

CHAPTER 13

PROBLEM OF DISCRIMINATION

To the Untouchables the problem of discrimination in order of seriousness is only next to the problem of recovering their manhood. The discrimination against the Untouchables is practised by the Hindus on a scale, the extent of which it is impossible for an outsider to imagine. There is no field of life in which the Untouchables and the Hindus come into competition and in which the former is not subjected to discrimination. It is also of the most virulent type.

In the matter of social relationship, it takes the form of barriers against dancing, bathing, eating, drinking, wrestling, worshipping. It puts a ban on all common cycles of participation.

In the use of public facilities, the spirit of discrimination manifests itself in the exclusion of Untouchables from schools, wells, temples and means of conveyance. Public administration is most deeply drenched by the spirit of discrimination against the Untouchables. It has affected Law Courts, Government Departments, Co-operative Banks, particularly the Police. Discrimination against Untouchables in the matter of securing land, credit, jobs exist in the most rampant form. It is in service that discrimination shows itself most strongly. Though there are no regulations, there are well-recognized rules which govern the entry and promotion of the Untouchables in the matter of service. Most often an Untouchable will not get an entry. Whole departments are closed to them. The weaving side of the Textile Mills—the whole of Army—is closed to the Untouchables. If he did, there is a well-set limit beyond which the Untouchable may not rise, no matter what his efficiency or length of service. The principle in general is maintained that the Untouchables shall not be placed in administrative authority over the Hindus. The consequence is that unless some entire branch of service is turned over the Untouchables, there are very few posts of consequence which the Untouchables are allowed to fill. To put it concretely, the only field of service in which there is no discrimination against the Untouchables is scavenging. There is no need for discrimination in this field because the whole of it is made over to the Untouchables and there is no competition from the Hindus. Even here

discrimination steps in the matter of higher posts. All unclean work is done by the Untouchables. But all supervisory posts which carry higher salary and which do not involve contact with filth are all filled by Hindus. In this situation rights of citizenship cannot mean the rights of the Untouchables. Government of the people and for the people cannot mean Government for the Untouchables; equal opportunity for all cannot mean equal opportunity for the Untouchables; equal rights for all cannot mean equal rights for the Untouchables. All over the country in every nook and corner the Untouchable faces handicaps, suffers discriminations, is meted injustices to the Untouchables, the most unprivileged people in India. The extent to which this is true is known only to the Untouchables who labour under the disadvantages. This discrimination is the strongest barrier against the Untouchables. It prevents them from rising out of it. It has made the life of the Untouchables one of the constant fear of one thing or another, of unemployment, assault, persecution, etc. It is a life of insecurity.

There is another form of discrimination which though subtle is nonetheless real. Under it a systematic attempt will be made to lower the dignity and status of a meritorious Untouchable. A Hindu leader would be described merely as a great Indian leader. No one would describe him as the leader of Kashmiri Brahmin even though he be one. If a leader who happens to be an Untouchable is to be referred to he will be described as so and so, the leader of the Untouchables. A Hindu doctor would be described as a great Indian doctor. No one would describe him as a Iyengar even though he be one. If a doctor happens to be an Untouchable doctor, he would be referred to as so and so, the Untouchable doctor. A Hindu singer would be described as a great Indian singer. If the same person happens to be an Untouchable he would be described as an Untouchable singer. A Hindu wrestler would be described as a great Indian Gymnast. If he happens to be an Untouchable he would be described as an Untouchable gymnast.

This type of discrimination has its origin in the Hindu view that the Untouchables are an inferior people and however qualified, their great men are only great among the Untouchables. They can never be greater nor even equal to the great men among the Hindus. This type of discrimination, though social in character, is no less galling than economic discrimination.

Discrimination is merely another name for absence of freedom. For as Mr. Tawney says¹: "There is no such thing as freedom

¹ We mean freedom in what labour can do? pp. 83-85.

in the market, divorced from the realities of a specific time and place. Whatever else it may or may not imply, it involves the power of choice between alternatives—a choice which is real, not merely nominal, between alternatives which exist in fact, not only on paper. It means, in short, the ability to do—or refrain from doing definite things, at a definite moment, in definite circumstances, or it means nothing at all. Because a man is most a man when he thinks, wills and acts, freedom deserves the outline things which poets have said about it; but, as a part of the prose of every day life, it is quite practical and realistic. Every individual possesses certain requirements—ranging from the material necessities of existence to the need to express himself in speech and writing, to share in the conduct of affairs of common interests, and to worship God in his own way or to refrain from worshipping Him—the satisfaction of which it is necessary to his welfare. Reduced to its barest essential, his freedom consists in the opportunity secured by him, within the limits set by nature and the enjoyment of similar opportunities by his fellows, to take the action needed to order to ensure that these requirements are satisfied.”

It is not my intention to add yet another catalogue of essential rights to the liberties of such lists which already exist; but these are two observations which apply to all of them. In the first place, if the rights are to be an effective guarantee of freedom, they must not be merely formed, like the right of all who can afford it to dine at the Ritz. They must be such that, whenever the occasion arises to exercise them, they can in fact be exercised. The rights to vote and to combine, if not wholly valueless, are obviously attenuated, when the use of the former means eviction and of the latter the sack; the right to the free choice of an occupation, if the expenses of entering a profession are prohibitive; the right to justice, if no poor man can pay for it; the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, if the environment is such as to ensure that a considerable proportion of those born will die within twelve months, and that the happiness—investments of the remainder are a gambling stock. In the second place, the rights which are essential to freedom must be such as to secure the liberties of all, not merely of a minority. Some sage has remarked that marriage would not be regarded as a national institution if, while 5 per cent of the population were polygamous, the majority passed their lives unsolved and unencumbered by husbands or wives. The same is true of freedom. A society in which some groups can do much what they please, while others can do little of what they ought, may have virtues of its own; but freedom is not one of them. It is free in so far, and only in so far,

as all the elements composing it are able in fact, and not merely in theory, to make the most of their powers, to grow to their full stature, to do what they conceive to be their duty, and—since liberty should not be too austere—to have their fling when they feel like it. In so far as the opportunity to lead a life worthy of human beings is restricted to a minority, what is commonly described as freedom would more properly be called privilege.

The discriminations against the Untouchables are merely the reflections of that deep and strong Hindu sentiment which is carried over in law and administration which justifies the making of distinctions between Hindus and Untouchables to the disadvantage of the Untouchables. Those discriminations have their roots in fear of the Hindus that in a free field, the Untouchables may rise above the prescribed station in life and become a menace to the Hindu Social Order the cardinal principle of which is the maintenance of Hindu superiority and Hindu domination over the Untouchables. So long as the Hindu Social Order lasts, discriminations against the Untouchables continue to exist.

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