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Harijans and the Prospects of their Human Rights

The problem of harijans has become a burning issue today in India. It has not only been attracting the attention of journalists and politicians, but it is also agitating the minds of the religious leaders. It has been hitting the headline in various forms: the swift and brutal massacre of 24 harijans in Deoli village,¹ the gunning down of 10 harijans in cold blood in Sadhupur village,² the burning down of harijan villages in Ramnad district, Tamilnadu in the early fifties, the most cruel persecution of harijans at Villupuram, in July 1978,³ the saddest plight in which Bihar harijans have found themselves in the last few years.⁴ All these confirm that the problem of harijans is widespread in our country. During the decade 1966-76, according to official reports 40,000 cases of atrocities on harijans were filed in the law courts. And in the year 1976 alone, there were 10,879 cases.⁵

In these circumstances then, any right-thinking harijan has every reason to be angry with his compatriots, be they Hindus or Christians or others. They have, of late, began to show their anger by threatening to give up their old religions to join some others. On the part of the religions themselves, including Hinduism, there has been a scramble for harvesting quick conversions in the fertile field of the harijans' turmoil. This scramble for numbers, leading to conversions

1. Cf. Udayan Sharma, "The Dehuli Massacre of harijans", *Sunday* (Calcutta) 6 December, 1981, pp. 20-21.
2. Cf. "Shadows of Sadhupur", *The Hindu* (Madurai) January 8, 1982, p.8
3. For a detailed report and an analysis of the Villupuram case see D. David, *Villupuram on 26, July 1978* (Tamil), (Thindivanam : 1979).
4. Cf. "Harijans A Raw Deal", *India Today*, August 1-15, 1979, p. 25. This gives a concise report on the ill-treatment meted out to the Bihar harijans.
5. As quoted from *India Today*, by D. David, *art. cit.*, p. 12.

and reverse conversions of harijans, is sure to create⁶ animosity and antagonism among people, thus affecting communal harmony, social peace and national integration. Again, as long as harijans do not form part of the mainstream of national life in all its aspects, social, political, cultural, religious, economic and so on, their problem will continue to be a threat to national integration.

It is in this wider context of national integration that an attempt is made in this paper to deal with the problem of harijans. In the first part, I analyse the problem in its various dimensions and try to pin-point the most basic of all. Part II is an evaluation of the different approaches to the problem of harijans and its solution. Against the background of both these parts then, I proceed in the third part (a) to bring out the role of religions in aggravating the problems, and (b) to suggest ways by which they can reverse their tendency and thereby make a contribution to national integration.

1. Identification of the Problem of Harijans

The problem of harijans may be identified in various forms: (i) as a problem of illiteracy, (ii) of untouchability, (iii) denial of temple entry, (iv) of economic exploitation and social discrimination. Of these the first problem that strikes the mind as important is that of illiteracy. For, harijans have long been denied the privilege of education. Consequently, they are not all aware of the measures of reform undertaken by the Government. However, I think that this manner of identifying the problem will not hold good in the present circumstances. For, steps have been taken not only to make primary education free and compulsory for all but also to take education to the door-steps of harijans by means of positive inducements such as establishing schools in harijan colonies and offering scholarships and making reservations in higher education.

As traditionally understood, the main problem has been one of untouchability. There were times when caste Hindus regarded any contact with members of the suppressed community as entailing defilement of which they could not be cleansed without the necessary ablution. They even regarded the omission to perform such an

6. Actually, one must say that such a spirit of animosity has already been felt by people. Cf. the cover story: K. R. Malkani, 'Virat Hindu Sammelan, Is it Communal?' *Onlooker* (Bombay), October 16, 1981, pp. 8-10.

ablution as a sin.⁷ However, under the changed circumstances of today, when many a harijan has begun to occupy key positions in society, untouchability is no more a problem affecting the lives of harijans, except perhaps in isolated pockets in different parts of the country. Moreover, apart from the fact that untouchability has been made a cognizable offence, harijans themselves have now such an awareness of their status that they are able to defy anyone who religiously adheres to the old practice of untouchability.⁸ Therefore, it will not be proper to identify the problem of harijans with that of untouchability.

Can we then identify the problem of harijans with the issue of temple entry? My opinion is that such identification is also not reasonable. For in the past when religion played a vital role in the cultural and social life of India, temple entry would have been a major issue for harijans. Even at that time this was not really a problem to them, because they had their own deities, priests and mode of worship, and so the denial of entry into the temples of caste Hindus could not have bothered them much. But it is not at all a problem to the socially awakened harijan today. For what he aspires most is a rightful place in the social, cultural and political life of the country and not just entry into the temples of caste Hindus.

Is oppression then the real problem of harijans? It appears very much to be so. They have been suffering from oppression of all forms—social discrimination, economic inequality, religious exploitation and cultural domination. In addition, in the present set-up, when harijan is able to offer resistance to such kinds of oppression, he is subjected to physical assaults and intimidations of the worst order. To quote the words of a spokesman of harijans: "This oppression only increases wherever the *dalit* asks for respect, asks for justice. If he asks for a just wage, he is oppressed, he is insulted, and if he is oppressed, when others snatch the land he has, and he resists, there is oppression against him. If he earns an honest living and tries to better his status, he is attacked."⁹

7. M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, April 27, 1921, p. 135. For easy ref. *vide* V. B. Kher, ed. *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. III, Ahmedabad, p. 160 (Hereafter reference to this work will be given as VBK III).

8. Cf. Suresh Ram's interview, *Onlooker*, p. 12.

9. Cf. Jagjivan Ram's interview with Santhosh Bhariya, *Sunday* (Calcutta), 4 October, 1981, p. 19.

Now, the question is: Why are harijans so much oppressed by others? My contention is that all the answers that can be given to this question can be finally reduced to a fundamental point, namely, non-recognition of human dignity. Caste Hindus have failed to recognize and refused to give to harijans the dignity a human being deserves. What is still more unfortunate was that the 'outcaste' himself did not recognize his own dignity as a person, or could not realize the inhuman treatment meted out to him.

This sort of treatment might have been due to the kind of work harijans were supposed to do. But here was a fallacious reasoning involved. Just because a man happens *to do* certain things which were not untouchable, he was considered *to be* an untouchable, a false identity of the *deed* with the *doer*. The Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi discerned this fallacy with great clarity and has exposed it with great conviction. "I can well understand a person being untouchable whilst he is performing a task which he himself would feel makes him untouchable." For instance, a nurse, who is nursing a patient who is helpless and bleeding and soiling his clothes and suffering from a disease giving out from his body a foul smell, such a nurse whilst she is nursing such a patient is untouchable. But when she has washed herself, . . . she is not only just as fit to move in society as any one of us . . . but she is worthy of our respect. . .¹⁰ Gandhi even compared the work of harijans, of *bhangis* (sweepers) in particular, with that of a mother in a house: "Just as we revere our mother for the sanitary service that she renders us when we are infants, and the greater her service the greater is our reverence for her, similarly the *bhangis* are entitled to our highest reverence for the sanitary service they perform for society."¹¹ Thus Gandhi refused to believe that anyone can be regarded as untouchable by reason of his or her birth. If at all untouchability is to be there, it has to be only transitory, easily removable, and referable to the deed not to the doer.¹²

It is precisely the failure to see this distinction between the transitory untouchability and personal untouchability, or, in other

10. Cf. Gandhiji's speech at the Kengeri Conference, *Harijan*, June 20, 1936, p. 148; rf. VBK III, p. 181.

11. *Young India*, January 22, 1925, p. 29; rf. VBK III, p. 169.

12. *Ibid.*

words the false identification of the untouchability of the deed with that of the doer, that is, the failure to recognize and accept the human dignity in harijans, which is the root of all the problems of harijans, be it social discrimination, economic inequalities, religious oppression, illiteracy, untouchability or atrocities. Men performing the different kinds of service needed for the sustenance of society, are all contributing to the survival of the society. Hence the vertical division of society on the basis of the nature of services rendered by different people is meaningless. However, this is what has actually happened in India and thereby caused the problem of harijans. After all every man is born naked out of the womb of his mother. And everybody is destined to return to the dust of Mother Earth. In this respect at least the equality of all men is to be accepted. Further, in respect of the spirit that activates the human body, every man is equal to every other. If the individual soul (the *atman*) of a caste Hindu is the same as the cosmic soul (the *brahman*) as the advaitin would have it so is the *atman* of the outcaste too. Why then is the harijan to be regarded as inferior to the high caste people? It is a failure to accept the equality of all human beings in this fundamental sense which has caused the problem of harijans.

To sum up, the problem of harijans is not merely one of illiteracy, untouchability or temple entry. Nor is it solely caused by a social or economic oppression. They are all different manifestations of a basic problem, namely, failure to accept or recognize the fundamental equality of men.

2. Solution to the Problem of Harijans

If I am right in concluding the foregoing analysis in the way I have done, I should be right then in contending that a proper solution to the problem lies not in giving them education, in legislating against untouchability, in providing for temple entry, in ameliorating their economic conditions, not even in arming them against the possible attacks and assaults by caste Hindus. However, this does not mean that we should not aim at harijans' economic, social and religious advancement. Far from it, we should welcome all these measures. But these measures alone cannot solve the problem unless, the basic problem of human in dignity is tackled effectively. This means that our goal must be to make the upper castes realize the human dignity in the so-called outcastes, and accept

them as equals. It means also that we should make the harijans realize their own fundamental equality with members of upper castes. That this alone will be a lasting solution to the problem of harijans will be shown in this section by considering the merits of the various solutions attempted so far.

Legislation for permitting temple entry cannot be a proper solution to the problem of harijans. For, although the caste Hindus through legal compulsions, may throw open their temples to harijans, if they themselves do not visit those temples, or they begin to instal their gods inside their homes, the intended results of the legislation will not have been achieved. Hence, what is needed is a change of heart on the part of the upper castes. Their hearts and homes should first be prepared to recognize human equality and dignity in harijans.

Literacy campaign cannot be a total solution to the harijans' problem. For, although the reservation policy in education, and other measures to improve their standard of education have helped many of the harijans to come up in life and enabled some to reach the top-ranks in government services, the stigma that one belongs to a scheduled caste remains. This will be amply proved by the experience of a 52-year old harijan official of the Maharashtra Government, who has become a muslim very recently. He told UNI that he had been facing ill-treatment and discrimination in the matter of getting promotions and accommodation.¹³ The statement of this official is not a lone cry but one which represents the community itself. What happened when a Central minister belonging to a harijan community unveiled a statue in one of our famous cities is still fresh in our memory. The caste Hindus brought water from the Ganges and held a purification ceremony to wash off the pollution.

Job reservations and other concessions like bank-loans, granting licences, assigning lands, granted to harijans by Government may improve their economic conditions. But at the same time it will kindle the wrath of the upper castes. In fact one of the reasons for the recent atrocities on harijans can be said to be the frustration of the upper castes on account of the special treatment given to harijans by the Government.

13. Cf. "Harijan Engineer Embraces Islam", *The Hindu*, (Madurai), January 11, 1981, p. 9.

Thus it is clear that if the measures taken by the Government to improve the lot of harijans are to be faithful, they ought to be preceded by a change of heart on the part of the upper castes. Conversion to other religions seems to be regarded as a solution to the problem before us. It is argued thus: "Harijans are consumed with the same desires and aspirations of social climbing as other Hindus. But they fear they cannot reach these stations while they remain outcaste and untouchable. They want naturally to run away from such a situation. They go where they think they will not be treated as oppressed untouchables by other human beings".¹⁴ Caste Hindus may not accept this kind of reasoning. They may rather attribute harijans' conversion to monetary gains. An answer to this sort of accusation is given by learned harijans themselves.¹⁵

The claims and counter-claims, made above, involve a discussion of the motives which is not feasible in this paper. But if we simply look at the actual results, we will certainly see that conversion of harijans to other religions has not proved a solution to their problem. Religions like Christianity and Islam are indeed known for their lofty ideals of equality of all human beings. But unfortunately these religions themselves have succumbed to the disease of caste-system,¹⁶ so much so that the hopes of converts have been shattered to pieces. As a result, many reverse conversions are taking place. The most recent reconversion of such a type is one which happened in Muzarpur village, Moradabad district in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁷ So it is clear that conversion cannot be an effective solution unless it is accompanied by the conversion of heart on the part of upper castes.

To sum up then, the true solution for the problem of harijans does not lie merely in the educational advancement of harijans, in

14. Cf. Ram Dhan's interview with Vijay Sanghvi, *Onlooker*, p.11.

15. E.g. Jagjivan Ram argues in the following way: All the Hindu leaders are saying that the *dalit* is a saleable commodity, and whoever wants to can buy the harijan. And what is the price they have fixed for the harijan? Rs. 500 per human being. Some Brahmins are as poor as the harijan - why are not they selling themselves? Cf. *Sunday*, 4 October, 1981, p. 21.

16. As regards caste distinction in Christianity, see P. A. Augustine, "Facing Caste Evil in the Church", *Indian Express* (Madurai), January 4, 1982, p. 8. As for the names of divisions in Islam, see *Onlooker*, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

17. Cf. Current Events Column, "Rejecting the Cross", *India Today* (New Delhi), January 15, 1982, p. 34.

measures of the Government to improve their social position in life, not even in offering them economic amelioration, and not at all in their conversion to other religions.

3. The Role of Religions

From both the sections above, it is clear that (i) the problem of harijans is basically a *moral problem* (namely, a failure to recognize and accept the fundamental equality of men); and therefore, (ii) the fundamental solution to it lies solely in a *moral conversion* of the people, both the upper caste and the outcastes. Paradoxically enough, religions which are supposed to be custodians of morality have not only recognized it as a moral problem, but also have made their own positive contributions to intensify the problem. How? I shall answer it in the first part of this section, and in the second part, I shall try to suggest some ways of remedying this situation.

(a) *Role of Religions in Aggravating the Problem of Harijans*

I try to establish in this sub-section that religions in India have contributed to aggravate the problem of harijans. I illustrate it with reference to two religions only. First in Hinduism, the most important factor responsible for the problem of harijans was the general belief that untouchability has a religious sanction. The system of *varnāshrama dharma* was supposed to imply untouchability too. Some texts from the *Shāstras* for example, the Vedic hymns like *Purusha Sukta*¹⁸ and many passages from *Manusmṛti* were also cited in favour of the practice. Thus the problem of untouchability was taken to be embedded in the religious framework of Hinduism.

Once the institution of untouchability was given the colour of religious sanction, the practice of untouchability came to be rooted in the ethos of the Hindu community; the result was it became a "permanent blot on Hinduism." Naturally then all other problems of harijans proceeded from this blot, and became a permanent feature of Hinduism.

In the case of Christianity, however, there was no such religious sanction for untouchability, not even indirectly. So, when it came

18. *Rig Veda* X: 90.

to India it prided itself on its lofty teachings,¹⁹ advocating perfect equality of men irrespective of caste, colour and creed. These teachings, carrying a great message of hope to the untouchables of India must have been a great inducement to the harijans among other things, to join it. But if we look at the Indian Christian community we find that the caste discriminations of Hinduism crept into Christianity too. The harijans were allotted separate aisles in many churches. Even separate rails were used for distributing the Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Unity and Love. Even unto death such discrimination was allowed to continue: separate cemeteries or separate parts of a cemetery were allocated for harijans.²⁰

In short religions like Christianity which boasted about their 'doctrinal purity' have miserably failed to translate it into an experiential reality. The reason was that they, in their anxiety to add the multitude to their fold, have made compromises on their own teachings. They did not fight against the problem of untouchability perhaps because they feared that they might not get a foothold in the Indian soil unless they accepted the existing social structures. Or it may be because they failed to train committed followers who would really 'live' their principles with complete conviction.

(b) *Ways of Remediating the Situation*

Having examined the question of how religions have contributed to aggravating the problem of harijans, we may now try to consider some ways of remedying this situation.

First, in the case of Hinduism, there is urgent need to declare beyond all doubt, that untouchability cannot have a religious situation at all. For, as Gandhi pointed out, what was manifestly against the fundamental principles of humanity or morality, what was against the dictates of reason, what was immoral and inhuman could not be sanctioned by religion.²¹ As Gandhi insisted, untouchability could not have a religious sanction in Hinduism, because a religion which considers *Ahimsa* as the supreme thing in life cannot sanction perpetration of such cruelties on human beings.²²

19. For example the doctrine of the eternal fatherhood of God and Universal brotherhood of men see P. A. Augustine, *op. cit.*

20. Cf. P. A. Augustine, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

21. *Harijan*, 11-2-1933, p. 4 (cf. VBK III, p. 167).

22. *Harijan*, 11-3-1933, p. 2 (See VBK III, p.159).

What about, then, the so-called 'authorities' in the scriptures? This calls for a re-interpretation or a true interpretation of the scriptures. Here too it is Gandhiji who has given a lead in the matter. I will just cite a few of his re-interpretations. As for the *varṇāshrama dharma* system which seems to be the very fabric of Indian society and which seems to provide the basis for untouchability, Gandhi said that it only defined the duties of men belonging to different vocations (namely, teaching, defending, wealth-producing and manual labour). As no community can depend more on one than on another, he argued, all *varṇās* are equal, and they cannot connote superiority or inferiority. But, the caste system as actually practised then differed from what it was conceived originally. He remarked "*varṇāshrama* 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 . . ." So he said, "if *varṇāshrama* is to abide, Hindus must sweep away the mockery and restore *varṇāshrama* to its pristine purity."²³

As regards the "*Purusha Suhta*" Gandhi said that it was wrong to interpret it as explaining the origin of *varṇas* and thereby signifying superiority or inferiority of the *varṇas*. The real purport of the simile was to stress the unity and equality of all the four *varṇas*. Insofar as the four *varṇas* are compared to the four members of one body, he asked, "how can one be superior or inferior to another? If the members of the body had the power of expression and each of them were to say that it was higher and better than the rest, the body would go to pieces. Even so, our body politic, the body of humanity, would go to pieces, if it were to perpetuate the canker of superiority or inferiority."²⁴ Moreover, referring to *Rāmāyaṇa* he argues: It is stated there that one who took Rama across the Ganges in his boat was one who is regarded nowadays as an 'untouchable'. How can this *Rāmāyaṇa* then countenance the idea of any human beings being 'untouchable' on the ground that they were polluted souls?²⁵

Gandhi's Steps of Reform

It was only because of the systematic degradation of brahminism according to Gandhi, that untouchability had become instituti-

23. *Young India*, 5-10-1925, p. 379, (See VBK III, p. 159).

24. *Harijan*, 28-9-1934, p. 260, (See VBK III, p. 128).

25. *Young India*, 27-4-1921, p. 135, (VBK III, p. 161).

onalized in Hinduism.²⁶ And he suggested many ways for the revival of the original Brahminism and a consequent removal of untouchability. First and foremost the caste Hindus had to realize that they had committed a sin and should be ready to atone for that sin. "We are guilty of having suppressed our brethren; we make them crawl on their bellies; we have made them rub their noses on the ground; with eyes red with rage, we push them out of railway compartment. . . We ought to purge ourselves of this pollution."²⁷

As a sign of their readiness to repent, Gandhi said, Brahmins must *identify* themselves with the outcastes, and must voluntarily call themselves outcastes.²⁸ He also set an example by calling himself a *bhangi*, a sweeper.²⁹ Merely calling oneself an untouchable is not enough for one's identification with untouchables. It must be shown in action, and that action must not be momentary but permanent: "It will not be enough even if you in a flush of enthusiasm go to a harijan and touch him and embrace him, and then forget all about him. It will not do even if you go to the harijan quarters everyday and make it a point to touch a number of harijans as a token of your conviction. What is required of you is that you should regulate your day-to-day conduct in such a manner that you make it absolutely evident to the harijans whom you come across that a better day has dawned for them all."³⁰

So much for the caste Hindus. Gandhi gives many suggestions to the harijans themselves to change their lot. First of all they should cultivate the habits of cleanliness so that no one might point his finger at him. Secondly, they must get rid of some of their evil habits like drinking and gambling. Thirdly, they must themselves possess a sense of self-respect. As a sign of their self-respect they must not ask the Hindus to emancipate them as a matter of favour. They must accept only good, sound grain, not rotten grain, and that too, only if courteously offered.³¹

26. *Harijan*, 25-3-1933, p. 3, (See VBK III, p. 132).

27. *Young India*, 27-4-1921, p. 135 (VBK III, p. 163).

28. *Harijan*, 25-3-1933, p. 8, (VBK III, p. 133).

29. *Young India*, 5-11-1925, p. 379, (VBK III, p. 158).

30. *Harijan*, 20-6-1936, p. 148, (VBK III, p. 182).

31. *Young India*, 4-5-1921, p. 143, (VBK III, pp. 164-5).

Gandhi was not satisfied with suggesting to others certain ways of removing the blot of Hinduism. He was first of all himself committed to practising what he preached. His commitment to the cause of solving the problem of harijans was so intense that he dedicated his whole life to that cause alone.³² It is said that he was wedded to work for the extinction of untouchability long before he was wedded to his wife. When there was a clash between these two weddings, he was even ready to prefer the cause of harijans to his wife.³³ He also undertook many tours to rouse public opinion against the inhuman practice of untouchability. In 1924 he directed a Satyagraha offered by harijans themselves. In 1932 and 33, he resorted to fasting many a time for improving the lot of the harijans. He also started a paper, '*Harijan*' for promoting the welfare of harijans.³⁴

It may appear that I have deviated from the theme of the paper and that I have stressed more what Gandhi did to solve the problem of harijans. True, I have dealt with Gandhi's approach to the problem of harijans. For it is against the background of his commitment to the cause of harijans that the specific role of Hinduism in solving the problem becomes clear. Gandhiji's war against the problem of harijans was by no means victorious. As he was engaged in attacking an age-old tyranny, he had to face a lot of opposition from the caste Hindus. Some accused him of betraying Hinduism. Others organized black-flag demonstrations. They tried to heckle him, and disrupt the meetings he addressed.³⁵ However, his war was relentless. It looked as though he was fighting for the cause of harijans all alone. Had the religious leaders lent him a helping hand, the problem would have been solved long ago. But if today, many Swamijis come out, openly voicing their concern for harijans,³⁶ and if today a '*Virat Hindu Sammelan*' has been constituted with removal of untouchability as their main objective,³⁷ it is not because they are convinced of the problem being a moral one but mainly because 'mass conversions' of

32. *Harijan*, August 26, 1933, p. 1, quoted by J. Thekkinedath, *Love of Neighbour in Mahatma Gandhi* (Alwaye: 1973), p. 122.

33. *Young India*, 22-1-1925, p. 30 as quoted by J. Thekkinedath, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

34. Cf. Thekkinedath, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

35. Cf. B. R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi, A Biography* (Bombay, 1965).

36. Cf. Swamiji of Pejawar said that he would campaign against atrocities on harijans: "Pejawar Swamiji's Threat of Fast," *The Hindu* (Madurai), Jan. 11, 1982, p. 2.

37. *Onlooker*, pp. 10-11.

harijans since Meenakshipuram has given a sudden and severe jolt to caste Hindus.³⁸ They are afraid that soon Hindus would be reduced to a minority in the land they consider to be their own and "the cradle of their culture".³⁹ This is not at all the correct approach. They must approach the problem with the conviction and commitment that Gandhiji had.

Share of Christian Responsibility

In the case of Christianity its offence is perhaps even worse. At least in the case of Hinduism there was apparently some basis in the scriptures which people interpreted to their advantage in order to perpetuate the social inequalities. But in the scriptures of Christianity, not only do we fail to find any text supporting caste-distinctions, but we do many commandments and injunctions which directly go against social discriminations. The commandment of universal love and humble service irrespective of creed and colour⁴⁰ would definitely go contrary to the casteistic practices perpetrated in the church. Hence, what Indian Christianity lacks is the Gandhian conviction of the equality of all men and the need to love one another as preached by Christ. So, what is needed for Indian Christianity is a community of convinced and committed followers of the Master.

Apart from certain lone voices,⁴¹ there have been of late certain organizational efforts to prevent the casteist tendencies in the church. For example, the Research Seminars organized by Indian Catholic Agencies have focussed their attention on the cause of harijans.⁴² Even the CBCI which met at Tiruchirapalli (December, 1981) has given serious consideration to caste discriminations in the church. However, the Church in India entered the scene so late that its motives

38. *Onlooker*, p. 11.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

40. Jn. 13, 16-17 and 34-35 also. Cf. Mt. 25-3.

41. Rt. Rev. Peter Leonard who was bold enough to remove the separate rails in St. Mary's Cathedral at Tiruchirapalli. Rev. Fr. Simon led a group of people to break open the 'wall of separation' at the Tiruchirapalli cemetery.

42. Cf. The Research Seminar's Proceedings in about 1,100 pages: *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, by D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed.), Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981. For a concise report on the Seminar, see also M. Amaladoss, *Indian Theological Studies* (Bangalore), Vol. XVIII, No. 4, December, 1981.

are suspected.⁴³ There is not enough evidence to prove that the church is taking up this cause only because of its realization of the moral nature of the problem. Perhaps vested interests also have a role to play here. It is possible that the half-hearted depositions of the church on the problem of harijans if due to a fear that it will be left behind in the main stream of Indian society, or it is induced to do this because it is afraid of losing its own adherents in the harijan community.

If Indian Christianity allowed its converts to continue their caste distinctions and discriminations all these centuries, it is only because of either or both of the following reasons. (i) It did not fully realize that the problem of harijans was fundamentally a moral problem. (ii) It was not interested in addition to the number of its followers so much that it did not insist a strict observance of its precepts by its followers. This meant that it was ready to compromise its 'doctrinal excellence' by accepting the degraded Hindu-social order.

Under these circumstances then, what is demanded of Christianity is to give strong evidence that it has realized the moral dimension of the problem and that its interest in the welfare of harijans is motivated solely by the moral nature of the problem and not by any other considerations. As evidences of such a realization a few steps are suggested parallel to those that were suggested by Gandhi in respect to Hinduism. First and foremost the church leaders and the upper caste Christians must realize that they have committed a grave mistake in having allowed caste discriminations in the church so far. Secondly, they must show a readiness to wipe off this stain on the Indian Church. As a sign of their realization and readiness, they must identify themselves with harijans, which identification must be shown in their day-to-day life.

Concluding Remarks

In the last section, I tried to show that religions in India (Hinduism and Christianity) have failed to recognize the moral dimension of the problem of harijans and consequently they have failed to their mission too, which is a grave sin!

43. As an illustration of such a suspicion, see F. A. Chidambaram, "Role of the Catholic Church", *The Hindu* (Madurai), Jan. 11, 1982, p. 8.

If today, they show unusual interest in the welfare of harijans this again is not due to a sincere realization of their sin and readiness to make amends for it. It is only because of their anxiety to retain their present numerical strength or because of their desire to attract an even greater number of followers. This is further evidenced by the fact that religions are competing with each other in wooing harijans. Such an interest will not only create animosity among religions but will ultimately jeopardize the chances of national integration too.

Against this background then, I may be justified in making just three points, by way of conclusion: (i) Religions, insofar as they claim to be custodians of human conscience, will cease to be religions unless they try with all their might to solve the problem of harijans, which is essentially a moral problem. (ii) It is high time they realized that their sin is two-fold: (a) A sin of mission namely, they have failed to recognize and accept the problem of harijans as a moral problem, (b) The sin of conversion, namely, they, with their unjust structures and institutionalizations, have positively contributed to the intensification of the problem of harijans. (iii) As a measure of sincere realization of this sin, they must try to atone for it by taking positive steps to solve the problem of harijans. In order that each one's attempt to solve the problem should not turn out to be a further means of increasing one's own vested interests, they must aim at interreligious co-operation in this matter. Each religion must inspire its followers, particularly the youth, to take up leadership in solving the problem and create an atmosphere conducive to creating men of Gandhian conviction and commitment.