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I HAVE NO HOMELAND

In the third week of July 1931, the names of the delegates to the second session of the Round Table Conference were announced. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi were invited to attend the Conference in London. It was not decided as yet whether Mahatma Gandhi would attend the Round Table Conference. Naturally all eyes were focussed on Manibhuvan at Bombay where Mahatma Gandhi was staying. Gandhiji wanted to sound Dr. Ambedkar as to his demands. So Gandhi wrote Ambedkar,

“Dr. Mr. Ambedkar,

I would come to see you to-night at 8 p.m. if you can spare that time. I would gladly come over to your place if it is inconvenient for you to come.

Bombay :

6-8-31.

Yours Sincerely

M. K. Gandhi.”¹

“Dr. Ambedkar had just arrived from Sangli, and was running a temperature. He wrote in reply that he would himself go to Gandhi at eight O’Clock that night. But in the evening the temperature soared to 106; so Dr. Ambedkar sent a message that he would come after the fever abated.

Subsequently, Ambedkar went to meet Gandhi on August 14, 1931 at Manibhuvan, at two in the afternoon. A batch of his lieutenants, Deorao Naik, Shivtarkar, Pradhan, Bhaurao Gaikwad and Kadrekar accompanied him. When Dr. Ambedkar was shown in to the third floor, Gandhi was busy talking with his partymen and eating some fruits. The Doctor and his party bowed to Gandhi and sat on a blanket.

In the characteristic way which Gandhi observed in dealing with non-Muslim and non-European leaders and representatives, he did not look at first for a while at Dr. Ambedkar and kept chatting with Miss Slade and others. Dr. Ambedkar’s men now feared that a little more indifference on the part of Gandhi, a

¹ : Ratnakar Ganvir, Ambedkar-Gandhi: Teen Mulakhathi (Marathi), P. 9.

collision would follow. Just then Gandhi turned to Ambedkar whom he saw for the first time, and, after formal question, he switched on to the main topic.

GANDHI : Well, Doctor, what have you to say in the matter ?

AMBEDKAR : You called me to hear your views. Please tell me what you have to say. Or you may please ask me some questions and I shall answer.

GANDHI : (*with a staring look at Ambedkar*): I understand that you have got some grievances against me and the Congress. I may tell you that I have been thinking over the problem of Untouchables ever since my school days—when you were not even born. You may perhaps be knowing what enormous amount of efforts I had put in to incorporate this problem in the programme of the Congress and make it a plank of the Congress platform. The Congress leaders opposed it on the plea that it was a religious and social question and as such it should not be mixed with political ones. This is not all. The Congress has spent not less than rupees twenty lakhs on the uplift of the Untouchables. And it is really surprising that men like you should offer opposition to me and to the Congress. If you have to say anything to justify your stand, you are free to do so.

AMBEDKAR : It is true, Mahatmaji, that you started to think about the problem of Untouchables before I was born. All old and elderly persons always like to emphasize the point of age. It is also true that because of you the Congress Party gave recognition to the problem. But let me tell you frankly that Congress did nothing beyond giving formal recognition to this problem. You say the Congress spent more than rupees twenty lakhs on the uplift of the Untouchables. I say it was all waste. With such a backing I could have effected an astounding change in the outlook and economic conditions of my people. And in that event it would have been imperative for you to see me long before. But I tell you that the Congress is not sincere about its professions. Had it been sincere, it would have surely made the removal of Untouchability a condition, like the wearing of khaddar, for becoming a member of the Congress. No person who did not employ Untouchable women or men in his house, or rear up an

Untouchable student or take food at home with an Untouchable student at least once a week should have been allowed to be a member of the Congress. Had there been such a condition, you could have avoided the ridiculous sight where the President of the District Congress Committee was seen opposing the temple entry of the Untouchables !

You might say that Congress wanted strength and therefore it was unwise to lay down such a condition. Then my point is that Congress cares more for strength than for principles. This is my charge against you and the Congress. You say the British Government does not show a change of heart. I also say that the Hindus have not shown a change of heart in regard to our problem, and so long as they remain adamant we would believe neither the Congress nor the Hindus. We believe in self-help and self-respect. We are not prepared to have faith in great leaders and Mahatmas. Let me be brutally frank about it. History tells that Mahatmas, like fleeting phantoms, raise dust, but raise no level. Why should the Congressmen oppose our movement and dub me a traitor ?

Dr. Ambedkar now grew animated. His face flushed and eyes glowed. He paused for a moment and then continued in a bitter, indignant tone.

AMBEDKAR : Gandhiji, I have no homeland.

GANDHI : (*taken aback and cutting him short*) : you have got a homeland, and from the reports that have reached me of your work at the Round Table Conference, I know you are a patriot of sterling worth.

AMBEDKAR : You say I have got a homeland, but still I repeat that I am without it. How can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink ? No self-respecting Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land. The injustice and sufferings inflicted upon us by this land are so enormous that if knowingly or unknowingly we fall a prey to disloyalty to this country, the responsibility for that act would be solely hers. I do not feel sorry for being branded as a traitor ;

for the responsibilities of our action lie with the land that dubs me a traitor. If at all I have rendered any national service as you say, helpful or beneficial, to the patriotic cause of this country, it is due to my unsullied conscience and not due to any patriotic feelings in me. If in my endeavour to secure human rights for my people, who have been trampled upon in this country for ages, I do any disservice to this country, it would not be a sin; and if any harm does not come to this country through my action, it may be due to my conscience. Owing to the promptings of my conscience I have been striving to win human rights for my people without meaning or doing any harm to this country.

The atmosphere turned grim. Faces changed colour. Gandhi was growing restless. He wanted to give a turn to Dr. Ambedkar's talk. Just then Dr. Ambedkar asked him the most pertinent question which was the object of the interview.

AMBEDKAR : Everybody knows that the Muslims and the Sikhs are socially, politically and economically more advanced than the Untouchables. The first session of the Round Table Conference has given political recognition to the Muslim demands and has recommended political safeguards for them. The Congress has agreed to their demands. The first session has also given recognition to the political rights of the Depressed Classes and has recommended for them political safeguards and adequate representation. According to us that is beneficial to the Depressed Classes. What is your opinion ?

GANDHIJI : I am against the political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindus. That would be absolutely suicidal.

AMBEDKAR (*Rising*): I thank you for your frank opinion. It is good that I know now where we stand as regards this vital problem. I take leave of you.*

Dr. Ambedkar left the hall, his face beaming with a fiery resolve to fight out the issue with all his might and to win human rights for his down-trodden people.

* The Navyug—Ambedkar Special Number, 13 th April 1947.

The interview thus ended in a grim atmosphere. Gandhi was the boss of Indian politics, the dictator, the uncrowned king of the Indian masses, who were dazed and electrified by his dynamic actions. To answer Gandhi back was to incur permanent displeasure and to create undying bitterness. And that too a Hindu leader doing it was a thing beyond Gandhi's imagination ! But the die was cast. The spark of opposition was ignited. The interview sounded the beginning of a war between Gandhi and Ambedkar.

It is, however, surprising to note here that Gandhi thought that Ambedkar was not a Harijan. Till he went to London he thought he was some Brahmin who took deep interest in Harijans and therefore talked intemperately.*

Following is the press report of the meeting.

“Dr. Ambedkar Sees Mr. Gandhi

Dr. Ambedkar, leader of the Depressed Classes, saw Mr. Gandhi on Friday afternoon. He tried to impress on Mr. Gandhi his point that the Congress had not so far done anything tangible for the Depressed Classes and that Mr. Gandhi was under a delusion in imagining that the Depressed Classes were solidly behind him as the representative of the people. Mr. Gandhi did not admit that the Congress had not done anything or was not doing anything for the Depressed Classes. Dr. Ambedkar eventually left without convincing Mr. Gandhi or being convinced by him.”¹

“Dr. Ambedkar on Mr. Gandhi's Folly

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Depressed Classes delegate, who had a frank talk with Mr. Gandhi on the previous day about his attitude towards the Depressed Classes, interviewed by a representative of *The Times of India*, said : “To place the interests of Bardoli above those of India and refuse on that account to go to England to take part in the deliberations of the Round Table Conference seems to me to be the height of folly. To bother about the petty tyrannies of village officers and to be unmindful of the bigger problem, the settlement of which will enable us to exercise control on those very officers, is a thing which I cannot understand.”

* The Diary of Mahadeo Desai, Vol. I, Navajivan Publishing House, P. 52.

¹: The Times of India, dated 15th August 1931.

Dr. Ambedkar was somewhat sure about particular reply which Mr. Gandhi had given him in an interview on the previous day. He said he had asked Mr. Gandhi in anticipation of his going to the R, T. C. whether he was prepared to accept the decision of the Conference that the Depressed Classes should be given political recognition in the new constitution and like other minorities, should be given political safeguards and adequate representation in the legislatures. Dr. Ambedkar complained that Mr. Gandhi refused to uphold that view and said that if he went to the Round Table Conference he would tell them that the conference might do what they liked, but in his opinion the suggestion was absolutely suicidal so far as the Depressed Classes were concerned.”¹

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¹. The Times of India, dated 17th August 1931.