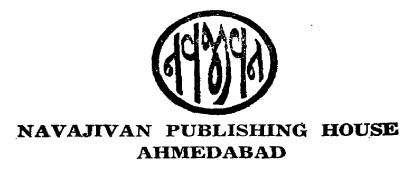
## UNTOUCHABILITY

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Edited by Bharatan Kumarappa



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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

This has been prepared in response to an urgent request for a pamphlet which will give the gist of Gandhiji's views on untouchability, and which can be used widely for creating public opinion in the country against untouchability. A companion pamphlet entitled For Workers against Untouchability is also being issued in order to give very briefly Gandhiji's suggestions as to how work for the removal of untouchability should be carried on. For a fuller and more comprehensive presentation of Gandhiji's views on both these subjects, the reader should turn to the volume entitled The Removal of Untouchability \* published by the Navajivan Trust.

Bombay, December 4954

Bharatan Kumarappa

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#### I. HINDUISM AND UNTOUCHABILITY

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. This idea was not brought home to me by my bitter experiences during the South African struggle. It is not due to the fact that I was once an agnostic. It is equally wrong to think—as some people do—that I have taken my views from my study of Christian religious literature. These views date as far back as the time when I was neither enamoured of, nor was acquainted with, the Bible or the followers of the Bible.

I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an 'untouchable', used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him, why I was forbidden to touch him. If I accidently touched Uka, I was asked to perform ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion, that it was impossible that it should be so. I was a very dutiful and obedient child, and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents, I often had tussles with them on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

While at school I would often happen to touch the 'untouchables', and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch was to cancel the touch by touching a Musalman passing by. And simply out of reverence and regard for my mother I often did so, but never did so believing it to be a religious obligation.

The Ramayana used to be regularly read in our family. 'How can the Ramayana,' I thought to myself, 'in which one who is regarded nowadays as an 'untouchable' took Rama across the Ganga in his boat, countenance the idea of any human beings being 'untouchables' on the ground that they were polluted souls?' The fact that we

addressed God as the 'purifier of the polluted' and by similar appellations, shows that it is a sin to regard any one born in Hinduism as polluted or 'untouchable'—that it is Satanic to do so. I have hence been never tired of repeating that it is a great sin. I do not pretend that this thing had crystallized as a conviction in me at the age of twelve, but I do say that I did then regard untouchability as a sin. I narrate this story for the information of the Vaishnavas and orthodox Hindus.

[From a speech at the Suppressed Classes Conference in Ahmedabad] Young India, 27-4-'21, p. 135

To remove untouchability is a penance that Caste Hindus owe to Hinduism and to themselves. The purification required is not of 'untouchables' but of the so-called superior castes. There is no vice that is special to the 'untouchables', not even dirt and insanitation. It is our arrogance which blinds us, superior Hindus, to our own blemishes and which magnifies those of our downtrodden brethren whom we have suppressed and whom we keep under suppression. Religions like nations are being weighed in the balance. God's grace and revelation are the monopoly of no race or nation. They descend equally upon all who wait upon God. That religion and that nation will be blotted out of the face of the earth which pins its faith to injustice, untruth or violence. God is Light, not darkness, God is Love, not hate, God is Truth, not untruth. God alone is great. We His creatures are but dust. Let us be humble and recognize the place of the lowliest of His creatures. Krishna honoured Sudama in his rags as he honoured no. one else. Love is the root of religion.

Young India, 26-12-'24, p. 423

I still confess my literary ignorance of the Shastras, but I do profess to understand the secret of Hinduism. And I venture to say in all humility but with all the strength I can command, that to perpetuate untouchability in the manner we have done is a serious blot on Hinduism, an unwarranted abuse of the Smritis and a negation of love which is the basis of Hinduism.

Young India, 27-10-'21, p. 344

I believe in the doctrine of equality as taught by Lord Krishna in the Gita. The Gita teaches us that members of all the four castes should be treated on an equal basis. It does not prescribe the same *dharma* for the Brahmana as for the Bhangi. But it insists that the latter shall be entitled to the same measure of consideration and esteem as the former with all his superior learning.

Young India, 22-1-'25, p. 29

We shall be the laughing-stock of humanity if we hug this 'curse, and the religion that nurses it shall stand condemned by the world.

Young India, 23-4-'25, p. 139

I am not a literalist. Therefore, I try to understand the *spirit* of the various scriptures of the world. I apply the test of Truth and Ahimsa laid down by these very scriptures for interpretation. I reject what is inconsistent with that test, and I appropriate all that is consistent with it.

Young India, 27-8-25, p. 293

Untouchability in its extreme form has always caused me so much pain, because I consider myself to be a Hindu of Hindus saturated with the spirit of Hinduism. I have failed to find a single warrant for the existence of untouchability as we believe and practise it today in all those books which we call as Hindu Shastras. But as I have repeatedly said in other places, if I found that Hinduism really countenanced untouchability I should have no hesitation in renouncing Hinduism itself. For I hold that religion, to be worthy of the name, must not be inconsistent with the fundamental truths of ethics and morality. But as I believe that untouchability is no part of Hinduism, I cling to Hinduism, but daily become more and more impatient of this hideous wrong.

[From a speech in Trivandrum]
Young India, 20-10-'27, pp. 353 and 354

I have never been able to reconcile myself to untouchability. I have always regarded it as an excrescence in Hinduism. It is true that it has been handed down to us from generations, but so are many evil practices even to this day. I should be ashamed to think that dedication of

girls to virtual prostitution was a part of Hinduism. Yet it is practised by Hindus in many parts of India. I consider it positive irreligion to sacrifice goats to Kali and do not consider it a part of Hinduism. Hinduism is a growth of ages. A religion that establishes the worship of the cow cannot possibly countenance or warrant a cruel and inhuman boycott of human beings. And I should be content to be torn to pieces rather than disown the suppressed classes. Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it if they allow their noble religion to be disgraced by the retention of the taint of untouchability. And as I love Hinduism dearer than life itself, the taint has become for me an intolerable burden. Let us not derly God by denying to a fifth of our race the right of association on an equal footing.

Young India, 6-10-'21, pp. 318 and 319

Hinduism is like the Ganga pure and unsullied at its source, but taking in its course the impurities in the way. Even like the Ganga it is beneficient in its total effect.

The Shastras are ever growing. The Vedas, Upanishads, Smrkis, Puranas and Itihasas did not arise at one and the same time. Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods, and therefore they seem to conflict with one another. These books do not enunciate anew the eternal truths but show how these were practised at the time to which the books belong. A practice which was good enough in a particular period would, if blindly repeated in another, land people into the 'slough of despond'. Because the practice of animal sacrifice obtained at one time, shall we revive it today? Because at one time, we used to eat beef, shall we also do so now? Because at one time, we used to chop off the hands and feet of thieves, shall we revive that barbarity today? Shall we revive polyandry? Shall we revive child marriages? Because we discarded a section of humanity one day, shall we brand their descendants today as outcastes?

Hinduism abhors stagnation. Knowledge is limitless and so also the application of truth. Every day we add to our knowledge of the power of Atman, and we shall keep on doing so. New experience will teach us new duties, but truth shall ever be the same.

Young India, 8-4-'26, p. 131

It is bad enough when dictated by selfish motives to consider ourselves high and other people low. But it is not only worse but a double wrong when we tack religion to an evil like untouchability. It, therefore, grieves me when learned Pandits come forward and invoke the authority of Shastras for a patent evil like untouchability. I have said, and I repeat today, that we, Hindus, are undergoing a period of probation. Whether we desire it or not, untouchability is going. But if during this period of probation we repent for the sin, if we reform and purify ourselves, history will record that one act as a supreme act of purification on the part of the Hindus. But if, through the working of the time spirit, we are compelled to do things against our will and Harijans come to their own, it will be no credit to the Hindus or to Hinduism. But I go a step further and say that if we fail in this trial, Hinduism and Hindus will perish.

Harijan, 5-1-'34, p. 8

In the purest type of Hinduism a Brahmana, an ant, an elephant and a dog-eater (Shvapacha) are of the same status. And because our philosophy is so high, and we have failed to live up to it, that very philosophy today stinks in our nostrils. Hinduism insists on the brotherhood not only of all mankind but of all that lives. It is a conception which makes one giddy but we have to work up to it.

[From a report of a conversation] *Harijan*, 28-3-'36, p. 51

## II. VARNASHRAMA AND UNTOUCHABILITY

I do regard Varnashrama as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present ideas of caste are a perversion of the original. There is no question with me of superiority or inferiority. It is purely a question of duty.

What I would like my correspondent to join me in is a fight against an arrogant assumption of superiority whether it is assumed by Brahmanas or others. It is the abuse of Varnashrama that should be combated, not the thing itself.

Young India, 23-4-'25, p. 145

Immediately, therefore, we remove the taint of birth, i.e. the idea of superiority and inferiority attaching to birth, we purify Varnashrama. The scavenger's children may remain scavengers without being or feeling degraded and they will be no more considered untouchables than Brahmanas. The fault does not therefore lie in recognizing the law of heredity and transmission of qualities from generation to generation, but it lies with the faulty conception of inequality.

Young India, 13-8-'25, p. 283

Recognition of the essential identity and oneness of all that lives excludes the very idea of superiority and inferiority. Life is duty, not a bundle of rights and privileges. That religion is doomed to destruction which bases itself upon a system of gradations high and low. Such is not the meaning for me of Varnashrama. I believe in it because I imagine that it defines the duties of men belonging to different vocations. And Brahmana is he who is the servant of all, even of the Shudras and the 'untouchables'. He dedicates his all to such service and lives upon the charity and sufferance of his fellow-beings. He is no Kshatriya who puts forth pretensions to rank, power and privileges. He alone is a Kshatriya who uses the whole of himself for the defence and honour of society. And a Vaishya who earns for himself only, and believes in merely,

amassing wealth is a thief. A Shudra because he labours for hire on behalf of society is in no way inferior to the three classes. According to my conception of Hinduism there is no such thing as a fifth or 'untouchable' class. The so-called untouchables are as much privileged labourers of society as Shudras. Varnashrama seems to me to be an ideal system conceived for the highest good of society. What we see today is a travesty and a mockery of the original. And if Varnashrama is to abide, Hindus must sweep away the mockery and restore Varnashrama to its pristine dignity.

Young India, 5-11-'25, p. 380

I believe that just as every one inherits a particular form, so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors, and to make this admission is to conserve one's energy. That frank admission, if he will act up to it, would put a legitimate curb upon our material ambitions, and thereby our energy is set free for extending the field of spiritual research and spiritual evolution. It is this doctrine of Varnashrama which I have always accepted.

Young India, 29-9-'27, p. 329

A scavenger is as worthy of his hire as a lawyer or your President. That, according to me, is Hinduism. There is no better communism on earth. Varnadharma acts even as the law of gravitation. I cannot cancel it or its working by trying to jump higher and higher day by day till gravitation ceases to work. That effort will be vain. So is the effort to jump over one another. The law of Varna is the antithesis of competition which kills.

Harijan, 6-3-'37, p. 27

#### III. REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

#### 1. To 'Untouchables'

Some members of the 'untouchable' class said when I was at Poona that they would resort to force if the Hindus did not alter their attitude towards them. Can untouchability be removed by force? Can the amelioration of the 'untouchables' come through these methods? The anly way by which you and I can wean orthodox Hindus from their bigotry is by patient argument and correct conduct. So long as they are not converted, I can only ask you to put up with your lot with patience. I am willing to stand by you, to share your sufferings with you. You must have the right of worship in any temple in which members of other castes are admitted. You must have admission to schools along with the children of other castes without any distinction. You must be eligible to the highest office in the land not excluding that of the Viceroy's. That is my definition of the removal of untouchability.

But I can help you in this only by following the way indicated by finy religion and not by following Western methods. For that way I cannot save Hinduism. Yours is a sacred cause. Can one serve a sacred cause by adopting Satan's methods? I pray you, therefore, to dismiss from your mind the idea of ameliorating your condition by brute force. The Gita tells us that by sincerely meditating on Him in one's heart, one can attain Moksha. Meditation is waiting on God. If waiting on God brings the highest bliss of salvation, how much quicker must it bring removal of untouchability? Waiting on God means increasing purity. Young India, 22-1-'25, p. 30

You cannot be free from this self-purification. You, too, have to bring your own sacrifice to this altar and that consists in the strict observance of the laws of sanitation—internal and external, and secondly, in the giving up of carrion, and beef-eating, wherever that habit still persists. In every part of the civilized world carrion is abhorred. It is considered unfit for human consumption. And no one

can call himself a Hindu and partake of beef. Sacredness of the cow and her worship are an integral part of Hinduism. Thirdly, I would ask every Harijan, man and woman present here, to give up the habit of drinking. Let no Harijan say to himself or herself or to me that many Savarna Hindus also drink. I would beseech you as a fellow-Harijan by choice to shun all vices of Savarna Hindus. In spite of all the reparation that Hindus may make to you, in spite of all the repentance they may show in the presence of God, after all, in the ultimate resort, your salvation will rest with yourselves.

[From a speech in Bangalore] Harijan, 19-1-'34

#### 2. To Caste Hindus

Let me tell you that it is not enough for you to hold the belief passively that untouchability is a crime. He who is a passive spectator of crime is really, and in law, an active participator in it. You must therefore begin and continue your agitation along all lawful and legitimate lines.

[From a speech in Nagercoil] Young India, 20-10-'27, p. 353

The cause of Harijans and Hinduism will not be served by the methods of the rabble. This is perhaps the biggest religious reform movement in India, if not in the world, involving as it does the wellbeing of nearly forty million human beings living in serfdom. The orthodox section that disapproves of it is entitled to every courtesy and consideration. We have to win them by love, by self-sacrifice, by perfect self-restraint, by letting the purity of our lives produce its own silent effect upon their hearts. We must have faith in our truth and love converting the opponents to our way.

There is no doubt whatsoever that deliverance of forty million human beings from age-long suppression will not be brought about by mere showy demonstrations. There has to be a solid constructive programme contemplating attack on all fronts. This enterprise requires the concentrated energy of thousands of men, women, boys and girls who are actuated by the loftiest religious motives. I would,

therefore, respectfully urge those who do not appreciate the purely religious character of the movement to retire from it. Let those who have that faith and fervour, be they few or many, work the movement. Removal of untouchability may produce, indeed it will produce, great political consequences, but it is not a political movement. It is a movement purely and simply of purification of Hinduism. And that purification can only come through the purest instruments. Thanks be to God that there are kundreds, if not thousands, of such instruments working in all parts of India. Let the impatient sceptics watch, wait and see. But let them not mar the movement by hasty, ill-conceived interference even though it may be prompted by laudable motives.

My Soul's Agony (1933), 7-11-'32, pp. 19 and 20

I do preach to the Harijans cleanliness, abstention from carrion-eating and intoxicating drinks and drugs, necessity of taking education themselves and giving it to their children, also abstention from eating the leavings from Caste Hindus' plates, etc. Only, I do not put these before Harijans as conditions precedent to the removal of untouchability. On the contrary, I suggest to Caste Hindus that the shortcomings are not inherent to Harijans but they are due to our criminal neglect of even deliberate suppression of these brethren of ours. Therefore, the disappearance of these shortcomings will take place sooner for our fraternizing with Harijans even as they are, and then helping them to become better men and women. That is the least penance Caste Hindus can do for the past wrongs. We must approach Harijans as penitents or debtors, not as their patrons or creditors extending generosity to the undeserving.

Harijan, 28-9-'34, pp. 257 and 258

The only way in which we can expiate this sin of centuries is to be friend the Harijans by going to their quarters, by hugging their children as you do your own, by interesting yourselves in their welfare, by finding out whether they get enough to eat, whether they get pure water to drink, whether they have the fresh light and air

that you enjoy as of right. The other way is for each of you to start the spinning sacrifice and to pledge yourselves to wear Khadi, which supports millions of these submerged human beings. The spinning sacrifice will help you in some slight measure to identify yourselves with them, and every yard of Khadi you wear will mean some coppers going into the pockets of the Harijans and the poor. The last thing is to contribute your mite to the Harijan Fund, which has no other end but the amelioration of the lot of the Harijans.

[From a talk to women] Harijan, 31-8-34, p. 225

#### 3. Government and Untouchability

Governments cannot afford to lead in matters of reform. By their very nature Governments are but interpreters and executors of the expressed will of the people whom they govern, and even a most autocratic Government will find itself unable to impose a reform which its people cannot assimilate.

[From a speech in Trivandrum] Young India, 20-10-'27, p. 354

Untouchability will not be removed by the force even of law. It can only be removed when the majority of Hindus realize that it is a crime against God and man and are ashamed of it. In other words, it is a process of conversion, i.e. purification, of the Hindu heart. The aid of law has to be invoked when it hinders or interferes with the progress of the reform as when, in spite of the willingness of the trustees and the temple-going public, the law prohibits the opening of a particular temple.

Harijan, 23-9-'39, p. 280

This removal of untouchability is much more than building a temple of brick and mortar. Hindus must bleed for it, must pay for it. They must be prepared to forsake wife, children and all for the sake of removing the curse.

Young India, 1-5-'24, p. 144

## 4. Interdining and Inter-marriage

Personally I am not sure that interdining is a necessary reform. At the same time I recognize the tendency

towards breaking down the restriction altogether. I can find reasons for and against the restriction. I would not force the pace. I do not regard it as a sin for a person not to dine with another, nor do I regard it as sinful if one advocates and practises interdining. I should, however, resist the attempt to break down the restriction in disregard of the feelings of others. On the contrary I would respect their scruples in the matter.

Young India, 19-3-'25, p. 94

Interdining and inter-caste marriage are in no way essential for the promotion of the spirit of brotherhood or for the removal of untouchability.

Harijan, 29-4-'33, p. 2

Marrying and dining are matters of individual concern. No one has a right to ask another to choose a girl for wife or to dine with anybody against his will. But if a person refuses to take food touched by another person on the ground of untouchability or inferiority, he is observing untouchability. In other words, untouchability cannot constitute any ground for restraint on interdining or marriage.

Harijan, 23-3-'34, p. 44

Though there is in Varnashrama no prohibition against intermarriage and interdining, there can be no compulsion. It must be left to the unfettered choice of the individual as to where he or she will marry or dine.

Harijan, 16-11-'35, p. 316

At one time I did say that interdining was not an essential part of the campaign for the removal of untouchability. Personally, I was for it. Today I encourage it. In fact, today I even go further.

Harijan, 28-7-'46, p. 234

### 5. Temple Entry for 'Untouchables'

Not the entry of a Panchama into a temple but the brand of prohibition against him is an insult to religion and humanity.

Young India, 14-1-'26, p. 16

It is the persecutors who are unknowingly defiling their own religion by keeping out of public temples men who are at least as honourable as they claim to be themselves and are willing to abide by all the ceremonial rules observable by Hindus in general on such occasions. More than that no man has any right to impose or expect. The heart of man only God knows. An ill-dressed Panchama may have a much cleaner heart than a meticulously dressed has caste Hindu.

Young India, 11-3-'26, p. 95

Temple entry is the one spiritual act that would constitute the message of freedom to the 'untouchables' and assure them that they are not outcastes before God.

Harijan, 11-2-'33, p. 5

I have absolutely no desire that the temple should be opened to Harijans, until Caste Hindu opinion is ripe for the opening. It is not a question of Harijans asserting their right of temple entry or claiming it. They may or may not want to enter that temple even when it is declared open to them. But it is the bounden duty of every Caste Hindu to secure that opening for Harijans.

[From a speech at Shrirangam] Harijan, 23-2-'34, p. 10

If all that there is in the universe is pervaded by God, that is to say, if the Brahmana and the Bhangi, the learned man and the scavenger, the Ezhava and the Pariah, no matter what caste they belong to—if all these are pervaded by Lord God, in the light of this Mantra\*, there is none that is high and none that is low, all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that Creator. And this is not a philosophical thing to be dished out to Brahmanas or Kshatriyas, but it enunciates an eternal

<sup>\*</sup> ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यितंक च जगत्यां जगत्।

तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्यस्विद् धनम्।।

This verse when translated would read as follows:

<sup>&</sup>quot;God the Ruler pervades all there is in this universe. Therefore renounce and dedicate all to Him and then enjoy or use the portion that may fall to thy lot. Never covet anybody's possessions."

truth which admits of no reduction, no palliation. And if that is so, how can anyone here dare to arrogate superiority to himself or herself over anyother human being? I tell you, therefore, that if this Mantra holds good, if there is any man or woman here who believes that the temples are defiled by those called Avarnas, that person, I declare, would be guilty of a grave sin.

Harijan, 30-1-'37, p. 408

#### 6. Conversion of 'Untouchables

A remedy suggested to 'untouchables' is rejection of Hinduism and wholesale conversion to Islam or Christianity. And if a change of religion could be justified for worldly betterment, I would advise it without hesitation. But religion is a matter of the heart. No physical inconvenience can warrant abandonment of one's own religion. If the inhuman treatment of the Panchamas were a part of Hinduism, its rejection would be a paramount duty both for them and for those like me who would not make a fetish even of religion and condone every evil in its sacred name. But I believe that untouchability is no part of Hinduism. It is rather its excrescence to be removed by every effort And there is quite an army of Hindu reformers who have set their heart upon ridding Hinduism of this blot. Conversion, therefore, I hold, is no remedy whatsoever.

Young India, 27-10-'20, p. 3

Liquidation of untouchability cannot be attained by the conversion of 'untouchables' to Islam or any other religion. For it is the so-called Caste Hindu who has to rid himself of the sin of untouchability. He can wash away the stain only by doing justice, however tardy, to the outcaste.

Harijan, 20-4-'40, p. 93

## IV. WIDER MEANING OF THE MOVEMEN

#### Towards Fellowship of Faiths

In dealing with the monster of untouchability, my own innermost desire is not that the brotherhood of Hindus only may be achieved, but it essentially is that the brotherhood of man — be he Hindu, Musalman, Christian, Parsi or Jew — may be realized. For, I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are God-given, and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another.

This 'touch-me-not-ism' has not been confined to Harijans, but it has affected caste against caste, and religion against religion. I, for one, shall not be satisfied until, as the result of this movement, we have arrived at heart-unity amongst all the different races and communities inhabiting this land, and it is for that reason that I have invited the co-operation of all the people living in India and even outside.

Harijan, 16-2-'34, pp. 6 and 7

## One Human Family

The ulcer of untouchability has gone so deep down that it seems to pervade our life. Hence the unreal differences: Brahmana and Non-Brahmana, provinces and provinces, religion and religion. Why should there be all this poison smelling of untouchability? Why should we not all

be children of one Indian family and, further, of one human family? Are we not like branches of the same tree?

When untouchability is rooted out, these distinctions will vanish and no one will consider himself superior to any other. Naturally, exploitation too will cease and cooperation will be the order of the day.

Harijan, 10-2-'46, p. 4