

"Where is the untouchable who will satisfy your condition?" said a Vaisya friend self-complacently.

The Ashram had been in existence only a few months when we were put to [the] test. I received a letter. . . . "A humble and honest untouchable family is desirous of joining your Ashram. Will you accept them?"

The family consisted of Dudabhai, his wife, Damibehn, and their daughter, Lakshmi [whom Gandhi later adopted], then a mere toddling babe. Dudabhai had been a teacher in Bombay. They agreed to abide by the rules [of the Ashram] and were accepted.

But their admission created a flutter amongst the friends who had been helping the Ashram. . . .

All monetary help . . . was stopped. . . .

With the stopping of monetary help came rumors of proposed social boycott. We were prepared for all this. I had told my companions that if we were boycotted and denied the usual facilities [such as the public well, because untouchables or those who had been in contact with them would "pollute" it], we would not leave Ahmedabad. We would rather go and stay in the untouchables' quarter and live on whatever we could get by manual labor.

. . . Maganlal Gandhi one day gave me this notice: "We are out of funds. . . ."

. . . On all such occasions God has sent help at the last moment. [A rich Hindu whom Gandhi had not seen before drove up to the Ashram, handed him enough money to carry on for a year, and drove off.]

[There] was a storm in the Ashram itself. Though in South Africa untouchable friends used to come to my place and live and feed with me, my wife and other women did not seem quite to relish the admission into the Ashram of the untouchable friends. . . . The monetary difficulty had caused me no anxiety, but this internal storm was more than I could bear. . . . I pleaded with [Dudabhai] to swallow minor insults. He not only agreed but prevailed upon his wife to do likewise.

The admission of this family proved a valuable lesson to the Ashram. In the very beginning we proclaimed to the world that the Ashram would not countenance untouchability. Those who

SEGREGATION IN INDIA

[Untouchability is segregation gone mad. In the Hindu caste, or class, system of Brahmans (the priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaisyas (merchants and farmers) and Sudras (craftsmen)—the untouchables are outcastes. An untouchable is exactly that: he must not touch a caste Hindu or anything a caste Hindu touches. Obviously, he should not enter a Hindu temple, home or shop. In villages, the untouchables live on the lowest outskirts into which dirty waters drain; in cities they inhabit the worst sections of the world's worst slums. Untouchables are confined to tasks which Hindus spurned: street cleaning, handling dead animals and men, removing refuse, etc.]

To perpetuate caste, Hindus have clothed it in the religious formula of fate. The Hindus believe in reincarnation. You are a Brahman or Sudra or untouchable because of your conduct in a previous incarnation. Your misbehavior in the present life might result in caste demotion in the next. A high-caste Hindu could be born an untouchable, an untouchable could become a Brahman.

Untouchables also were called "pariahs," "suppressed classes" or "scheduled classes." Gandhi called them "Harijans—Children of God" and later named his weekly magazine after them. His fight against the system of untouchability was ferocious and lifelong.]

The question of untouchability was naturally among the subjects discussed with the Ahmedabad friends [persons who lived in Gandhi's Satyagraha Ashram]. I made it clear to them that I should take the first opportunity of admitting an untouchable candidate to the Ashram if he was otherwise worthy.¹

¹ M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Part V, Chapter 9, pp. 329-330.

wanted to help the Ashram were thus put on their guard. . . . The fact that it is mostly the real orthodox Hindus who have met the daily growing expenses of the Ashram, is perhaps a clear indication that untouchability is shaken to its foundation. . . .²

Caste distinction is not observed in the Ashram because caste has nothing to do with religion in general and Hinduism in particular. It is a sin to believe anyone else is inferior or superior to ourselves. We are all equal. It is the touch of sin that pollutes us and never that of a human being. None are high and none are low for one who would devote his life to service. The distinction between high and low is a blot on Hinduism which we must obliterate.³

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot of Hinduism. The 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. . . . 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.⁴

Untouchability is not a sanction of religion . . . scriptures cannot transcend Reason and Truth. They are intended to purify Reason and illuminate Truth. . . . It is the spirit that giveth the light. And the spirit of the Vedas [Hindu scriptures] is purity, truth, innocence, chastity, simplicity, forgiveness, godliness and all that makes a man or woman noble and brave. There is neither nobility nor

² *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 10, pp. 329-333.

³ Yeravda [British] Prison, August 14, 1932, in Mahadev Desai, *The Diary of Mahadev Desai* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953), Volume I, pp. 286-287.

⁴ Speech while presiding at the Suppressed [Untouchable] Classes Conference, Ahmedabad, September 13 and 14, 1921, *Young India*.

bravery in treating the great and uncomplaining scavengers of the nation as worse than dogs to be despised and spat upon. Would that God gave us the strength and the wisdom to become voluntary scavengers of the nation as the "suppressed" classes are forced to be. . . .⁵

. . . Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability. It has degraded us, made us the pariahs of the [British] Empire. . . . What crimes for which we condemn the [British] Government as satanic, have not we been guilty of toward our untouchable brethren?

. . . It is idle to talk of Swaraj so long as we do not protect the weak and the helpless or so long as it is possible for a single Swarajist to injure the feelings of any individual. Swaraj means that not a single Hindu or Moslem shall for a moment arrogantly think that he can crush with impunity meek Hindus or Moslems. Unless this condition is fulfilled we will gain Swaraj, only to lose it the next moment. We are no better than the brutes until we have purged ourselves of the sins we have committed against our weaker brethren.⁶

How is this blot on Hinduism to be removed? "Do unto others as you would that others should do unto you." I have often told English officials that if they are friends and servants of India they should come down from their pedestal, cease to be patrons . . . and believe us to be equals in the same sense they believe fellow Englishmen to be their equals. . . . I have gone a step further and asked them to repent and to change their hearts. Even so is it necessary for us Hindus to repent of the wrong we have done, to alter our behavior toward those whom we have "suppressed" by a system as devilish as we believe the English system of the government of India to be. We must not throw a few miserable schools at them, we must not adopt the air of superiority toward them. We must treat them as our blood brothers as they are in fact. We must return to them the inheritance of which we have robbed them. And this must not be the act of a few English-knowing reformers merely but it must be a conscious voluntary effort on the part of the masses. We may not wait till eternity for this much belated refor-

⁵ *Young India*, January 19, 1921.

⁶ *Young India*, September 13 and 14, 1921.

mation. We must aim at bringing it about within this year. . . . It is a reform not to follow Swaraj but to precede it.⁷

. . . We must first cast out the beam of untouchability from our own eyes before we attempt to remove the mote from that of our "masters."⁸

. . . I do want to attain Moksha [Salvation, merging with God]. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them in order that I may endeavor to free myself and them from that miserable condition. . . .⁹

[9]

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE SUCCEEDS

I will tell you how it happened that I decided to urge the departure of the British. It was in 1916. I was in Lucknow working for Congress [the name Indians give the Congress Party]. A peasant came up to me looking like any other peasant of India, poor and emaciated. He said, "My name is Rajkumar Shukla. I am from Champaran, and I want you to come to my district." He described the misery of his fellow agriculturists. . . .¹ The Champaran tenant was bound by law to plant three out of every twenty parts of his land with indigo for his landlord. . . .

[Gandhi was unable to finish other tasks until early in 1917.] [We] left Calcutta for Champaran looking just like fellow-rustics. . . .

[A sympathetic lawyer named] Brajkishore Babu acquainted me with the facts of the case. He used to be in the habit of taking up the cases of the poor tenants. . . . Not that he did not charge fees for these simple peasants. Lawyers labor under the belief that if they do not charge fees they will have no wherewithal to run their households, and will not be able to render effective help to poor people. The figures of the fees they charged and the standard of a barrister's fees in Bengal and Bihar staggered me.

" . . . I have come to the conclusion" [said I] "that we should stop going to law courts. . . . Where the ryots [peasants] are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear. . . ."

" . . . We shall render all the help we can," [Brajkishore Babu] said quietly. . . . "tell us what kind of help you will need."

¹ Interview at Sevagram Ashram, June 9, 1942, in Louis Fischer, *A Week with Gandhi*, p. 97.

⁷ *Young India*, January 19, 1921.

⁸ *Young India*, October 13, 1921.

⁹ Speech while presiding at the Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad, September 13 and 14, 1921, *Young India*.

And thus we sat talking until midnight.

"I shall have little use for your legal knowledge," I said to them. "I want clerical assistance and help in interpretation. It may be necessary to face imprisonment, but much as I would love you to run that risk, you would go only so far as you feel yourselves capable of going. Even turning yourselves into clerks and giving up your profession for an indefinite period is no small thing. I find it difficult to understand the local dialect of Hindi . . . and . . . I shall want you to translate. . . . We cannot afford to pay for this work. It should all be done for love and out of a spirit of service."²

. . . "Such and such a number of us will do whatever you may ask. . . . The idea of accommodating oneself to imprisonment is a novel thing for us. We will try to assimilate it."³

. . . I decided that I would talk to thousands of peasants but, in order to get the other side of the question, I would also interview the British commissioner of the area. When I called on the commissioner he bullied me and advised me to leave immediately. . . .⁴

. . . I received a summons to take my trial . . . for disobeying the order to leave. . . .

. . . I might have legally resisted the notices. . . . Instead, I accepted them all and my conduct towards the officials was correct. . . . [They] were put at ease, and instead of harassing me they gladly availed themselves of my and my co-workers' cooperation in regulating the crowds [that had gathered around Gandhi's house]. But it was an ocular demonstration . . . that their authority was shaken. The people had for the moment lost all fear of punishment and yielded obedience to the power of love. . . .

It should be remembered that no one knew me in Champaran. The peasants were all ignorant. Champaran, being far up north of the Ganges and right at the foot of the Himalayas . . . was cut off from the rest of India. . . .

. . . No political work had yet been done amongst them. The

² M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Part V, Chapter 12, pp. 337-338.

³ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 13, pp. 340-341.

⁴ Interview at Sevagram Ashram, June 9, 1942, in Louis Fischer, *A Week with Gandhi*, p. 98.

world outside . . . was not known to them. And yet they received me as though we had been age-long friends. . . .

That day in Champaran was an unforgettable event in my life and a red-letter day for the peasants and for me.⁵

. . . The government attorney pleaded with the magistrate to postpone the case but I asked him to go on with it. I wanted to announce publicly that I had disobeyed the order to leave. . . . I told him that I had come to collect information about local conditions and that I therefore had to disobey the British law because I was acting in obedience with a higher law, with the voice of my conscience. This was my first act of civil disobedience against the British. My desire was to establish the principle that no Englishman had the right to tell me to leave any part of my country where I had gone for a peaceful pursuit. The government begged me repeatedly to drop my plea of guilty. Finally the magistrate closed the case. Civil disobedience had won. It became the method by which India could be made free.

What I did was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me around in my own country.⁶

[The] Collector wrote to me saying I was at liberty to conduct the . . . inquiry and that I might count on whatever help I needed from officials. . . .

[The] situation . . . was so delicate and difficult that over-energetic reports might easily damage the cause. . . . So I wrote to the editors of the principal papers requesting them not to trouble to send any reporters as I should send them whatever might be necessary for publication and keep them informed.

. . . Incorrect or misleading reports . . . were likely to incense [the planters] all the more, and their ire, instead of descending on me, would be sure to descend on the poor fear-stricken ryots and seriously hinder my search for the truth about the case.

In spite of these precautions the planters engineered a poisonous agitation against me. . . . But my extreme cautiousness and my

⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *Experiments*, Part V, Chapter 14, pp. 343-344.

⁶ Interview at Sevagram Ashram, June 9, 1942 in Louis Fischer, *A Week with Gandhi*, pp. 98-99.

insistence on truth, even to the minutest detail, turned the edge of their sword.⁷

Those who took down the statements [of the peasants] had to observe certain rules. Each peasant had to be closely cross-examined, and whoever failed to satisfy the test was rejected. This entailed a lot of extra time but most of the statements were thus rendered incontrovertible.

As I did not want to irritate the planters but to win them over by gentleness, I made a point of writing to and meeting such of them against whom allegations of a serious nature were made. . . . Some of the planters hated me, some were indifferent, and a few treated me with courtesy.⁸

[Gandhi's activity led to an official inquiry which] found in favor of the ryots and recommended that the planters should refund a portion of the exactions made by them . . . and that the [rities] system should be abolished by law.⁹

It was not quite possible to carry on the work without money. . . . I had made up my mind not to accept anything from the Champaran ryots. It would be . . . misinterpreted. [Appealing] to the country at large . . . was likely to give it [a] political aspect. . . . I decided to get as much as was possible from well-to-do Biharis living outside Champaran. . . . We were not likely to require large funds, as we were bent on exercising the greatest economy in consonance with the poverty of Champaran. . . .¹⁰

As I gained more experience . . . I became convinced that work of a permanent nature was impossible without proper village education. . . .

In consultation with my companions, I decided to open primary schools in six villages. One of our conditions with the villagers was that they should provide the teachers with board and lodging while we would see to the other expenses. The village folk had hardly any cash in their hands but they could well afford to provide food-

⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Experiments*, Part V, Chapter 15, p. 345.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 16, pp. 348-349.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 19, p. 354.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 16, p. 347.

stuffs. Indeed, they had already expressed their readiness to contribute grain and other raw materials.

From where to get the teachers was a great problem. . . . My idea was never to entrust children to commonplace teachers. . . .

So I issued a public appeal for voluntary teachers. It received a ready response. . . .

I explained to them that they were expected to teach the children not grammar and the three R's so much as cleanliness and good manners. . . .

The villages were insanitary, the lanes full of filth, the wells surrounded by mud and stink and the courtyards unbearably untidy. The elder people badly needed education in cleanliness. They all were suffering from various skin diseases. So it was decided to do as much sanitary work as possible and to penetrate every department of their lives.

[The teachers] had express instructions not to concern themselves with grievances against planters or with politics. People who had any complaints to make were to be referred to me. . . . The friends carried out these instructions with wonderful fidelity. . . .¹¹

[The] volunteers with their schools, sanitation work and medical relief gained the confidence and respect of the village folk and were able to bring good influence to bear upon them.

But I must confess with regret that my hope of putting this constructive work on a permanent footing was not fulfilled. . . . As soon as my work in Champaran was finished, work outside drew me away. The few months' work in Champaran, however, took such deep root that its influence in one form or another is to be observed there even today.¹²

Whilst I was yet winding up my work [in Champaran], there came a letter . . . about the condition of labor in Ahmedabad. Wages were low, the [millhands] had long been agitating for an increment and I had a desire to guide them if I could. . . .

. . . My relations with [the mill owners] were friendly, and that made fighting with them the more difficult. I held consultations with them and requested them to refer the dispute to arbitration, but they refused to recognize the principle of arbitration.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 17, pp. 350-351.

¹² *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 18, p. 353.

I had . . . to advise the laborers to go on strike. Before I did so, I . . . explained to them the conditions of a successful strike:

1. never to resort to violence.
2. never to molest [non-strikers].
3. never to depend upon alms, and
4. to remain firm no matter how long the strike continued and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest labor.

The strike went on for twenty-one days. . . .¹³

For the first two weeks, the millhands exhibited great courage and self-restraint, and daily held monster meetings. On these occasions I used to remind them of their pledge and they would shout back to me . . . that they would rather die than break their word.

But at last they began to show signs of flagging. Just as physical weakness in men manifests itself in irascibility, their attitude towards the [non-strikers] became more and more menacing as the strike seemed to weaken, and I began to fear an outbreak of rowdyism. . . . The attendance at their daily meetings began to dwindle by degrees, and despondency and despair were writ large on the faces of those who did attend. Finally, the information was brought to me that the strikers had begun to totter. I felt deeply troubled, and set to thinking furiously as to what my duty was in the circumstances. . . .

One morning—it was at a millhands' meeting—while I was still groping . . . the light came to me. . . . "Unless the strikers rally," I declared to the meeting, "and continue the strike till a settlement is reached or till they leave the mills altogether, I will not touch any food."

The laborers were thunderstruck. [They] broke out, "Not you but we shall fast. . . . Please forgive us for our lapse, we will now remain faithful to our pledge to the end."

"There is no need for you to fast," I replied. "It would be enough if you could remain true to your pledge. As you know, we are without funds and we do not want to continue our strike by living on public charity. You should therefore try to eke out a bare existence by some kind of labor so you may be able to remain unconcerned

¹³ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 20, pp. 355-356.

no matter how long the strike may continue. As for my fast, it will be broken only after the strike is settled."

. . . The hearts of the mill owners were touched, and they set about discovering some means for a settlement. [The] strike was called off after I had fasted for only three days. . . .
[To celebrate, the mill owners distributed sweets. Beggars intruded.]

The grinding poverty and starvation with which our country is afflicted is such that it drives more and more men every year into the ranks of beggars, whose desperate struggle for bread renders them insensible to all feelings of decency and self-respect. And our philanthropists, instead of providing work for them and insisting on their working . . . give them alms.¹⁴

. . . I must refuse to insult the naked by giving them clothes they do not need instead of giving them work which they sorely need. I will not commit the sin of becoming their patron but on learning that I had assisted in impoverishing them I would give them a privileged position and give them neither crumbs nor cast-off clothing but the best of my food and clothes and associate myself with them in work.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Part V, Chapter 22, pp. 358-362.

¹⁵ *Young India*, October 13, 1921.