

GANDHI AND THE UNTOUCHABLES

BY VIOLA IRENE COOPER

GANDHI, standing forth as almost the first Indian to attack the question, has approached the problem of untouchability, that situation in India's social structure which is so puzzling to westerners and which is so appalling to the western sense of democracy, with anything like a practical solution. His solution is a long way from attainment, it is a long way even from being put into effect at all. But he has launched the movement. In *Young India* of February 5, 1925, he discusses the question in detail, replying in his article to the objections of his opponents to the movement he has set on foot for the abolition of the custom and seeking to point out the means by which this abolition may be attained.

In India, members of the untouchable caste are not permitted in the public schools. They are outcasts literally in every sense of the word. Gandhi's suggestion to the question of education is: open to the untouchables all public schools, temples and roads that are open to non-Brahmins and are not exclusively devoted to any particular caste. To this he adds the suggestion that Hindus should open schools for the children of the untouchables, dig wells for them when necessary and render them the personal service that is so badly needed, e. g., to carry on hygienic reform and provide medical aid.

One question that has been asked Gandhi is: "Do you advocate an intermingling of the castes?" Gandhi's reply is, "I would abolish all castes!" It is this universality, regardless of his political views, which has made Gandhi a world figure and which will make him one of the greatest workers in India's destiny that India has produced.

The student of eastern philosophy must of necessity realize that a belief in reincarnation and karma, the law of cause and effect or the *as ye sow, so shall ye reap* of Christian doctrine, is part and

parcel of the Indian's mental make-up. Gandhi was asked, "Do you not believe that India is *karma-bhumi*, and that everybody born here is endowed with wealth and intelligence, social status and religious aspirations according to his good or ill deeds in his previous birth?" Gandhi replied that India is essentially "*karma-bhumi*" (land of duty), in contradistinction to "*bhoga-bhumi*" (land of enjoyment), thus putting the burden of social duty upon the people in the present and not upon the past.

Other questions and answers in his survey of the situation would be stated best, perhaps, by a simple presentation in the form of question and answer. These are as follows:

Q.: Are not education and reform among the untouchables primary conditions to be fulfilled ere one can begin to talk of the removal of untouchability?

A. (Gandhi): There can be no reform or education among the untouchables without the removal of untouchability.

Q.: Is it not natural, and just as it should be, that non-drunkards should avoid drunkards, and that vegetarians should avoid non-vegetarians?

A.: Not necessarily; a teetotaler would regard it as his duty to associate with his drunkard brother for the purpose of weaning him from the evil habit. So may a vegetarian seek out a non-vegetarian.

Q.: Is it not true that a pure man easily becomes an impure man when he is made to mingle with men who drink, and kill, and eat animals?

A.: A man who, being unconscious of the wrong, drinks wine and eats flesh, is not necessarily an impure man. But I can understand the possibility of evil resulting from one being made to mingle with a corrupt person. In our case, however, there is no case of "making anyone associate with untouchables."

Q.: Is it not owing to the above fact that certain classes of orthodox Brahmins do not mingle with the other castes (including the untouchables), but constitute themselves into a separate class, and live together for their spiritual uplift?

A.: It must be a poor spirituality that requires to be locked in a safe. Moreover, days are gone when men guarded their virtue by permanent isolation.

Q.: Do you advocate, then, that all should become equal, without any distinction of cast, race, creed or avocation?

A.: Such should be the case in the eye of the law in the matter of elementary human rights, even as, irrespective of caste, race,

creed, or color, we have certain things in common, e. g., hunger, thirst, etc.

To the final question regarding philosophy, perhaps incomprehensible to the average western mind as expressed in Indian terms yet not without its interest, he replies with lucidity and foresight. The question is as follows:

"Would that supreme philosophical truth be of any use in the field of practical politics to the average 'grihastha' (householder) seeing that only great souls who have come to the end of their cycle of karma (the necessity of returning to earth life) and realize and practice that supreme philosophical truth, and not the ordinary householder who has only to follow that which the Rishis have ordained, and in that following gain discipline which will eventually lead to release from birth and death?"

The answer of Gandhi to this is akin to his other answers, namely, democratic in spirit. "Not much 'supreme philosophical truth,'" he says, "is involved in the recognition of the simple truth that no human being is to be regarded as untouchable by reason of his birth. The truth is so simple that it is recognized all over the world except by orthodox Hindus. I have questioned the statement that the Rishis taught the doctrine of untouchability as we practice it."

The task before Gandhi is a great one. It is doubtful whether he can do very much. But the attempt is being made and it is possible that through it there will come about in India a democracy of the present which will be in accord with her ideals of the past.