammedans, the Hindus, the Anglo-Indians, and so on), the idea being to reserve a certain portion of the seats in the national assembly for each group. The electoral struggle would then take place exclusively within the communes, not between them, and each group would be able to send its best and most trustworthy candidates to parliament. In a certain sense this system is related to the European idea of the class parliament, except that in India religious groups take the place of classes.

At first the Untouchables were ready to vote with the Hindu group in the elections provided the Hindus would reserve them a fixed percentage of their parliamentary seats. This demand was thoroughly justified. For since the Untouchables are far behind the caste Hindus in respect to educational and economic status, the danger existed that they would be pushed completely into the background in every electoral district. The experience of thousands of years of oppression has taught the Untouchables not to rely on the altruism of the caste Hindus. Strangely enough, Gandhi, who up to that time had almost always been in favor of the Untouchables, would not accede to their just demand. The Untouchables then did the only thing possible. They openly demanded that they be recognized as a commune separate from the Hindus and claimed the same rights that had been granted to the other minorities.

But, despite lengthy negotiations,

the Indian communes could not agree as to the number of seats to be assigned to the separate groups in parliament. Some demanded too much, others offered too little. The British Government had long before declared that it would have to decide this question by arbitration if the parties could not come to a decision among themselves. And when, in the late summer, the intercommunal negotiations bore no fruit, the British Prime Minister issued a decree in which he assigned seats in the future national assembly to each of the communes on a percentage basis. At the same time, the Government let it be known that it stood ready to revise this division in case the parties of India should finally agree on a new formula. The Untouchables were treated as a separate commune in this decree and were formally put on an equal footing with the other minorities. A breath of relief rose from the downtrodden masses and at the same time a cry of frantic indignation went up from the caste Hindus, whose commune was reduced by fifty millions.

IV

At this time Gandhi was in prison as a result of his campaign of civil disobedience and had abstained from all political activity for a number of months. But when MacDonald's decree was published he did something unexpected. He announced that he would fast until he died if the Untouchables continued to consider themselves a commune apart from the Hindus. This declaration on the part of the man who had stood as a champion of the rights of these mistreated classes was paradoxical.

But Gandhi could always claim that the welfare and salvation of the Untouchables could be achieved only within the framework of the Hindu social structure. And he hastened to add that he was now ready to reserve a given number of seats for the Untouchables if they would return to the bosom of the Hindu commune. He had apparently quite forgotten that it was his original refusal of this point which had compelled the leader of the Untouchables to announce the secession of his own group from the Hindus. But we must do Gandhi justice. His appeal was not only to the Untouchables, to profess themselves Hindus again, but also to the caste Hindus, to abolish untouchability as such once and for all and to make restitution for the social injustice of past times.

The extraordinary effect of this declaration showed how Gandhi is venerated by most Hindus. The thought that their leader might really fast until he died—and Gandhi left no doubt in any one's mind that he meant what he said—whipped all the political groups and sects among the Hindus into immediate action. Leaders from all parts of India hastened to confer. Public opinion worked in Gandhi's favor. Temples were opened to the Untouchables for the first time in India's history. Scenes of fraternization took place everywhere. High-caste Hindus organized banquets for the Pariahs. India was intoxicated. The leaders of the Untouchables were forced by the pressure of public opinion to give way, although in their heart of hearts they perhaps did not place much trust in this frenzy of enthusiasm of the Hindus.

After a few days of negotiation within the prison walls behind which

Gandhi sat, a pact was signed in Poona with the representatives of the Untouchables, who agreed to give up their public opposition as a non-Hindu minority and to vote as Hindus in future elections. In return they received the reservation of seats that they had demanded and the assurance that the Hindus would do all they could to abolish untouchability, at least in a practical sense,—that is to say, in respect to the use of temples and other public institutions,—in as short a time as possible. This pact was telegraphed to the British Government, which, according to its promise, canceled the part of the decree in question and assigned the seats that had been granted to the Untouchables to the Hindu commune. Thereupon Gandhi broke his fast, since he had achieved his aim. The unity of Hinduism was saved.

As many of the Untouchable leaders had feared, the enthusiasm of the Hindus proved short-lived. To be sure, the reservation of seats in future parliaments remained a fact. Not so, however, the other side of the Poona pact, namely the practical abolition of untouchability. A basic change of this sort cannot be brought about in the twinkling of an eye. The Untouch-

ables will have to resign themselves to being treated like dirty animals by the caste Hindus for a long time to come, and the friendly treatment of their leaders in the Hindu conferences can do little to alter this fact. It may be that when they realize this a deeper, more conscious bitterness will grow in the hearts of these despised masses, and they will understand that the Untouchables can never have a place in the structure of the Hindu caste system and the Hindu philosophy.

Once again Gandhi has fasted twenty-one days without a break, but this time his fast was not founded on practical considerations as it was last September, when he was not only persuading the Untouchables to remain in the Hindu 'family' but was also trying to compel the orthodox Hindus to abolish untouchability. The second half of his attempt seems now to have failed. Gandhi said, 'I was born into a social class that always oppressed the so-called "Untouchables." My fast will accomplish what I could not accomplish while I took food and drink.' It seems, however, more likely that the Untouchables will again be compelled to wait patiently for the bells of the future to ring out their redemption.

'What is happening in the world?' asks the foremost critic in Spain and turns to the field of modern art as the most accurate representation of our times.

WHAT Goes On?

By JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

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THE question, 'What is happening in the world?,' is one that we ask ourselves, and those who do not ask it discover that it is repeated, even though they refuse to hear it, by a strange personage that they carry within themselves and that speaks with a small, monotonous, restless, impertinent voice. This is no metaphor but a fact, something that exists. It is undeniable—and contemporary philosophy has not dared deny it—that man bears within him a voice which comes to him from a mysterious zone of being, from the beyond, as it has been graphically described.

There have been periods that recognized the authenticity of these voices as giving expression to a world that belongs to one's self alone—an inner world or life that orders and compels man to be true to his ultimate destiny. The voice of conscience is of the same order. One could speak at length of

these voices from within, of this spiritual ventriloquism that we do not hear with our ears but that rises from the depths of our being. This, however, is not my subject; let us put it aside. I wish only to make this much plain: that something in us, yet something beyond us, is continually asking, 'What is happening in the world?' It is not a trivial matter of simple curiosity, because curiosity is something that arises from the periphery of our world of consciousness. One is curious only about things that do not matter.

Let us look at this question from another angle. Obviously, we should not have asked ourselves anything if we had not somehow heard that strange things seemed to be occurring. This seems paradoxical, for instead of answering the question, 'What is happening?,' we ask ourselves, 'What is it that is happening?' It is like a noise heard from the street when we