

PART I

What it is to be an Untouchable

CHAPTER 1

UNTOUCHABILITY—ITS SOURCE

It is usual to hear all those who feel moved by the deplorable condition of the Untouchables unburden themselves by uttering the cry "We must do something for the Untouchables". One seldom hears any of the persons interested in the problem saying 'Let us do something to change the Touchable Hindu'. It is invariably assumed that the object to be reclaimed is the Untouchables. If there is to be a Mission, it must be to the Untouchables and if the Untouchables can be cured, untouchability will vanish. Nothing requires to be done to the Touchable. He is sound in mind, manners and morals. He is whole, there is nothing wrong with him. Is this assumption correct? Whether correct or not, the Hindus like to cling to it. The assumption has the supreme merit of satisfying themselves that they are not responsible for the problem of the Untouchables.

How natural is such an attitude is illustrated by the attitude of the Gentile towards the Jews. Like the Hindus the Gentiles also do not admit that the Jewish problem is in essence a Gentile problem. The observations of Louis Goulding on the subject are therefore very illuminating. In order to show how the Jewish problem is in its essence a Gentile problem, he says:

"I beg leave to give a very homely instance of the sense in which I consider the Jewish Problem in essence a Gentile Problem. A close acquaintance of mine is a certain Irish terrier of mixed pedigree, the dog Paddy, who is to my friend John Smith as the apple of both his eyes. Paddy dislikes Scotch terriers; it is enough for one to pass within twenty yards of Paddy to deafen the neighbourhood with challenges and insults. It is a practice which John Smith deplors, which, therefore, he does his best to check—all the more as the objects of Paddy's detestation are often inoffensive creatures, who seldom speak first. Despite all his affection for Paddy, he considers, as I do, that Paddy's unmannerly behaviour is due to some measure of original sin in Paddy. It has not yet been suggested to us that what is here involved is a Scotch Terrier Problem and that when Paddy attacks a neighbour who is peacefully engaged in inspecting

the evening smells it is the neighbour who should be arraigned for inciting to attack by the fact of his existence.”

There is here a complete analogy between the Jewish Problem and the problem of the Untouchables. What Paddy is to the Scotch Terrier, the Gentile is to the Jews, and the Hindu is to the Untouchables. But there is one aspect in which the Jewish Problem stands in contrast to the Gentile Problem. The Jews and the Gentiles are separated by an antagonism of the creeds. The Jewish creed is opposed to that of the Gentile creed. The Hindus and the Untouchables are not separated by any such antagonism. They have a common creed and observe the same cults.

The second explanation is that the Jews wish to remain separate from the Gentiles. While the first explanation is chauvinistic the second seems to be founded on historical truth. Many attempts have been made in the past by the Gentiles to assimilate the Jews. But the Jews have always resisted them. Two instances of this may be referred.

The first instance relates to the Napoleonic regime. After the National Assembly of France had agreed to the declaration of the ‘Rights of man’ to the Jews, the Jewish question was again reopened by the guild merchants and religious reactionaries of Alsace. Napoleon resolved to submit the question to the consideration of the Jews themselves. He convened an Assembly of Jewish Notables of France, Germany and Italy in order to ascertain whether the principles of Judaism were compatible with the requirements of citizenship as he wished to fuse the Jewish element with the dominant population. The Assembly consisting of 111 deputies, met in the Town Hall of Paris on the 25th of July 1806, and was required to frame replies to twelve questions relating mainly to the possibility of Jewish patriotism, the permissibility of inter-marriage between Jew and Non-Jew, and the legality of usury. So pleased was Napoleon with the pronouncements of the Assembly that he summoned a Sanhedrin after the model of the ancient council of Jerusalem to convert them into the decree of a Legislative body. The Sanhedrin, comprising of 71 deputies from France, Germany, Holland and Italy met under the presidency of Rabbi Sinzheim, of Strassburg on 9th February 1807, and adopted a sort of Charter which exhorted the Jews to look upon France as their fatherland, to regard its citizens as their brethren, and to speak its language, and which also pressed toleration of marriages between Jews and Christians while declaring that they could not be sanctioned by the synagogue. It will be noted that the Jews refused to sanction intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews. They only agreed to tolerate them.

The second instance relates to what happened when the Batavian Republic was established in 1795. The more energetic members of the Jewish community pressed for a removal of the many disabilities under which they laboured. But the demand for the fuller rights of citizenship made by the progressive Jews was at first, strangely enough, opposed by the leaders of the Amsterdam community, who feared that civil equality would militate against the conservation of Judaism and declared that their co-religionists renounced their rights of citizenship in obedience to the dictates of their faith. This shows that the Jews preferred to live as strangers rather than as members of the community.

Whatever the value of their explanations the Gentiles have at least realized that there rests upon them a responsibility to show cause for their unnatural attitude towards the Jews. The Hindu has never realised this responsibility of justifying his treatment of the Untouchables. The responsibility of the Hindus is much greater because there is no plausible explanation he can offer in justification of untouchability. He cannot say that the Untouchable is a leper or a mortal wretch who must be shunned. He cannot say that between him and the Untouchables, there is a gulf due to religious antagonism which is not possible to bridge. Nor can he plead that it is the Untouchable who does not wish to assimilate with the Hindus.

But that is not the case with the Untouchables. They too are in a different sense an eternal people who are separate from the rest. But this separateness, their segregation is not the result of their wish. They are punished not because they do not want to mix. They are punished because they want to be one with the Hindus. In other words, though the problem of the Jews and of the Untouchables is similar in nature—inasmuch as the problem is created by others—it is essentially different. The Jew's case is one of the voluntary isolation. The case of the Untouchables is that of compulsory segregation. Untouchability is an infliction and not a choice.

