# CHAPTER III

‘CHILDREN OF GOD’

‘t\* ndia,’ Jawaharlal Nehru said, ‘contains, all that is disgusting

I and all that is noble. 5 Nothing it contains is more disgusting\*

JLthan ‘the hideous system 5 , as Gandhi called it, of untouch-

ability, the ‘canker eating at the vitals of Hinduism 5 . Orthodox

Hindus did not share this view, nor did they welcome Gandhi’s

effort to extirpate the evil.

In attempting to eradicate untouchability, Gandhi was tugging

at roots several thousand years long. They originated in the

prehistoric Aryan invasion of India and grew into the hearts,

superstitions and social habits of hundreds of millions of people.

Many Western nations have their ‘untouchables 5 , but the stubborn

Hindu phenomenon of untouchability stems from peculiar historic

and economic circumstances which are tied together into an ugly

bundle by the sanction of religion.

In the long, unchronicled night before the dawn of history, a

fair-skinned folk called Aryans inhabited an area north of India.

Perhaps they hailed from the distant Caucasian isthmus between

the Caspian and the Black Sea, or from Turkestan, or even from

the more remote Russian valleys of the Don and the Terek where

exquisite gold ornaments of the ancient Scythians have been un¬

earthed. Nehru notes that Pathan dancing resembles Cossack

dancing. Six or seven thousand years ago the Aryans began

pushing south; one tide of the migration swept into India about

2000 or 3000 b.c., another moved into Iran; a third descended

into Europe.

Hence, the ‘Indo-European 5 language family. There is an

evident bond between the Sanskrit of India and many Western

tongues: Sanskrit pitri , Latin pater , Greek pater , English father ;

Sanskrit matri , Latin mater, Greek meter, English mother , Russian

mat ; Sanskrit duhirti , English daughter , German Tochter , Russian dock.

Gradually, the Aryans, which means ‘noblemen 5 , conquered

north-west India. They found there an older civilization related

to that of Babylon, Assyria and presumably Egypt.

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In 1922, at a place called Mohenjo-daro, about two hundred

miles north of Karachi, an Indian archaeologist, examining the

ruins of a comparatively new Buddhist temple seventeen hundred

years old, found, beneath the temple, proof of a much more

antique city. Scientific excavations at the site brought to light a

treasure of clay seals, beads, bricks, pots, utensils and ornaments.

One jar had a Sumero-Babylonian inscription in the hieroglyphic

writing of Mesopotamia which dated it between 2800 and 2500 b.c.

Many of the discoveries at Mohenjo-daro and other excavated

spots in the same area resemble those at Ur of the Chaldees, Kish

and Tell-Asmar in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates.

Explorers have since traced the abandoned caravan routes over

which north-west India and the Biblical Near East exchanged

goods and culture.

When the silt, sand and debris were carted away, the town of

Mohenjo-daro, founded fifty-five hundred years ago and con¬

tinuously inhabited for six centuries, was exposed. It covers more

than 240 acres. One can now see its principal avenue, which was

thirty-three feet wide, and many broad, straight north-south,

east-west streets once lined with burnt-brick homes, two or more

storeys high, that had wells and bathrooms. A sewage system

using clay pipes helped to keep the city clean.

In a silver jar found under a floor lay a piece of cotton cloth,

the oldest in the world. Bronze razors, chairs, spoons, cosmetic

boxes, silver drinking cups, ivory combs, bracelets, nose studs for

women, necklaces, bronze statuettes showing that ladies wore

skirts and girdles, gold beads, gambling dice, and thousands of

other historic objects have been retrieved from the dust of ages

in this most exciting unveiling of India’s past.

Either a flood or an epidemic destroyed this earliest-known

Indian civilization. The Aryans brought their own gods and

goods and put a new stamp on the country. They used horses

and chariots, battle-axes, bows and javelins.

The Rig-Veda, consisting of 1028 hymns and written in liturgical

Sanskrit, pictures the life of these conquering Indo-Aryans four

to five thousand years ago. Said to be the oldest book in the

world, the Rig-Veda reveals the origin of the Hindu caste system

and of the untouchable outcasts.

No caste divisions, as far as can be ascertained, encumbered the

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Aryans on their arrival in India. But conquest brought social

differentiation. Though the subjugated territory was hardly the

home of barbarians, or blacks, the Rig- Veda speaks of the inhabi¬

tants contemptuously as ‘black-skinned’, ‘noseless’ and ‘malignant’,

who did not know enough to appease the gods with burnt offerings

of animals. The Aryans employed these ‘inferiors’ to till their

fields, tend their herds, barter their products and fashion their

tools and ornaments. The merchants and farmers constituted the

Vaisya or third caste, the craftsmen the Sudra or fourth caste.

Power and wealth sowed discord among the Aryans and they

called upon a raja or king to rule over their several districts. He

and his courtiers and their fighting men and their families consti¬

tuted the master-warrior Kshatriya caste who were served by

hymn-singing, Veda- writing, ritual-performing, myth-making,

animal-sacrificing Brahmans or priests. Such was the ascendancy

of religion and intelligence, however, that the Brahmans became

the top caste, while the Kshatriyas occupied the next rung down.

The Aryans, who entered India poor in women, intermarried

with the local population. This healthy mixing of the blood con¬

tinued even after the conquerors penetrated into south India where

they subdued the Dravidians. These races had evolved an interest¬

ing culture of their own, but they were dark-skinned, and the

colour-conscious Aryans consequently increased the height of their

caste barriers. Dravidians became Brahmans, Kshatriyas and

Vaisyas, but a larger percentage than in the north were impressed

into the Sudra caste, and millions were left outside all castes.

The Aryan invasion frightened many natives into the hills and

jungles where they lived by hunting and fishing. In time, they

timidly approached the Aryan and Sudra villages to sell their

wicker baskets and other handicraft products. Occasionally, they

were allowed to settle permanently on the edges of the settlements

and do menial tasks, such as handling dead animals and men,

removing refuse, etc. These were the untouchables.

Since modern times, vocation no longer follows caste. A Brah¬

man can be a cab driver, a Kshatriya a bookkeeper, and a Vaisya

a prince’s prime minister. On the other hand, the ban against

marriage between castes is observed to this day, and when

Gandhi appeared on the scene in 1915 few violated it. Indeed,

the four castes are divided into three to four thousand sub-castes,

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some of them resembling craft guilds, others the equivalent of

blood or provincial groups; and parents preferred to find a wife

for their son within the sub-castes. Marriage of a caste menjiber

with an untouchable was, of course, unthinkable. Love marriages

were considered rather indecent, certainly ill-omened. Marriages

were arranged by parents; and why would a father demean his

family by admitting a pariah bride into it?

Untouchables were confined to tasks which Hindus spurped:

street-cleaning, scavenging, tanning, etc. In some regions, wheel¬

wrights, hunters, weavers and potters are considered untouchables.

To escape the humiliation, untouchables have adopted Chris¬

tianity or Islam. Yet forty or fifty million have chosen to stay in

the fold even though they are kept outside the pale. Why?

To perpetuate caste it has been clothed in the sacred formula

of immutable fate: you are a Brahman or Sudra or untouchable

because of your conduct in a previous incarnation. Your mis¬

behaviour in the present life might result in caste demotion in

the next. A high-caste Hindu could be reborn an untouchable.

The soul of a sinner might even be transferred to an animal. An

untouchable could become a Brahman.

‘The human birth’, Mahadev Desai writes in his introduction

to the Gita , ‘is regarded by the Hindu as a piece of evolutionary

good fortune which should be turned to the best and noblest

account’; then he quotes an old Indian poem:

I died as mineral and became a plant,

I died as plant and rose to animal.

I died as animal and I was man.

What should I fear? When was I less by dying?

A woman might become a man in the next incarnation, and

vice versa. Some Hindus would like to feel that at rebirth they

will still be members of the same family though their relationship

may be altered; a husband and wife may be brother and sister, for

instance, or sister and brother. Men with feminine propensities

might turn into women in the coming incarnation; a person who

is bloodthirsty and vicious may fall to animal status; a spiritual

merchant may be reborn a Brahman. A greedy Brahman may

be reborn in the merchant caste. Thus conduct alters inheritance,

but once caste rank is fixed in any one incarnation it becomes

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destiny. According to this doctrine, an untouchable is merely

doing penance; to interrupt it by raising his status robs him of a

possible ticket to a high caste in the next incarnation. This pro¬

spect reconciles religious untouchables to their current misery.

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 untouch¬

ables live on the lowest outskirts into which dirty waters drain;

in cities they inhabit the worst sections of the world’s worst slums.

If, by mischance, a Hindu should come into contact with an un¬

touchable or something touched by an untouchable he must purge

himself through religiously prescribed ablutions. Indeed, in some

areas, this is incumbent upon him even if the shadow of an un¬

touchable falls on him, for that too pollutes. On the Malabar

coast, untouchables are warned by a loud noise to quit the road

and its immediate environs at the approach of a caste Hindu.

Hindus are expected to bathe once a day, and water for washing

the hands and private parts is available in the most primitive

toilets. Hindus also take special pride in the cleanliness of their

personal pots, pans and drinking vessels. A Hindu will smoke a

huka water pipe or a cigarette through his fist without letting it

touch his lips, and he often pours water into his mouth instead of

sipping it. ‘This sense of cleanliness’, Nehru notes, ‘is not scientific

and the man who bathes twice a day will unhesitatingly drink

water that is unclean and full of germs . . . The individual will

keep his own hut fairly clean but throw all the rubbish in the

village street in front of his neighbour’s house . . .’ Cleanliness,

he adds, is a religious rite, not an end in itself. If it were, Hindus

would be concerned with the cleanliness of others, untouchables

included.

Untouchability is segregation gone mad. Theoretically a device

against contamination, it actually contaminates the country that

allows it. Mahatma Gandhi knew this and he fought untouch¬

ability for the sake of the castes as well as the outcasts, but in

fighting it he defied a thousand taboos and roused a million fears,

superstitions, hates and vested interests. Buddhism and many

Hindu reformers had attacked untouchability; Gandhi said little

against it until he had taken action against it.

In his youth, Gandhi played with an untouchable boy. Putlibai

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forbade it. Though he loved her he disobeyed her, his first re¬

bellion against authority. ‘I used to laugh at my dear mother’,

he wrote to Charles Freer Andrews, Tor making us bathe when we

brothers touched any pariah.’ In South Africa, too, he associated

with untouchables. In May 1918, in Bombay, he went to a

meeting called to improve the lot of untouchables. When he got

up to deliver his address, he said, Ts there an untouchable here?’

No hand was raised. Gandhi refused to speak.

Now there came to Gandhi’s ashram near Ahmedabad an un¬

touchable family and asked to become permanent members. He

admitted them.

A tempest broke.

The presence of the untouchable father, mother and their little

daughter Lakshmi polluted the entire ashram, and how could

the wealthy Hindus of Bombay and Ahmedabad finance a defiled

place? They withdrew their contributions. Maganlal, who kept

the accounts, reported that he was out of funds and had no pro¬

spects for the next month.

‘Then we shall go to live in the untouchable quarter,’ Gandhi

quietly replied. •

One morning a rich man drove up in a car and inquired

whether the community needed money. ‘Most certainly,’ Gandhi

replied. Gandhi had met the man only once and that casually.

The next day the anonymous benefactor put thirteen thousand

rupees in big bills into Gandhi’s hand and went away. That

would keep the ashram for a year.

This did not end Gandhi’s troubles. The women of the ashram

refused to accept the untouchable woman. Kasturbai, revolted

at the idea of having Danibehn in the kitchen cooking food and

washing dishes, complained to her husband. Gandhi heard her

patiently and appealed to her reason. But belief in untouchability

resides in some remote nervous recess where, with racial intoler¬

ance, dogma and colour prejudice among its neighbours, it eludes

common sense and humaneness. Gandhi therefore had to meet

Kasturbai on her own terms: she was a loyal Hindu wife; did she

wish to leave him and go to live in Porbandar? He was responsible

for her acts; if he forced her to commit a sin it was his sin not hers

and she would not be punished. Kasturbai was growing accus¬

tomed to her husband’s strange ways. She could never refute his

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arguments. He had become a Mahatma; who was she, the

almost illiterate Gujarat woman, to question the man of God?

He was now the loving teacher, no longer the lustful spouse. She

resented him less and listened to him more. Within her nerve

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tissue, to be sure, the hostility to the untouchables continued to

twitch. But her mind was gradually learning hospitality to his

ideas. In the worshipful air of India, husband became hero.

Presently, Gandhi announced that he had adopted Lakshmi as

his own daughter. Kasturbai thus became the mother of an un¬

touchable! It was like bringing a Negro daughter-in-law into the

pre-Civil War mansion of a Southern lady.

Gandhi insisted that untouchability was not part of early

Hinduism. Indeed, his war on the ‘miasma’ of untouchability

was conducted in terms of Hinduism. ‘I do not want to be re¬

born,’ he stated, ‘but if I have to be re-born I should be re-born

an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and

the affronts levelled against them in order that I may endeavour

to free myself and them from their miserable condition.’

If this prayer of the Mahatma has been answered he is now an

untouchable child in India and his devout followers might be

maltreating him.

But before being transformed into an untouchable in the next

incarnation he tried to live like one in this. So he took to cleaning

the lavatories of the ashram. His disciples voluntarily joined him.

Nobody was an untouchable because everybody did the untouch¬

able’s work without considering themselves contaminated thereby.

The outcasts were called ‘untouchables’, ‘pariahs’, ‘depressed

classes’, ‘scheduled classes’. Gandhi understood psychology; he

began calling them ‘Harijans’ (Children of God), and later named

his weekly magazine after them. Gradually, ‘harijan’ was hal¬

lowed by usage.

Fanatic Hindus never forgave Gandhi his love of untouchables

and were responsible for some of the political obstructions he en¬

countered during his career. But to vast multitudes he was the

Mahatma; they asked his blessing; they were happy to touch his

feet; some kissed his footprints in the dust. They accordingly had

to overlook, they forgot, that he was as contaminated as an un¬

touchable because he did scavenging and lived with untouchables

and had adopted an untouchable as his daughter. Over the years,

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thousands of high-caste Hindus came to Gandhi’s ashram to

interview him, to eat with him, to stay with him. A few un¬

doubtedly purged themselves thereafter, but most of them could

not be such hypocrites. Untouchability lost some of its curse.

Gandhians began to use untouchables in their households; were

they better than their saint? He taught by example.

City life and industrialization have had the same effect of

weakening the persecution of Harijans. In a village, everybody

knows everybody else. But the untouchable does not look

different, and in a trolley or train the caste Hindu might be

sitting skin-to-skin with a pariah and not realize it. Inescapable

contact has reconciled Hindus to contact.

Nevertheless, the poverty of the Harijans remained, and the

discrimination against them was far from overcome by Gandhi’s

early actions, gestures and statements in their behalf. He therefore

continued his efforts unremittingly.

Why did it fall to Gandhi, rather than to somebody else, to

lead the movement for the emancipation of untouchables?

Many of the indentured labourers in South Africa were un¬

touchables, and they were the heroes of the final phase of the civil

disobedience campaign in 1914. Gandhi’s twenty-year struggle

in South Africa, moreover, was directed against an evil which,

with all its economic overtones, was at bottom a colour prejudice.

All men are born with unequal gifts but equal rights, and society

owes them an equal or at least unimpeded opportunity to develop

their native abilities and live in liberty. How could Gandhi, fresh

from his fight for the equality of Indians in South Africa, coun¬

tenance a cruel inequality imposed by Indians on other Indians

in India?

The foundations of freedom are sapped where anybody is denied

equal rights because of his religion, the beliefs and deeds of his

ancestors or relatives, the shape of his nose, the colour of his skin,

the sound of his name, or the place or estate of his birth.

Gandhi’s concept of freedom for India excluded Hindu im¬

morality as well as British administrators. ‘Swaraj’ or indepen¬

dence, he said in Young India on May 25th, 1921, ‘is a meaningless

term if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjec¬

tion . . . Inhuman ourselves, we may not plead before the Throne

for deliverance from the inhumanity of others.’

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The simplest explanation of Gandhi’s attitude towards untouch-

ability is that he just could not stand it. In fact, he loathed this

‘inhuman boycott of human beings’ so much that he said ‘if it

was proved to me that it is an essential part of Hinduism I

for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism

itself’. No man who cared more for popularity than principle

would have made such a public statement in a country over¬

whelmingly and conservatively Hindu. But he made it as a Hindu

in an effort, he said, to purify his religion. He regarded untouch-

ability as an ‘excrescence’, a perversion of Hinduism.

In Hinduism, however, an excrescence is difficult to distin¬

guish from the essence. Hinduism is more than a doctrine and

more than a religion. Certainly, it is not a one-day-a-week

religion. It invades homes, farms, schools and shops. It is a way

of life which meshes with the mythological prehistory, the history,

the economy, the geography and the ethnography of India. In

India, religion is the sum total of the national experience. Islam

is less absorbent, but Hinduism is a sponge religion, hospitable

and without fundamentalism. ‘We have no uncontradictable and

unquestionable documents, no special revelations, and our scrip¬

tures are not final . . .’ writes Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, a

Hindu philosopher. Hinduism is simultaneously monotheistic and

idolatrous, because it has, at different periods in history, drawn

in populations that accepted one or the other. The monotheists

tolerate idols and the idolaters dance before graven images but

pray to one God. Some Hindus sacrifice animals in their temples,

and some hold it a religious duty not to kill a worm or germ. The

reform movements of Hinduism, like Buddhism and Jainism, have

never broken away in schisms. They disappear into the general

bloodstream. Hinduism is flexible, capacious, malleable. So is

the thinking of many Hindus. So was Gandhi’s. He fought un-

touchability. He abhorred animal sacrifices; the flow of blood in

the house of God sickened him. But Hindus who perpetrated

these wrongs were his brothers and he was theirs.

India, Nehru has said, is like a palimpsest. A palimpsest is an

ancient parchment or canvas which has been written on or painted

on and then varnished over at a later period and written on or

painted on again and then varnished over and written on or

painted on a third, fourth and fifth time. This economic use of

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materials has unintentionally preserved some precious relics of

the past, and experts now know how to wash off the newer coats

and reveal the old original inscriptions or drawings. The differ¬

ence is that in the case of India, the varnish has, so to speak, dis¬

solved, and all the words and figures of the several layers are

visible at the same time as one intricate jumble. This explains

the complexity of Indian civilization and of those Indians who are

permeated by it. ‘The human intellect’, writes Sir Valentine

Chirol, ‘has indeed seldom soared higher or displayed deeper

metaphysical subtlety than in the great system of philosophy in

which many conservative Hindus still seek a peaceful refuge from

the restlessness and materialism of the modern world.’ No Indian

can altogether escape this cultural-intellectual heritage.

At times, however, only one layer of the palimpsest is visible; on

such occasions a modern, European-educated Hindu may vanish and

become a worshipper of crude, primeval fetishes, even as a Western

scientist may accept the irrational abracadabra of a desert cult.

Hinduism amalgamated Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, and

Buddha who were regarded as atheists or agnostics. Many

Hindus accept Jesus and Mohammed as religious guides. Yet in

insane moments, Hindus, Sikhs and Moslems avidly slaughter one

another. Then they relax into apathetic tolerance.

Despite its insatiable hunger for oneness, however, Hinduism’s

‘Live-and-Let-Live’ only meant, ‘Live separately’. Hinduism has

fostered endless division into self-contained villages, self-sufficient

joint families comprising two, three, or even four generations in

one residence, and self-segregated castes and multitudinous sub¬

castes whose members did not, until recent times, intermarry or

inter-dine. God-fearing Hindus were content to see the ‘children

of God’ in degrading isolation.

Yet the Indian ideal of unity in diversity remains. The binding

factors are the three legs of the subcontinent’s compact triangle,

the unbroken line of culture from the dim past until today, the links

of history and the bonds of blood and religion.

Blood connects Hindus with Moslems and Sikhs. Religion

weakens the connection. Geography connects; bad communica¬

tions divide. The multiplicity of languages divides.

Out of these elements, Gandhi and his generation undertook to

forge a nation.

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