

## Between Economism and Emancipation

### Untouchables and Indian Nationalism, 1920-1950

Vijay Prashad

The capitalist class would never resist the trades' unions, if it could always and under all circumstances do what it is doing now by way of exception ... to wit, avail itself of every rise in wages in order to raise prices of commodities much higher yet and thus pocket greater profits. (Karl Marx)<sup>1</sup>

[Gandhism] is conservatism in excess. So far as India is concerned, it is a reactionary creed blazoning on its banner the call of Return to Antiquity. Gandhism aims at the resuscitation and reanimation of India's dread, dying past. (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, 1946)<sup>2</sup>

The Khrushchevian revelations about Stalin in 1956 inaugurated a series of political and theoretical attacks on Marxism from within the Left. One of the problems with Marxism, it was argued, was its "economism," a word used to designate a rigid Second International interpretation of the Marxist canon which held that the economy determined all other aspects of life. This understanding of the shortcoming of Marxism persists to this day, especially in the now fashionable arguments of Laclau and Mouffe in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Ironically, the very term "economism" emerged in a polemic begun by Lenin in 1899 against those who held that working-class politics must be restricted to a struggle for economic rights. Such "economism," Lenin argued, restricts political agitation as well as breeds the belief that politics occurs spontaneously and without organization — all this

1 Karl Marx, *Capital II* (New York 1967), 344.

2 Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables," *Writings and Speeches, Volume 9* (Bombay 1991), 290.

leads to a commitment towards the most restrictive politics of social reform.<sup>3</sup> Under the spell of money and profit, Lenin argued, the bourgeoisie assume that social praxis must be measured through the logic of the double entry account book. When workers rebel, it is the bourgeoisie who assume that they are rebelling for higher wages. Labour rebels for a lot more, but the other demands are typically belittled and withdrawn by the workers in favor of an obtainable increment to their wages. Lenin deploys the term “economism” to critique the economic reductionism of the bourgeoisie; Marxism, in this Leninist form, is precisely not an “economism,” but a critique of just such an operation.

In this essay, I want to demonstrate how the bourgeoisie and the workers in a tortuous struggle define the form of the ‘strike’ and the ‘protest’ as *economic* struggles. The ‘workers’ under scrutiny here are untouchable sanitation workers from north India. Beyond a critique of bourgeois economism, I want to question the limit of Indian nationalist emancipation for untouchables who work in menial occupations. The untouchables in question (variously called Bhangis, Chuhras and Balmikis) are promised a form of emancipation which can fittingly be defined as emancipation from direct contact with dirt rather than emancipation from their structural exploitation. The Indian bourgeoisie does not only reduce the demands of the untouchables to economic demands, they also reduce their cry for humanity to a question of the provision of decent implements and showers. The quest for freedom is reduced to a problem of allocating sufficient resources to quiet the consciousness of the oppressive present.

### A Question of Bread

When the Indian working-class emerged as a political force in the 1920s, it came out rebellious and strong. In 1920, the colonial state reported 200 strikes and in 1921, almost 400. In 1921, M.K. Gandhi wrote that “strikes are the order of the day. They are a symptom of the existing unrest.”<sup>4</sup> Industrial labourers found that they could not sustain themselves on their existing wages; as the Secretary of State himself observed, “as the prices rose remarkably high, many an increase of wages which look all right on paper proves to have in fact little influence in easing the hard lot of the labourers.”<sup>5</sup> The

3 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 3 and 4: esp. “A talk with defenders of economism,” *Iskra*, 12 December 1901 (CW 4) and *What is to be done?*

4 *Young India*, 16 February 1921.

5 Quoted in Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970* (Calcutta 1977), 141.

influenza epidemic of 1918 displayed the horrendous conditions in which the working class lived and died, and recurrent price rises further exacerbated a difficult situation. In this broad context the Indian National Congress passed its first resolution which dealt principally with the working-class (1919) and in the process the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was inaugurated. From railway strikes to press strikes, from the formation of unions to the consolidation of trade guilds, from the training of leaders from among the workers to the initial interest in socialism and communism, a workers' movement was in formation.

For its first Congress, the organizers of AITUC invited Lala Lajpat Rai to preside. Lajpat Rai was a prominent nationalist politician, with a firm base in the Arya Samaj (a religious community organization), in student politics and in the campaign to emancipate untouchables. "Militarism and imperialism are the twin children of capitalism," he pronounced, "they are one in three and three in one. Their shadow, their fruit and their bark all are poisonous." This statement carries within it the Indian radicals' exuberant reaction to the Soviet Revolution: not only are militarism and Imperialism abhorrent, but they are the 'children of capitalism,' echoing the arguments of Lenin. "It is only lately," Lajpat Rai continued, "that an antidote has been discovered and that antidote is organized labour." Lajpat Rai's idea of trade union politics, however, betrayed his fealty to his class and its interests. Rather than calling for militant trade unionism, Lajpat Rai called for capitalist benevolence. "If however Indian capital wants to ignore the needs of labour and can think only of its huge profits, it should expect no response from labour and no sympathy from the general public. If labour must remain half-starved, ill-clothed, badly housed, and destitute of education, it can possibly have no interest in the development of Indian industries and all appeals in the name of patriotism must fail."<sup>6</sup>

In this statement we can unravel the threads of nationalism's response to labour struggles. Reform is for the good of Indian industry, for without a healthy and happy labour force production will suffer. If self-interest does not work for the capitalist, then patriotism (in the political domain) must be invoked to remind the capitalist that labour struggles will only reveal further fissures to the British who will use them to divide the 'Indian community.' The capitalists' role was to take care of the workers, for the Indian capitalists and Indian labourers belonged to one 'family.' Paternalism ('trusteeship') was the nationalists' advice to the capitalist; the capitalists must take responsibility for the betterment of the conditions of the workers.<sup>7</sup> If the capitalists did

6 Quoted in Sen, *Working Class*, 171. For the preceding, I have leaned heavily upon Sen and Rakhahari Chatterjee, *Working Class and the Nationalist Movement in India. The Critical Years* (New Delhi 1984).

7 Cf. Gandhi, "I do want cleanliness in capitalism as well as in labour." *Young India*, 8 May 1924.

not adopt their paternalistic role, they may find themselves in trouble. In 1929, G.D. Birla, a leading Indian industrialist, urged his fellow businessmen to “exist not as exploiters but as servants of society.” In doing so, he told them, they would undercut their main enemy — the Communists.<sup>8</sup> Rather than allow the workers to struggle, the capitalists must pre-empt their demands and facilitate them. Providing the workers with a reason to protest jeopardized the very sanctity of the nationalist demand for political freedom. The bourgeois leadership of the Congress was loath to legitimize the class issues put forward by the labourers (the reluctance of the Congress to adopt no-rent and no-revenue as political issues is the most well-known example of the bourgeoisie’s wilful neglect of demands from below).

The sweepers in the main cities of north India were greatly influenced by the uprisings of their working-class friends and neighbors.<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1920s, municipal sweepers in various Punjabi cities came together to form their first union, the Mehtar Labour Union (Safai Mazdur Sangh). There had been various sorts of trade guilds and alliances earlier, but these did not put themselves forward as the representative body of the workers hired by the municipality. In Delhi, the municipality did not take the union seriously, for there are few references to the union in their archives, not even a note accepting the credentials of the union. The union’s demands not only included workplace issues (hiring, wages, etc.), but also neighborhood and city issues (schooling, housing, recreation, familial relationships, etc.). Why did they have to live in certain areas? Why did the men drink and avoid their children? Why did the teachers in the local schools not bother with their children?<sup>10</sup> Not only did the union call for these changes; it also put forward a demand for control over the work process and political power (by having representation on the municipal committee). In this broad sense, the union posed an antagonistic challenge to society.<sup>11</sup>

8 *Young India*, 19 December 1929.

9 Mohinder Singh, *The Depressed Classes: Their Economic and Social Condition* (Bombay 1947), 102.

10 Ratan Lal Balmiki, Balmiki Colony, New Delhi, 20 March 1992; Ram Krishen Bhajni, Qila Kadam Sharif, Delhi, 23 and 24 February 1993; L. R. Balley, *Dr. Ambedkar ne kya kiya?* (Jalandhar 1991).

11 Whereas I have been much influenced by Ernesto Laclau’s *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London 1977), I find the argument in Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London 1985) to be misguided. Trade unions do not only organize for the “unavoidable guerrilla fights” (Marx) which enable workers to struggle to protect the little they have, nor do they only organize because the leadership believes that workers stand outside the tentacles of the State, but trade unions organize for the *political effects* of union work. Marx pointed out that unions must not forget they “are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects.” The most sophisticated unions move the struggle between the effects and their causes. For Marx, see *Value, Price and Profit*. His argument was made explicit in A. Lozovsky’s *Marx and the Trade Unions* (1935, but reprinted in Calcutta in 1944 by the Radical Book Club). It was an argument well-known to Indian communists.

When nationalists took interest in union work, they posed union issues economically, as wage issues. Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS) declared that "*in the work of economic uplift*, trade unions can play an important role."<sup>12</sup> This impoverishment meant that unions could not put forward a claim on the terrain of the national-popular, a claim to refashion the emerging nation as a whole, which itself is a *political* claim. The Gandhians encouraged unions in their economic role, in order to alert them not to cross the fine line between *economic* interests and the *national* interest (the latter being determined now by certain obvious class interests).<sup>13</sup> Unions could only act as a part, as one narrow sectional interest whose view was considered in accord with other sectional interests (such as capitalists, administrators, bureaucrats, consumers). From an antagonism, the views of the unions were reduced to indifference. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in 1929 right-wing trade union leaders declared that unions should "weed out of its organization mischief makers," such as those who go about "preaching the gospel of strike."<sup>14</sup> A strike was not simply a demand for economic justice, but also a political gesture, an antagonistic force which the Congress wished to discourage. The most effective political way to discourage such gestures was to make them appear morally wrong and to show that those who advocated such gestures (such as the radical untouchables and the Communists) were misguided and dangerous. G.D. Birla made it clear in 1936 that "our duty does not end in simply opposing socialism. Businessmen have to do something positive to ameliorate the condition of the masses."<sup>15</sup> The rising of the masses was made into a question of bread.

## A Politics of Class

Eager to forge a movement of the 'people' (which is devoid of specific class determination), the Congress refused to adopt many of the demands of the workers and the peasants. "Although the Indian National Congress and other

12 Jiwanlal Jairamdas, *Bhangi Kshat Mukti aur Bhangi Mukti* (New Delhi 1969), 7 (emphasis added).

13 The interested reader should turn to Claude Markovits' study, *Indian Business and Nationalist Politics, 1931-1939. The Indigenous Capitalist Class and the Rise of the Congress Party* (Cambridge 1985) and Sumit Sarkar, "The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism," *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta 1985).

14 Quoted in B.T. Ranadive, *The Independence Struggle and After* (New Delhi 1988), 61.

15 Quoted in Aditya Mukherjee, "The Indian Capitalist Class: Aspects of the Economic, Political and Ideological Development in the Colonial Period, 1927-47," Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds.), *Situating Indian History* (Delhi 1986), 262.

political organizations have on some occasions passed resolutions in favor of Labour organizations,” a moderate Labour leader wrote in 1927, “they have not rendered any practical assistance to the movements.” Further, since the Congress was “dominated by the capitalists of the upper middle classes, it would be futile to expect them to do very much in the future in that direction.”<sup>16</sup> The language of class was not used in the political praxis of the Congress, but in the 1920s the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the Workers and Peasants’ Party and the Communist Party of India put the question of class on the agenda of national politics. The appearance of ‘class’ on the margins of the nationalist movement was crucial, despite the fact that the Left forces were unable to fashion an alternative to Congress control over the national movement.

Gail Omvedt recently argued that since Indian Marxists and Communists were blinded by ‘class’ they did “not see the issue of caste and untouchability as important.”<sup>17</sup> In 1922, however, M.N. Roy enunciated a very sophisticated critique of untouchability from within the emerging Indian Communist movement. Untouchability, like much of caste itself, was a “heritage of the old society,” Roy argued. Without removing the practices which prolong untouchability, “no amount of ethical propagandizing will remove this prejudice.” Since caste Hindus identified sweepers with the filth they removed, emancipation for the sweepers meant emancipation from the conditions of their work. Technologically better means of waste removal would allow sweepers to resist the charge that their work made them dirty. While Roy did not elaborate on his suggestion, he made it very clear that the “sentimental humanitarian cant” put forward by bourgeois nationalists was insufficient.<sup>18</sup> When the Communist Party of India (CPI) released its Draft Platform of Action in 1930, the question of caste was foregrounded as the CPI urged all workers to join its ranks to fight “for the complete abolition of slavery, the caste system and inequality in all forms (social, cultural, etc.)” as well as for the struggle for political power. In this manner, the CPI put forward an antagonistic agenda as opposed to an economistic one. The will to antagonism put forward in the 1920s and 1930s by the Left forced bourgeois leaders to take a renewed interest in ‘working-class politics,’ which included the abolition of untouchability.<sup>19</sup>

16 Quoted in Sen, *Working Class*, 286.

17 Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution. Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Delhi 1994), 177.

18 M.N. Roy, “Civil Disobedience,” Subnarayan Ray (ed.), *Selected Works of M.N. Roy: Volume I* (Delhi 1987), 553-5; E.S. Yurlova, “Communists and Problems of Scheduled Castes,” *Scheduled Castes in India* (New Delhi 1990).

19 B.T. Ranadive, *Caste, Class and Property Relations* (Calcutta 1982).

In 1936, Nehru pointed out that he “wanted to spread the ideology of socialism especially among Congress workers and the intelligentsia; for these people, who were the backbone of the national movement, thought largely in terms of the narrowest nationalism.” This narrow nationalism included dreams of a perfect and ancient past, the indignities of conquest, and the commitment to sacrifice oneself for freedom. “They were familiar themes which found an echo in every Indian heart, and the nationalist in me responded to them and was moved by them (though I was never a blind admirer of ancient times in India or elsewhere). But, though the truth in them remained, they seemed to grow a little thin and threadbare with constant use, and their ceaseless repetition prevented the consideration of other problems and vital aspects of our struggle.”<sup>20</sup> The need of the hour, he indicated, was to constitute a politics of class in order to truly represent the sectional interests of the workers. To fill this need, the Communists pushed the idea of ‘class’ onto the national agenda.<sup>21</sup>

Why do many scholars argue that the introduction of the language of class narrowed the vision of the political project of the Left? Gail Omvedt argues that

The ‘class’ category provided a marvellous tool for Indian Marxists to interpret what they saw around them within one grand framework of a theory of exploitation and liberation, but at the same time blinding them to other factors in their environment, so that instead of being inspired by the multifaceted struggles of low-caste peasants and workers to develop their own theory and practice, they instead sought to narrow these struggles and confine them within a ‘class’ framework.<sup>22</sup>

Omvedt, among others, makes a category error in order to reach the conclusion that the Left was paralyzed by its theory. Reading the political texts of the Communist movement, she extracts its concrete concepts (such as caste and class) in order to show the limitations of its theory. There is a need to *elaborate* upon these texts, just as we have done with the political and unsystematic texts of nationalism; it is not sufficient to simply *extract* concepts from them. The Communist texts, like the writings of Gandhi, are written in

20 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Towards Freedom* (New York 1942), 138-9.

21 So much so, that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar formed a political organization in 1936 (Independent Labour Party) in order to “advance the welfare of the labouring classes.” Eleanor Zelliot argues that this party represented “Ambedkar’s realization that the needs of the Depressed Classes were in economic as well as the social and religious fields.” Eleanor Zelliot, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement,” PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania (1969), 246-9.

22 Omvedt, *Dalits*, 184-5.

the heat of the moment, using categories without the luxury of critical analysis.<sup>23</sup> The role of 'class' needs to be analyzed not just in the texts of Communism, but also in the way in which the Communist activists organized. Empirical research will enable us to enrich the historical record with regard to the political significance of the Left and its own shortcomings, since Communist activism clearly exceeded the rhetoric of the CPI.

If the concrete concepts of the Communist movement were unable to effectively theorize the relationship between caste and class in the 1920s, the idea of 'worker' enabled the Communist activists to organize amidst untouchables. In 1926, the Communist paper *Kirti* elaborated on the concept 'kirti' or toiler: anyone who does manual labour and "does not exploit others is a *kirti* in the true sense of the word." *Kirti*, therefore, included "carpenters, blacksmiths, peasants, cobblers, weavers and other workers engaged in different professions."<sup>24</sup> Although, the word "kirti" often got confused with *kisan* or farmer, the activities of the Communists belied any easy identification of *kirti* with proletariat or with peasant. The work of the Communists among the sweepers is ample evidence.

When sweepers formed their unions, they sought help from the CPI and the CSP. In 1926, the Communists worked on and supported a sweepers' strike in Batala (Punjab). During the first major strike of sanitation workers in Calcutta and Howrah in April 1928, Communists such as Muzaffar Ahmad were in attendance for support and planning.<sup>25</sup> The strike was memorable also for the harsh repression the colonial state let loose upon the strikers as well as the sweepers' creative resistance. During a fracas, women threw pots of excreta at the policemen, who tore off their uniforms as they ran away, vowing not to return without permission to shoot at the strikers.<sup>26</sup> This strike entered the annals of the sweepers in north India, for it represented their strength and their hope.

Consequently, in 1929, Punjab sanitation workers led by O.P. Gill, Chunni Lal Thapar, Balmukund and Guramdas 'Alam' formed a union, the Safai Mazdur Sangh (SMS). SMS was strongly influenced by the Communists, with Guramdas 'Alam' having been close to the CPI (he was later to join) and CSP workers (such as Master Kabul Singh).<sup>27</sup> The 1937 strike of sanitation workers in Rawalpindi was organized by the CSP and the

23 Some of these problems have been worked out by Sudipta Kaviraj, "On Political Explanations in Marxism," in K. Bharadwaj and S. Kaviraj (eds.), *Perspectives on Capitalism* (Delhi 1989). On the issue of categories, see Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London 1973), 21-3.

24 Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab, 1926-1947* (Delhi 1979), 71-4.

25 *On Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad* (Calcutta 1989), 27.

26 Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal, 1928-1934. The Politics of Protest* (Delhi 1987), 57.

27 "Babu Chunni Lal Thapar ka Ludhiana mein Shraddhanjali," *Jago, Jagte Raho*, April 1978.



Communists (notably Alaf Din, Fazal Din, Joginder Lal Jain and Meher Chand Ahuja). When the strike seemed to be fizzling out, “Fazal Din adroitly and surreptitiously blocked the sewerage system one night forcing the municipal authorities to seek peaceful and negotiated settlement.”<sup>28</sup> In Hoshiarpur, a CSP cadre, Balbir Singh Chowdhry was the President of the Sweepers’ Union, and in Ambala, Devi Krishan (CSP) helped set up the union. Despite the breath of union organizing, the 1939 strike in Jalandhar remains the centerpiece of the memories of sanitation workers to this day.

In June-July 1939, the Jalandhar Municipality’s sanitation workers (through the SMS) went out on strike, an event which sent a shiver down the spine of both colonial authorities and nationalist leaders. Lala Chundi Lal Thapar, Balmukund, Allah Rakha and Om Prakash Gill led the strike, which quickly spread through other municipalities of the Punjab. Processions and civil disobedience filled the streets, showing the influence of Gandhianism on the practices of protest. Some men among the marchers struck themselves on their chests with blades, to demonstrate both their physical strength as well as their durability, but also as a threat to the colonial officials. Entire neighbourhoods were left empty, since families came and participated in the marches. Om Prakash Gill remembers that this was the first time that people locked their doors, given that there were no neighbors to tend their homes. Eight leaders lay down in front of garbage trucks which attempted to leave the sanitation depot with scabs. The leadership, since it came from among the workers, was as radical and ready to die as the rank and file. The police came on the scene, armed and ready to shoot. At this point, the bourgeois Congress leadership entered the scene.

Om Prakash Gill is still a loyal Congressman, yet he was as ready as his friends who remember those days to say that it was the Congress who sold their struggle out for a pittance. The “Gandhi of the Doab,” Pandit Mull Raj, who was the President of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee, entered the negotiations to arbitrate the dispute between the municipality and the sweepers. An arbitration committee was formed, which included ‘city fathers’ (including municipal members), and the committee offered sympathetic consideration to the sweepers. The committee urged the sweepers to go back to work while it negotiated a settlement. As the sweepers did not budge, Mull Raj enlisted Congressmen to do the work which, of course, undercut the sanitation workers. In most strikes of sanitation workers of this period, the arbitration bodies granted higher wages for a short period of time, pending evaluation, which were then reduced when the deciding body offered its verdict.<sup>29</sup>

28 K.L. Johar, *Unsung Torch Bearers. Punjab Congress Socialists in Freedom Struggle* (New Delhi 1991), 66.

29 Mohinder Singh, *Depressed Classes*, 104.

In the 1939 strike, however, the settlement remained, with the sanitation workers being offered a minimal wage increase.<sup>30</sup> As Mohinder Singh argues, and in accord with the thesis of economism which we are developing, these small wage increases were granted by municipalities and the urban middle-classes because they “would much rather tolerate, nay sympathize with attempts to raise the wages than go the whole hog and abolish caste distinctions.”<sup>31</sup>

In time, a repertoire of demands was constructed, which was raised at each sweeper strike. Higher wages, legitimate unions, regulated leave and holidays, rules of procedure for hiring and working, and maternity benefits were the main demands. Educational opportunities and better housing also appeared on some agendas, but these were not given too much importance by most unions. In 1937, when Congress took office in the provinces, the office-holders were urged to deliver on their promises. “When industrial labour is crying for sickness, insurance and holidays with pay,” a senior Gandhian wrote, “the sweeper does not get even a few hours on Sunday off.”<sup>32</sup> Concern and humanist outrage formed the centerpiece of the Congress populist idiom, which itself forged many of the components of the common sense of the oppressed Indian. Social reform, in the process, became the logical end-point of political work.

The populist idiom acted, however, in diametrically-opposed ways — towards centralization and towards economism. First the Congress was urged to produce a “uniform policy” which would “compel local bodies to provide decent minimum wage, permanency of service, a month’s leave with full pay, maternity leave for women sweepers, immunity from bribes and arbitrary dismissals, proper arrangement for housing, water, light and primary education, and which may be conducive to the well-being of the community.”<sup>33</sup> The various reforms in themselves are perfectly desirable, but the responsibility for their enactment was not given to local bodies who would adopt them by

30 Om Prakash Gill, 4 and 5 April 1993 and Rolu Ram, 3 and 4 April 1993, Jalandhar.

31 Mohinder Singh, *Depressed Classes*, 103. Cf. Marx: “A larger part of the workers’ own surplus product, which is always increasing and is continually being transformed into additional capital, comes back to them in the shape of means of payment, so that they can extend the circle of their enjoyments, make additions to their consumption fund of clothes, furniture, etc., and lay by a small reserve fund of money. But these things no more abolish the exploitation of the wage-laborer, and his situation of dependence, than do better clothing, food and treatment, and a larger *peculium*, in the case of the slave. A rise in the price of labour, as a consequence of the accumulation of capital, only means in fact that the length and weight of the golden chain the wage-laborer has already forged for himself allow it to be loosened somewhat.” *Capital I* (London 1976), 768-9.

32 A.V. Thakkar, “Plight of the Sweepers,” *The Hindu*, 13 September 1937.

33 Harijan Sevak Sangh, *Annual Report* (Delhi 1936-7), 16.

pressure from the untouchables themselves. The onus was sent to the Executive, who brushed them off as matters too minor for consideration. When the leadership did take action, it was to pass a resolution to themselves to “take prompt and effective measures to improve their condition of work and also wages where these are found to be inadequate.”<sup>34</sup> The very long list of reforms came down to an improvement of work conditions and to a raise in wages — economism of the highest order.

The reforms called for were all beneficial to the sweepers, but they came with another negative effect, the undermining of independent initiative from the sweepers themselves. The Congress justified its paternalism by the correctness of its reforms. However, the very reforms they promised the sweepers, lost the sweepers the chance to develop their self-respect and self-assertiveness in the process of struggle. Mistakes in a political movement provide an immeasurable pedagogical exercise, one which the Congress did not allow the sweepers to undergo.<sup>35</sup> R.R. Bhole, the untouchable labour activist, worked with Gandhi for a number of years, only to break with him on this issue in 1935. He urged untouchables to “retain independence of action,” the very moment which the Congress wished to absorb them.<sup>36</sup> The contradictions between socialist aspirations and the forces of reproduction in class society plagued the struggles of the untouchables.

### The Sweeper Question

Caste has a close connection with the profession for one’s livelihood. Everyone’s (ancestral) profession is his own ‘dharma’ (duty or religion). Whoever gives it up, falls from his caste, and is himself destroyed, that is, his soul is destroyed. (Gandhi)<sup>37</sup>

How was the sweeper, the embodiment of the untouchable, to be emancipated? Was the sweeper to be emancipated by abolishing the task of sweeping? Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi’s closest disciple, declared that the “only possible reform in this profession would be to eradicate it altogether.” The people who sweep must be given land for cultivation and the opportunity to lead a prosperous life.<sup>38</sup> That would leave the world without sweepers, a proposition

34 Delhi CID SB (noncurrent) records, 3rd installment, no. 26 in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

35 Paul Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg* (New York 1972), 86.

36 R. Bhole, 29 July 1936 in R. R. Bhole Papers, NMML.

37 Quoted in J.E. Sanjana, *Caste and Outcaste* (Bombay 1946), 26.

38 *Harijan*, 22 January 1955.

which the bourgeoisie did not take seriously. The sweeper needed to be emancipated without abolishing the very job of sweeping.

Instead of demanding that there be no sweepers in the world, the Gandhians put forward the proposition that all those untouchables who became sweepers because of birth must not be permitted to sweep; they must be given other jobs, while other castes must do the sweeping work — this was the highest enunciated ideal of Indian nationalism. Alongside this ideal, lay the highest enunciated ideal of modernity — that no-one should do sanitation work which will now be done by technology (water-flush latrines, etc.). That solution, however, could not be implemented because of lack of resources and thereby, it was more an ideological mantra. The problem with the water-flush system was not just a lack of resources, but that engineers had designed technologies which had not taken into account the limits of such things as water and landfills.<sup>39</sup>

Instead of no-one doing sanitation work, some Gandhians argued that everyone must do the work as a spiritual endeavour. “It is time for the liberation of the Bhangi. In truth, if every person becomes his or her own Bhangi, that will be the ideal.”<sup>40</sup> Saints, such as Gandhi we are told, cleaned toilets to “weaken [their] ego and to acquire humility.”<sup>41</sup> Each morning every person must rise and do “worship to filth,” to appreciate the work it takes to make the world beautiful and then, to remove dirt “in the correct manner.”<sup>42</sup> This form of emancipation is an extremely personalized one, for it still does not offer a solution for street sweeping and other urban sanitary functions.<sup>43</sup> Further, this strategy relied upon a transformation in the Brahmanical mores which declared that dirt is taboo for certain privileged castes.

The Brahmanical theories of early twentieth century Hindu reformers equated untouchability with hygiene and cleanliness. The modernist discourse of science was utilized to validate the argument that dirt is bad for one’s health, so people who encounter dirt should be shunned until they have cleaned themselves.<sup>44</sup> Untouchables are dirty because they do dirty work. It is not that sweepers are naturally or ontologically dirty, but that as they remove the nightsoil and refuse their bodies come in contact with intestinal parasites

39 Vijay Prashad, “Revolting Labor: The Making of the Balmiki Community,” PhD thesis, The University of Chicago, 1994, Chapter IV.

40 Vallabswami, *Safai. Vigyan aur Kala* (Varanasi 1957), 34.

41 Vinoba Bhave, *Shanti Yatra* (New Delhi 1950), 226. The larger implications of Bhave’s social theory can be glimpsed in his 1940 book, *Swaraj Shastra* (Wardha 1955).

42 Vallabswami, *Safai*, 32.

43 In fact, Bhave said that he scavenged in villages, but “he doubted if he could do it in a city. The gutters and latrines and the filth of cities was unbearable.” *Harijan*, 5 December 1948.

44 Prashad, “Revolting Labor,” Chapter VI.

and other germs. Certainly modern science offers a complex typology of dirt, disease and germs. Anthropologists of South Asia are preoccupied with themes of purity and pollution, and they provide a number of plausible theories which attempt to explain untouchability in such modernist terms. Satish Saberwal, for instance, argued for a distinction between inherited pollution, occupational pollution and episodic pollution.<sup>45</sup> Both inherited and occupational pollution rely upon the impurity of a community's occupation. These pollutions refer to the sort of impurity which occupational groups must bear throughout their lives because of the dirty tasks which they conduct. The 'dirty' tasks in question are dirty because they cause contact with bodily emissions or organic life such as saliva, semen, menstrual blood, faeces, urine, hair, nail-clippings, etc. Barbers, sweepers, skimmers, etc. are some of the occupations which carry the stigmata of pollution. Everyone is polluted at some point, whether daily (as they go to the toilet) or monthly (during menstruation cycles) — this is episodic pollution, since it is not ontological. For the caste Hindu 'individual,' ablutions can erase the mark of the dirt (i.e. episodic pollution); for the low caste 'community,' the dirt determines its social status (i.e. occupational pollution). But the notion of episodic pollution is also becoming more prevalent, Saberwal argues, since even those who conduct dirty tasks are not considered polluted after they have bathed, an index of the strength of Gandhianism.<sup>46</sup> Shalini Randeria makes a further distinction, which concurs to a certain extent with the growing tendency for episodic pollution to encompass occupational pollution. She argues that occupational pollution is also seen as temporary, whereas permanent pollution occurs only due to a transgression of social norms or a mythical fault or error.<sup>47</sup> These arguments are all fairly general and typological, but they do provide us with some understanding of the centrality of the fear of dirt in the social consciousness of caste Hindus. Untouchables, in my own ethnographic experience, have no especial love for dirt, but those who work as sweepers do so because it provides them with employment. I am in agreement with Robert Deliége who argues that untouchability "cannot be reduced to a mere problem

45 Satish Saberwal, *Mobile Men: Limits to Social Change in Urban Punjab* (Delhi 1990), 201-2.

46 Cf. Gandhi: "If such a Bhangi has been engaged in sanitary work, to take a bath (after contact with him) is simple hygiene and is absolutely necessary, but failure to do so does not threaten one with spiritual ruin. There can be no sin in refusing to touch a Bhangi when the occasion requires us to do. It is sinful not to welcome a Bhangi, who has bathed himself, to take a seat by our side, and it is ignorance to believe that his touch will pollute us." *Navajivan*, 17 July 1921.

47 Shalini Randeria, "Carrion and Corpses: Conflict in Categorizing Untouchability in Gujarat," *Archives-Europeennes-de-Sociologie*, 30 (1989), 172.

of ritual pollution, it is *also* a problem of social deprivation.”<sup>48</sup> It would be hard to prioritize between the social and the ritual, for they have historically operated together.

To transform the notion of occupational pollution, Hindu reformers relied upon the theory of episodic pollution. “The meaning of cleanliness,” it was enjoined, “is place (*sthan*). Things must be put in their proper place.”<sup>49</sup> If the act of cleaning was made mundane, the mere removal of a thing from one place to the next, then castes other than untouchables might adopt the job — understanding that they were not in danger of being infected with a social taboo. The Gandhians adopted this strategy because they realized that a professional sanitation workforce was inevitable for the cities. To end the reliance upon one caste, itself a result of the imperatives of the colonial regime and the legacy of Brahmanism, the Gandhians understood the need to revalorize the act of sanitation. But their desire to end the reliance upon one caste (*Bhangi Mukti*) became the ideal of their struggle and not the realizable goal.

Once an objective attains the status of an ideal, it is sure to lose any hope of being realized. Compromises are formulated, which themselves become the objectives. The ideals remain as a way to symbolically appear to be interested in their achievement. If not *Bhangi mukti*, then at the very least, *Bhangi ksht mukti*, the improvement of the working conditions of sanitation workers so that those who do the work might not be socially and economically discriminated. *Bhangi ksht mukti* meant two things: one, that sanitation work be made clean so that when workers from various castes do the work, they will not be discriminated and two, that the work be made clean so that when the Bhangis do the work, caste Hindus will not look down upon them. The problem was formulated in such a way that the reformers first pledged to improve the conditions of the work; at some later date, after the stigma had fallen from the work, high castes might become sweepers. *Bhangi Ksht Mukti* meant the emancipation of the Bhangis in the long-run.

*Bhangi ksht mukti*, therefore, implies the reform of the actual practice of cleaning in order to reduce the stigma borne by the Bhangis. Technology must be brought to the aid of the scavengers to make their work less dirty, and thereby less polluting. The 1932 Constitution of the HSS urged municipalities

48 Robert Deliége, “Replication and Consensus: Untouchability, Caste and Ideology in India,” *Man* (N.S.), 27 (1992), 170. Dumont makes the remarkable statement that those “who are most oppressed materially are at the same time seen as supremely impure.” *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago 1970), 137. We do not want to take our argument into such functional territory. “Untouchability is more than a religious system,” Ambedkar rightly wrote in 1946, “it is also an economic system which is worse than slavery,” “What Congress and Gandhi,” 196-97.

49 Vallabswami, *Safai*, 3-4.

to provide “special facilities for scavengers calculated to make their conditions of work cleaner and easier.” They must be given water for washing their bodies after work as well as their implements and they must be given clean clothes.<sup>50</sup> Swami Sundarananda urged caste Hindus to improve the inhuman conditions under which their sweepers laboured, since the methods the sweepers had to use were “most unhygienic.”<sup>51</sup> The work is filthy, and so the people who do this filthy work themselves become equated with filth. As Malkani puts it, “the Bhangi is filth because he carries our filth.”<sup>52</sup>

For Gandhian Congressmen the notion of episodic pollution was dominant. The limit of Congress activism was thus: make the work clean and make the worker clean. “All scavenging should really be done without soiling the hands or any part of the body,” a Congressman wrote, which meant that the sanitation worker should not come into direct contact with impurities. Given this approach to sanitation, “the work would assume a dignity which it does not carry at the moment.” In a comment on this statement, Gandhi wrote that he advocated “bye-laws requiring authorized receptacles, brooms, etc. which would avoid physical handling of dirt and would also prescribe simple working costume.”<sup>53</sup> Two sorts of reforms were needed: reforms of the toilets and reforms of the implements used by the sweepers to clean toilets and remove nightsoil and garbage. Scrapers made of durable metals allowed the sweepers to remove nightsoil from service privies without having to take recourse to such implements as mudguards from bicycles, small brooms, and broken vessels. Faeces pans and wheelbarrows enabled sweepers to stop having to carry nightsoil and refuse on their heads in baskets. Dustbins had to be placed around the city, in order to cut down on sweeping.<sup>54</sup> On the issue of sweeping, the question of brooms held the interest of the Gandhians for many years. Scientific observation enabled Gandhians to develop brooms for different situations. At the Ashrams, tests were conducted and brooms developed, which Gandhians promoted to the municipalities.

Implements, however, were not able to emancipate the Bhangi from the conditions of their work. What was necessary was the transformation of the system of privies. Until recently, the main toilet used in north Indian cities required a sweeper to visit it each morning and physically remove the nightsoil to a depot. The nightsoil was either in a basket, in a pan or simply splattered on the floor and flowing into the nearest open drain. Sometimes ash or dry earth was thrown on the nightsoil in order to cut down on the smell and to

50 Harijan Sevak Sangh, *Constitution* (Delhi 1932), 18-23.

51 Swami Sundarananda, *Hinduism and Untouchability* (Delhi [1922] 1945), 143-4.

52 N.R. Malkani, “A Hereditary Proletariat,” *Interdiscipline*, 7 (Winter 1970).

53 *Harijan*, 6 October 1946.

54 Ishwarbhai Patel, *Safai-Marg Darshika* (Delhi 1970), 103-118.

reduce the preponderance of flies. In the words of Malkani: “whoever devised this type of latrine devised it so as to make it a place of filth and stink — an evil necessity in the house. He also literally made scavenging so filthy that the scavenger himself became identified with filth.”<sup>55</sup>

From the 1930s to 1969, the focus of Gandhian activity for *Bhangi Ksht Mukti* was on the creation of better toilets. At both the Gandhi Museum and the offices of the HSS (in Delhi), there is a remarkable exhibit which honours this focus. Imbedded in a dais about two feet off the ground are a series of toilets designed by various prominent Gandhians. We have, among others, Appa Patwardhan’s Gopuri latrine, Dr. Kessel’s latrine, farmer latrine, and Janata Sandas. In 1963, at Ahmedabad, Ishwarbhai Patel took charge of the newly founded Safai Vidyalaya, located in Sabarmati Ashram. Toilets gained pride of place for the HSS. The Gandhian toilets all had a rural focus; they were not effective in urban areas.<sup>56</sup> Gandhi commonly used the model of the village when he spoke of sanitation technology. The emphasis on placing earth on faeces is only one example of the theoretical priority Indian nationalism accorded to the rural. In the mythical village, the sweeper worked along with other castes, reciprocally and benevolently in the pursuit of utilitarian peace. The urban sweepers and cities themselves were not favoured with nationalism’s diagnosis. *Varnashramdharm* (the reconstructed occupational-based regime of castes) was silent on the city, for the theory of reciprocity could not recast the urban landscape or deal with the prevalence of wage-labour.<sup>57</sup>

Urbanization changes the focus entirely, since one cannot assume the existence of abundant open space for the disposal of nightsoil and other refuse. Two urban technologies which were available to the Gandhians were sewerage systems and septic tanks. Both enabled sanitation workers to keep their physical distance from sewage, although septic tanks have to be cleaned periodically. Sewerage systems rely upon an immense amount of water and they are exorbitantly expensive to install and operate. These macro considerations themselves might have driven Gandhians away, for they were more keen on micro projects. For urban systems, the Gandhians experimented with septic tanks, which however, are expensive and require large amounts of water (especially the modified Aqua Privy). On the basis of the design of the septic tank, Bindeshwar Pathak devised the Sulabh Shauchalaya, the easy-toilet, which is being used in many Indian cities. It is the technological hope of the present.<sup>58</sup>

55 N.R. Malkani, *Ramblings and Reminiscences of Gandhiji* (Ahmedabad 1972), 28.

56 This point has been made by the founder of Sulabh International, Bindeshwar Pathak, *Road to Freedom. A Sociological Study on the abolition of scavenging in India* (Delhi 1991).

57 The career of Vinoba Bhave is exemplary in this. In 1950, he enunciated a movement against the money economy (*Kanchan Mukti*), and in 1953 he began to urge people to donate their labour (*Shramdan*) and land (*bhoodan*) for the reconstruction of the country.



## Credit, Consciousness, Control

From the standpoint of the untouchables, the improvement of their work practices as sanitation workers did impact upon their everyday lives. The reforms made it easier to do their work, they reduced the risk of illness and they even improved the workers' social status. Yet the reforms did not rank high on the workers' hopes for the future. In his statement on the Temple Entry Bill in 1933, Ambedkar pointed out that untouchables "think that the surest way for their elevation lies in higher education, higher employment and better ways of earning a living."<sup>59</sup> Emancipation, for the young untouchables in the 1930s, came to mean hoping for a better job. To secure that better job, they considered three avenues — credit, education and political power.

### Credit

When merchants and traders secure prestige and status for themselves, they buy these with their money. Money can buy any caste a different history and a different life. Money as credit, however, was not available to the untouchables in satisfactory amounts. Organizations such as the HSS gave loans for businesses such as pig-rearing and hen-rearing, neither professions which would emancipate the untouchable from untouchability. Moneylenders and the sweepers' crafty sanitary overseers were the only people willing to lend the sweepers money at exorbitant interest rates which drew them further into debt.

In order to provide an option, some sweepers and one friendly overseer, Devkinandan Singh, formed the Cooperative Credit and Thrift Society in 1931 for the menial staff of Delhi municipality. The membership in three years rose to 190, with 50 water-carriers and 140 sweepers. Cooperative societies, such as this one, however, were unable to provide enough credit for sanitation workers' to become petty merchants. In such societies, the workers pool their revenue (variable capital) to form the capital fund. Apart from a nominal membership fee, the 61 founder members purchased at least one Rs.

58 Pathak, *Road to Freedom*, 54; on Pathak's own Sulabh scheme which is a great advance as far as public toilets are concerned. At the bottom of the Sulabh toilet, there is a layer of earth "so that all the water leaches out and helps easy decomposition and transformation of the excreta into organic manure." The residue is pure manure, which can be removed without temporary pollution (7). See his *Sulabh Shauchalaya* (Patna 1981). His toilets make an excellent case for more public and less private toilets.

59 Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi," 110.

10 share, which they could buy in instalments. Further, a deposit of 8 annas enabled the society to have a working capital. In three years, the share money totalled Rs. 1067 and the deposits totalled Rs. 1278. The money could not 'grow' at an adequate rate, because the 6% per annum interest rate did not amount to much on a small capital. The net result of such societies is that the surplus of one worker is borrowed by another worker to modify real income (to keep up with inflation), to pay off debts, or for extraordinary expenditures. The societies for this reason did not permit accumulation on a productive scale. The maximum loan to a member was up to three months of his/her pay, and it was recoverable in 11 installments. The interest was 13% per annum. In two years, the society loaned Rs. 6000, and received Rs. 4000 back.<sup>60</sup> The money was for consumption, and the society enabled the mere circulation of capital as an advance, not for accumulation. The loans allowed, therefore, did not permit the sanitation workers to escape from their occupation.

### **Education**

In 1936, the Mehtars' Labour Union held a general meeting at the Queen's Garden behind the Town Hall in Delhi. A resolution was passed which stated that "notwithstanding that several Municipal Committees have passed resolutions for compulsory education ... they are not properly acted upon and the education of the children of the depressed classes and particularly of the sweepers' community is not properly looked after."<sup>61</sup> The issue of education became the whipping post for every reform group. Any group which did not claim to want to educate the untouchables had little hope of support. Education, as a desired norm, had an important place among the untouchables.

The Union recognized that resolutions were introduced in the Municipality as well as to the government. Gokhale introduced a resolution in the central legislature for government-sponsored schools for untouchables in 1911, but that was voted down. The government struck down three more similar resolutions: Dadabhoy (1916), Sarma (1918) and Jayakar (1928). In 1916, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi Hailey, declared that "I will cause inquiries to be made into the need for and the possibility of providing a school within the city itself purely for sweeper children." This inquiry, however, did not go

60 N.R. Malkani, "A Promising Experiment," *Harijan*, 9 September 1933.

61 Mehtars' Labour Union to GOI, 23 March 1936 in Chief Commissioner's Papers (Education), B file no. 3 (89), 1936, Delhi State Archives (DSA).

anywhere since Hailey made up his mind that “it seems not unreasonable to leave [the sweepers] to work out [their] future by [their] own resources and by such facilities as private enterprise is prepared to extend to [them].”<sup>62</sup> By ‘private enterprise,’ the Government meant missionaries who took a great deal of interest in the production of devout colonial subjects.

Apart from the good offices of religious organizations, the DMC did open schools on their own account. The presence of government schools enabled the municipal authorities to labour under the belief that their schools admitted untouchable children “without distinction.” In 1931, the municipal secretary wrote that “it is not an uncommon sight now to see in our schools even sweeper boys rubbing shoulder to shoulder with high caste Hindu boys and the prejudice which was noticeable five years ago against the admittance of boys of depressed classes to our schools has entirely died down.”<sup>63</sup> During discussions with untouchable elders, they often turned to tales of their schools.<sup>64</sup> An Arya Samaj teacher named Dayananda in old Delhi in the mid-1930s seated caste Hindu children on mats or blankets and the untouchable children on the naked floor. If any untouchable made a mistake, the teacher would insult him/her. Other stories of being beaten with long sticks so as not to come into contact with the teacher or of not being allowed to sit in the class are commonplace. I was curious if this sort of environment was also to be found in the municipal schools. From all indications, it seems that the words of the municipal secretary were written in hope rather than with veracity. The notable thing about the municipality was that it offered free books and writing materials, it took no fees and it provided some refreshment.

In response to harsh treatment from their teachers, untouchable children did not stay in school for very long. Both untouchable boys and girls came to Class I in reasonable numbers. The drop-out rate for the second class and beyond was alarming. 70% of the boys and 95% of the girls left school after Class I. The decline after that was about 50% per class. In 1939, for instance, only 6 boys and 27 girls reached Class X. More boys started school, but a smaller percentage finished. Equal numbers of boys and girls attended vocational school.<sup>65</sup> The high drop-out rate has been attributed to the low value given to education, although it could be argued that the constraints within which parents operated limited their ability to send their children to school — it might have been necessary to send them to the municipality to sign on as

62 Chief Commissioner’s Papers (Education), B file no. 169, 1916, DSA.

63 Chief Commissioner’s Papers (Education), DC no. 32, 1931, DSA.

64 Madan Lal Saugwan, Kalan Masjid, 28 March 1993; O.P. Shukla and O.P. Chauhan, Balmiki Colony, New Delhi, 21 March 1993.

65 The figures are from the *Annual Report on the Progress of Education in the Delhi Province*, from 1936 onwards.

sanitation workers in order to ward off starvation.<sup>66</sup> It should be pointed out that in the 1930s, more Balmiki girls finished school than boys, an indicator of how differently gender operates among untouchables than caste Hindus. Women, in untouchable communities, do not operate solely as the embodiment of tradition, for they are also important as workers. If they can succeed, then they must be encouraged for that would only increase the opportunities for the entire community.<sup>67</sup>

The Gandhians also took an interest in schools, not schools for liberal arts to produce a politicized citizenry, but schools for vocational study. What was the need to raise the untouchables' hopes, Gandhi asked privately, especially since there is a great deal of peace in knowing one's vocation?<sup>68</sup> In 1933, the HSS started a school for untouchable children at its headquarters Harijan Niwas (Kingsway Colony) to learn crafts. The purpose of this school was to train children in the declining arts so that they would "refuse to follow the profession of their forefathers."<sup>69</sup> The net result of such schools was that untouchable children learnt declining arts, such as weaving and spinning, whose economic value in an age of industrial mass reproduction was already suspect. G.D. Birla, in a letter to Thakkar Bapa, put forward the HSS's policy on vocational education. "It is not an intention of the [Harijan Industrial] home to give the Harijan home boarders higher education ... The Sangh has no desire to produce an army of unemployed. Therefore, only such education will be imparted to the students as to make them fit to earn their livelihood as honourable members of Hindu society."<sup>70</sup> The Harijan Home, which was opened in December 1934, concentrated on tanning, carpentry and wicker-work.<sup>71</sup>

Untouchable youth did turn to vocational education, for it provided them with skills for occupations other than sanitation work. But some untouchables wanted access to liberal education, to literacy, which they understood as the *summun bonnum* of modern civilization and their road to citizenship. Ghanshyam Das Gupta initiated the All India Harijan Welfare Mandal in Delhi (1941) to provide this highest skill, literacy. The Mandal established centers, staffed and run by local untouchables in untouchable neighborhoods,

66 Chief Commissioner's Papers (Education), B file no. 3( 89), 1936 in DSA.

67 William Houska, "The Characteristics of Son Preference in an Urban Scheduled Caste Community," *Eastern Anthropologist* 34 (January-March 1981).

68 In 1927, Santram asked Gandhi why he accepts the caste system, even in terms of the reconstructed *varnashramdharm*. Gandhi replied that there is peace in it (*usmein bara aaram hai*); one knows one's vocation and so there is no need to get flustered as a youth. Santram, Oral History Transcripts, no. 238 in NMML.

69 Mukht Behari Verma, *History of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1932-1968* (Delhi 1971), x.

70 Birla to Thakkar, 31 August 1934 in Delhi CID SB (Noncurrent) records, 3rd Installment, no. 25 in NMML.

71 *Hindustan Times*, 15 December 1934.

which provided free education and medical care, although the first task was to draw students to the centers and to politicize them. At the centers, the sweepers discussed their low wages, war allowance, maltreatment by their overseers, the unsanitary condition of their neighborhoods and other such issues. The centers enabled the sweepers to discuss their problems, to find out their rights and to find a way to demand justice. Gupta urged them not to take sudden action, for that would be suicidal. The plan was to make contacts with sweepers' unions around the country and to make their struggle strong enough for the state to respond positively.<sup>72</sup>

### Political Power

In a democracy, politicians have access to power, albeit power which has been given to them by the very people who envied them that power — their constituency. It became very clear to the untouchables that education would not necessarily offer them a future; their numerical power was a weapon which they could wield over the heads of those who needed their support. As early as the late 1930s, this feeling of being a 'vote bank' was evident. In response to this feeling, Dr. Ambedkar called for representation on political bodies and for a united workers' and untouchables' front to secure power and to counter both Capitalism and Brahmanism (through his Independent Labour Party). In the 1930s, Ambedkar reached out to all untouchable leaders in order to form an alliance which could not be dismissed by the British and the Congress. The Congress realized the consequences of such an alliance, and in response to this they developed untouchable leaders to counter this independent initiative.

In a biting indictment, Ambedkar argued that Gandhian political initiatives "collected a swarm of grateful Untouchables who are employed to preach that Mr. Gandhi and the Hindus are the saviors of the Untouchables." Gandhians tried to "create a slave mentality among the Untouchables" and to "kill the spirit of independence from among the Untouchables." Under the "pretense of service" and by its "petty services," the Gandhian political initiatives made the untouchables into "mere recipients of charity."<sup>73</sup> The patronage which the Congress, the HSS and the other nationalist organizations offered was small; so much so that when Mr. Birla offered some seats to untouchables on the Raghmal Charity Trust in Delhi "there was such a rush on the part of members of the depressed classes to get on board." It was left to the benevo-

72 Delhi CID SB (noncurrent) records, 2nd installment, no. 14 in NMML.

73 Ambedkar, "What Congress and Gandhi," 266-67 and 251.

lence of Birla to take untouchables onto the coveted junket.<sup>74</sup> The untouchable as spokesmen for the Congress was the focus of Bhim Pahalwan's poem: *Bhangi ki kimat bhang hai, bhole vacan bharbhang*. "The price of the Bhangi is defeat/simple promises are completely broken." Bhangis can be bought off, he said, and their very act of sale is the end of his community.<sup>75</sup> As a young untouchable man told me, "there are no elders here, only old people." The elders, those who should be respected, are not educated; the older educated are so corrupt that they are not respected, only old.<sup>76</sup>

### **To be Treated as Humans**

The political movement of the workers has ... as its *ultimate objective* the conquest of political power. (Marx to Bolte, 23 November 1871).

Political movements which put forward antagonistic demands were shunned by the bourgeois leadership of the Congress. The demands of the untouchables, therefore, were reinterpreted by the Congress in order to remove the antagonistic components (and thereby transform the character of the movement). Credit for accumulation came to mean credit for consumption; education and literacy came to mean vocational education in declining industries; political power came to mean political patronage. These translations are offered in broad strokes, but it is important to remember that these are only general trends. Incorporation seemed to be a far more acceptable solution to the Congress than independent initiative. The very act of incorporation, however, produced reforms which appeared to be a "mockery" of the situation of the oppressed. As Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in 1936, "we cannot check the flood or save these people by some of us carrying water away in a bucket."<sup>77</sup> Philanthropy could not suppress social contradictions.

Not only could philanthropy betray the wide humanist demands of the workers, but the small gestures provoked anger amidst radical leaders and untouchables. Small gestures needed to be replaced by a total change. "Nothing by way of educating them or raising their social status can be done," Rameshwari Nehru argued, without removing them from the very neighborhoods in which the untouchables were forced to live. "As long as the sweepers live in their present surroundings, no work can be done amongst them by any reformist organization. It is no use trying to teach them to be clean or to

74 G.D. Birla, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma* (Bombay 1953), 74-5.

75 Bhim Pahalwan, 20 March 1993, Pahargunj, New Delhi.

76 Rakesh Panther, 5 June 1993, Balmiki Colony, New Delhi.

77 Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London 1936), 588-90.

keep their children clean when they are forced to live in the filth from which they cannot get away." Nehru's is not a dehumanizing portrait of the underclass, but an attempt to see beyond the thick haze of poverty, to see the way to promote social change. "It is surprising," she writes, "that in spite of the nauseating atmosphere, they manage to live such healthy lives. For the interior of their houses were clean, and I even noticed an attempt made by certain inmates at beautifying the surroundings by rearing a few flower plants in the pots. How they have the heart to do it and how they manage to keep up their spirits is difficult to understand. They undoubtedly try to make the best of their surroundings." The recognition of the struggles to survive provide the elite radical with the certainty that change is possible.

The 'conundrum' of the elite leadership was this: how to provide reforms given the scarcity of resources? Radical leaders did not spend much time consoling the withered conscience of the perplexed elite: "If money can be found for parks and gardens and roads and lighting and a hundred other things, it can easily be found for bettering the living conditions of the sweepers."<sup>78</sup> Rameshwari Nehru represented a side of Gandhianism, a radical side which contrasted the wealth of the colonial regime and of the merchant classes with the poverty of the masses. That side of Gandhianism was often reduced to a cliché in speeches, but it enabled certain leaders to debunk the question of scarce resources — if nothing else, it was to claim that the problem was not scarce resources, but resource allocation.

Politicized untouchables certainly found the Gandhian reforms unsatisfactory. In 1932, Gandhi sent some clothes to an untouchable hamlet. The gift was returned, with the following statement: "if you want to give us clothes, then give it for our entire lives, what kind of *tamasha* [circus] is this? With these few pyjamas what will we do? If you want to do economic reform for us, then do it properly."<sup>79</sup> These untouchables protested against the narrowness and the sheer symbolism of the reforms. They protested against the paternalism of the reforms and the inability of the Gandhians to organize to build power.

In unions the untouchables came into their own, especially in the crucial years of 1946-47. In February 1946, the strike of the Royal Indian Navy ratings in Bombay captivated the country and inaugurated a period of strikes. As Sumit Sarkar argues, the strikes of the 1920s and 1930s were restricted to the major industrial centers of Bombay and Calcutta, whereas the strikes of the 1940s were nationwide.<sup>80</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that municipal

78 Rameshwari Nehru, "Harijan Bastis in Delhi," *Harijan*, 24 April 1937.

79 Mohan Lal, Oral History Transcripts, no. 208 in NMML.

80 Sumit Sarkar, "Popular Movements and National Leadership, 1945-47," *A Critique*, 128.

sweepers went out on strike in cities and towns across the country — Bombay, Srinagar, Multan, Delhi, Lahore, and the many cities of the United Provinces are only a few examples of the cities where sweepers put down their brooms and dustpans in anticipation of a new world.

The militancy of sweepers disturbed Gandhi. In April 1946, he made his famous statements on sweepers' strikes. "There are certain matters," he wrote, "in which strikes would be wrong. Sweepers' grievances come in this category." If sweepers did not do their work, the cities' refuse would accumulate; the refuse would be a breeding ground for disease. Sweeping is an essential service, which must be honored by the sweepers as such. The sweepers, however, had been behaving in a manner contrary to Gandhi's expectations. "In spite of my close attachment to sweepers," he wrote, "better because of it, I must denounce the coercive methods they are said to have employed." He does not share with his readers what these coercive measures might be, but he does indicate their consequences. The Bombay Sweepers' Union refused to come to arbitration. Gandhi felt that this would lead to recalcitrance from the bourgeoisie and an eventual collapse of municipal administration. "Coercion cannot but result in the end in chaos." In order to avert this sort of crisis, townspeople should "learn the art of cleaning their own and the city's drains, so that if a similar occasion arises they are not non-plussed and can render the necessary temporary services." Perhaps, the military might be brought in. The immediate step should be to welcome the untouchable, "to stretch out the hand of fellowship to the *bhangis*," in order to see that they get justice without having to demand it.<sup>81</sup>

In the context of this 'hand of fellowship,' a question was posed in *Harijan* in 1946: "The Communist Party has successfully organized Sweepers' unions and helped them to secure their rights through *hartals* [strikes], etc. But the Harijan Sevak Sangh's activities are confined mostly to welfare work. It cannot, therefore, successfully compete with the Communists for popularity among the Harijans. Don't you think that in view of this, the Harijan Sevak Sangh ought to alter its policy and method of work?" In response, Gandhi wrote, "we must be guided in our policy by our sense of right, not by the lure of winning cheap popularity. If the Harijan Sevak Sangh is convinced that it is working on the right line, it will keep on to it, regardless of what others might or might not do." If HSS organizes unions, it will not be "for political motive," but "for bettering the social or economic position of Harijans."<sup>82</sup> The HSS would better the sweepers' conditions, without the sweepers having to demand that their conditions be altered. "The *bhangis* may

81 *Harijan*, 21 April 1946.

82 *Harijan*, 21 July 1946.



not go on strike for lack of these amenities,” Gandhi wrote, “but it is up to all citizens to raise their voice on behalf of them.”<sup>83</sup> If the untouchables did have any real chance of ventilating their real grievances, this chance was now being systematically obliterated. They must not represent themselves, they must be represented.

An untouchable can, however, make some modest claims for a better life, *in the right spirit*. When an untouchable wrote to Gandhi asking him what a sanitation worker must do when he is confronted with starvation, Gandhi replied: he must inform his fellow citizens and the municipality that he is discontinuing services. The difference between this and striking is that the latter is a “temporary measure in expectation of relief,” while the former is the act of renouncing the work “because there is no expectation of relief.” To discontinue work is to cease to be a sanitation labourer, an act which would shock society rather than hold it hostage.<sup>84</sup> In accordance with this philosophy, Malkani differentiated between ‘wild cat strikes’ which clamor for extra cash and the ‘sensible types of strikes’ which are for supply of new tools, for new types of sanitary latrines and for direct access to these latrines. “The strike for more and more cash which goes down the drain in drink have created a state of tension between the Bhangi and the public.”<sup>85</sup> The liberal Congressman is not averse to giving a rise in wages, but begrudges the sweeper his or her use of the money. There is an understanding here of the inability of the sweeper to accumulate capital (into finance capital), since all the sweeper can do is to widen his or her circle of consumption. When reform degenerates into a critique of consumption, the goal seems to be to produce a ‘rational consumer,’ rather than to enable the sweeper to become a ‘rational capitalist.’<sup>86</sup>

In 1946, a sanitation workers union from Ballia (United Provinces) sent a letter to the General Secretary of the Congress Party to inform the Party that the union planned to go on strike in April. The union had already sent its demands to the municipality: medical care, maternal leave (3 weeks before and 6 after), leave to bury relatives, cost of living increases, wage increases, fixed pay days, rest time, statutory duties of darogas, and roll-call at Town Hall and not at the daroga’s house. The Congress’ response is emblematic of its reluctance to adopt the hopes of the sweepers into its own political praxis. The response also allows us to doubt the easy certainties of the Gandhians, so loud in their slogans about liberation. “A strike,” the General Secretary warned the union, “especially a strike of sweepers, is a serious matter. It is to

83 *Harijan*, 12 May 1946.

84 *Harijan*, 12 April 1946.

85 Malkani, *Rambles*, 225-6.

86 Marx, *Capital II*, 519-21.

be considered carefully in all its aspects before it is undertaken. You will do well to meet responsible Congress workers in your district before you take any extreme step. All possible avenues of peaceful settlement should be explored before you have recourse to direct action.”<sup>87</sup>

The first demand which the union listed, and which the Congress did not answer, is the most basic demand of the sweepers: “if we are humans, let us be treated as such.” This is the quiet voice of democracy, which urges (antagonistically) that small reforms are good and necessary, but they should not be substituted for emancipation. It is not just a fight for higher wages, the union argues, revolting against the economism of the elites. For the bourgeoisie, a strike is synonymous with the demand for higher wages. As Birla wrote to Mahadev Desai in 1947, “there are strikes everywhere — everybody wants higher wages and less work.”<sup>88</sup> The sweepers’ unions in 1946 did put up a brave fight for social change, but they had to be content with one sop — higher wages.<sup>89</sup> Disappointed with the failure of revolutionary change because of the strength of elite opposition, untouchables turned to two forms of bifurcated struggle: economic (the fight for higher wages) and political (a civil rights fight for recognition as equal political citizens). Having internalized the bourgeois split between the economic and the political, the untouchables conceded their powerful fight to be treated as human. In recent years, the emergence of a renewed untouchable movement whose primary demand is a total and revolutionary transformation in society reminds us that the will can still be optimistic. As far as history is concerned, we have cause to be pessimistic as we see the depth of bourgeois economism’s impact upon the dynamic of the workers’ movement. Social change needs to take as its framework the totality of life’s problems and not the fragmented bourgeois worldview — the untouchable demand to be treated as humans is the cry for a renewed revolutionary dream.

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87 All India Congress Committee Papers, G-25 (KW- 1), 1940-46, TL 1332 in NMML.

88 Quoted in Sarkar, “The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism,” 138-9.

89 For the results of a series of strikes, see *Hindustan Times*, 13, 22 and 25 April 1946.