

CHAPTER 9

HINDUS AND WANT OF PUBLIC CONSCIENCE

The cases in which the Hindus have indulged in violence against the Untouchables are cases of fight for equal freedom to all. If the Untouchables want to go in procession, they have no objection to the Hindus doing the same. If the Untouchables want to wear gold and silver ornaments, they do not object to the Hindus having the same right. If the Untouchables want to send their children to schools, they are not against the children of the Hindus having full freedom for education. If the Untouchables wish to draw water from the well, they have no objection to the Hindus exercising their right to take water. One can go on *ad infinitum*. But it is unnecessary. The point is easy and simple to grasp. It is that whatever freedom the Untouchables claim is not exclusive to them and is not inconsistent with the right of the Hindus to equal freedom. Why then does the Hindus use violence to put down such innocent and perfectly lawful acts? Why does he regard his lawlessness as lawful? Who cannot see that the acts and omissions, of the Hindus in his dealings with the Untouchables cannot be called by any other name except that of social wrongs. The acts and omissions are not mere inequities; they are not mere indignities. They are gross instances of man's inhumanity to man. For a doctor not to treat a patient because the patient is an Untouchable, for a body of Hindu villages to burn the houses of the Untouchables, to throw human excreta in their well if these are not acts of inhumanity, I wonder what can be? The question is why has the Hindu no conscience?

There is only one answer to these questions. The class composition in other countries were based on economic and social considerations. Slavery and serfdom had no foundation in religion. Untouchability though it can give and does economic advantages to the Hindus, is primarily based on religion. There is nothing sacrosanct in economic and social interests. They yield to time and circumstances. This is the broad explanation why slavery and serfdom have vanished and why untouchability has not. The same is the answer to the two other

questions. If the Hindu observes untouchability it is because his religion enjoins him to do so. If he is ruthless and lawless in putting down the Untouchables rising against his Established Order, it is because his religion not only tells him that the Established Order is divine and therefore sacrosanct but also imposes upon him a duty to see that this Established Order is maintained by all means possible. If he does not listen to the call of humanity, it is because his religion does not enjoin him to regard the Untouchables as human beings. If he does not feel any qualms of conscience in assaulting, looting, burning and other acts of atrocities against the Untouchables, it is because his religion tells him that nothing is sin which is done in defence of the social order.

Many Hindus would regard this as a travesty of their religion. The best way to meet the charge is to quote Chapter and verse from Manu who is the architect of Hindu Society. Let anyone, who denies what I have said, read the following Commands of Manu regarding untouchability. Untouchables and the duties of the Hindus in regard to them :

- “1. All those tribes in this world, which are excluded from (the community of) those born from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet (of Brahman), are called Dasyus, whether they speak the language of the Mlenchhas (barbarians) or that of the Aryans.
2. Near well known trees and burial ground, on mountains and in groves, let these (tribes) dwell, known (by certain marks), and subsisting by their peculiar occupations.
3. But the dwellings of the Chandalas and Shwapakas shall be outside the village, they must be made Apatras and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys.
4. Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead, (they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments, they must always wander from place to place.
5. A man who fulfils a religious duty, shall not seek intercourse with them ; their transactions (shall be) among themselves, and their marriages with their equals.
6. Their food shall be given to them by others (than an Aryan giver) in a broken dish; at night they shall not walk about in villages and in towns.
7. By day they must go about for the purpose of their work, distinguished by marks at the king's command, and they shall carry out the corpses (of persons) who have no relatives, that is a settled rule.

(1) Manu X. 45: (2) *Ibid.* X. 50: (3) *Ibid.* X. 51: (4) *Ibid.* X. 52: (5) *Ibid.* X. 53: (6) Manu X. 54: (7) *Ibid.* X. 65.

8. By the king's order, they shall always execute the criminals in accordance with the law, and they shall take for themselves the clothes, the beds and the ornaments of (such) criminals.
9. He who has had connection with a woman of one of the lowest castes shall be put to death.
10. If one who (being a member of the Chandalas, or some other low caste) must not be touched, intentionally defiles by his touch one who (as a member of a twice born caste) may be touched (by the other twice born persons only) he shall be put to death."

Can anybody, who reads these Commandments of Manu deny that it is Hindu religion which is responsible for the perpetuation of untouchability and for the lawlessness and want of conscience on the part of the Hindus towards the Untouchables? Indeed, if the acts of omission and commission which have been detailed in the earlier Chapters of this book were correlated to these ten Commandments, it will be found that the Hindus in committing these acts are merely following the Commandments of Manu. If the Hindu will not touch an Untouchable and regards it as an offence if an Untouchable touches him, it is because of the Commandments Nos. 5 and 10. If the Hindus insist upon the segregation of the Untouchables, it is because of Commandment No. 3. If the Hindu will not allow the Untouchable to wear clean clothes, gold ornaments, he is only following Commandment No. 8. If the Hindu will not tolerate an Untouchable acquiring property and wealth, he is only following Commandment No. 3.

It is really unnecessary to labour the matter further. It is incontrovertible that the main cause which is responsible for the fate of the Untouchables is the Hindu religion and its teachings. A comparison between Paganism and Christianity in relation to slavery and Hinduism in relation to untouchability reveals how different has been the influence of the two religions on human institutions, how elevating has been the influence of the former and how degrading that of the latter. Those who are fond of comparing slavery with Untouchability do not realize that they are facing a paradox. Legally the slave was not a freeman. Yet, socially he had all the freedom necessary for the growth of his personality. Legally the Untouchable is a freeman. Yet, socially he has no freedom for the growth of his personality.

This is indeed a very glaring paradox. What is the explanation of this paradox? There is only one explanation of this paradox. It is that while religion was on the side of the slave, religion has been against

the Untouchables. The Roman Law declared that the slave was not a person. But the religion of Rome refused to accept that principle, at any rate, refused to extend that principle to social field. It treated him as a human being fit for comradeship. The Hindu Law declared that the Untouchable was not a person. Contrary to Paganism, the Hindu religion not only accepted the principle but extended it to the social field. As the Hindu Law did not regard the Untouchable a person, Hinduism refused to regard him as a human being fit for comradeship.

That the Roman religion saved the slave from the social degradation consequent upon his legal degradation is beyond question. It saved him from such degradation in three different ways. One way by which the Roman religion saved the slave was to keep the most sacred place open for the slave to occupy. As has been observed:

“.....Roman religion was never hostile to the slave. It did not close the temple doors against him; it did not banish him from its festivals. If slaves were excluded from certain ceremonies the same may be said of freemen and women—men being excluded from the rites of Bona Dea, Vesta and Ceres, women from those of Hercules at the Ara Maxima. In the days when the old Roman divinities counted for something, the slave came to be informally included in the family, and could consider himself under the protection of the Gods of the household..... Augustus ordered that freed women should be eligible as priestesses of Vesta. The law insisted that a slave's grave should be regarded as sacred and for his soul Roman Mythology provided no special heaven and no particular hell. Even Juvenal agrees that the slave's soul and body, is made of the same stuff as his master.”

The second way in which the Roman religion helped the slave was equivalent to lodging a complaint before the City Prefect whose duty it became to hear cases of wrong done to slaves by their masters. This was a secular remedy. But the Roman religion had provided another and a better remedy. According to it, the slave was entitled to throw himself before the altar and demand that he should be sold to a kinder master.

The third way in which the Roman religion saved the slave by preventing the Roman Law from destroying the sanctity of his personality as a human being. It did not make him unfit for human association and comradeship. For the Roman slave this was the greatest saving grace. Suppose Roman society had an objection to buy vegetables, milk, butter or take water or wine from the hands of the slave; suppose Roman society had an objection to allow slaves to touch them, to enter their houses, travel with them in cars, etc., would

it have been possible for the master to train his slave to raise him from semi-barbarism to a cultured state? Obviously not; it is because the slave was not held to be an Untouchable that the master could train him and raise him. We again come back therefore to the same conclusion, namely, that what has saved the slave is that his personality was recognised by society and what has ruined the Untouchable is that Hindu society did not recognize his personality, treated him as one whose personality was unclean which rendered him as unfit for human association and common dealing.

There was no gulf, social or religious, which separated the slave from the rest of the society. In outward appearance he did not differ from the freeman; neither colour nor clothing revealed his condition; he witnessed the same games as the freeman; he shared in the life of the Municipal towns and got employed in the State service, engaged himself in trade and commerce as all freemen did. Often apparent equality in outward things counts far more to the individual than actual identity of rights before the law. Between the slave and the freed there seems often to have been little social barrier. Marriage between the slave and freed and even freed and slave was very common. The slave status carried no stigma on the man in the slave. He was Touchable and even respectable. All this was due to the attitude of the Roman religion towards the slave.

There is no space to describe at length the attitude of Christianity to slavery. But it was different from Paganism. It is not known to many that during the period of slavery in America, Christian priests were not prepared to convert Negro slaves to Christianity because of their view that it would degrade Christianity if the convert remained a slave. In their opinion, one Christian could not hold another Christian as a slave. He was bound to offer him fellowship.

To sum up, Law and Religion are two forces which govern the conduct of men. At times, they act as handmaids to each other. At other times, they act as check and counter-check. Of the two forces, Law is personal while religion is impersonal. Law being personal it is capable of being unjust and inequitable. But religion being impersonal, it can be impartial. If religion remains impartial, it is capable of defeating the inequity committed by law. This is exactly what happened in Rome in regard to the slave. That is why religion is believed to ennoble man and not to degrade him. Hinduism is an exception. It has made the Untouchable sub-human. It has made the Hindu inhuman. There is no escape to either from the established order of the sub-human and the inhuman.