

GANDHI TURNS ALL HIS ZEAL TO AID THE "UNTOUCHABLES"

In Letters to His Friends He Proclaims His Willingness to Die in The Hope of Uplifting a Huge Class of Native Indians

Mahatma Gandhi has announced his determination to enter upon another fast, this time in protest against the stand of the Indian Government on the question of the rights of the large class of Indians known as Untouchables. Gandhi's ideas in undertaking such a fast and the evils to which he calls the world's attention are set forth in the article below. The author is a personal friend and biographer of Gandhi.

By C. F. ANDREWS.

ABOLITION of the curse of untouchability from 40,000,000 people in India, revision in the light of modern requirements of the whole Hindu caste system and fasts of Mahatma Gandhi for the removal of these social disabilities and religious anomalies—these things, which make up the background of the Indian picture today, are extremely difficult to explain in a simple manner to Western minds.

And yet the movement for reform represents in sum total a vast upheaval and revolution intimately affecting one-fifth of the world's population. It is rapidly transforming the Orient, in our own generation making it in its social life dynamic instead of static, active and aggressive rather than passive and supine. It is releasing world forces which may lead on, in the end, to perhaps the greatest of all modern advances in the upward progress of mankind.

For with the possible exception of China, no more rapid social change is taking place in any country in our own generation than that caused by religious influences in India. All these processes have been immensely accelerated by Mahatma Gandhi's fasts. No one in the West can afford to be ignorant of them or to neglect what is thus happening before our eyes in the Eastern Hemisphere today. For the economic life of the West and the free current of world trade depend largely upon the unobstructed course of this social revolution.

Changes in Gandhi.

With Mahatma Gandhi himself, also, a change of immense spiritual significance has quite recently taken place, which has shifted in a new direction his angle of vision. Unforeseen circumstances have driven him forward, with an inevitable tendency toward leaving for a time the struggle for India's external freedom in order to concentrate his whole spiritual personality and all the forces at his command on the one subject of the removal of untouchability. His passionate desire, even while in jail, is to free from a servitude worse than death the millions of his own fellow-countrymen who are held down in social and religious bondage.

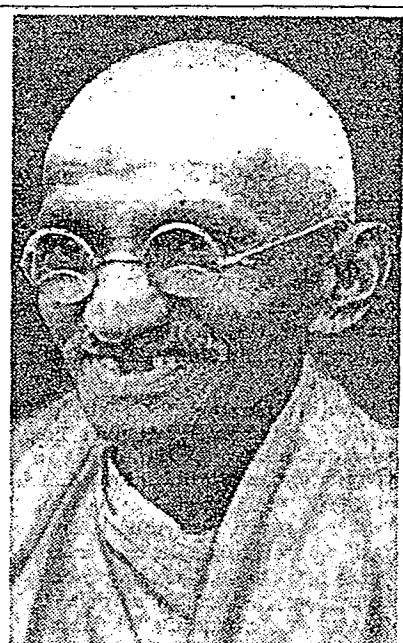
The time for action has suddenly become propitious, and Gandhi has already struck a sovereign blow for the emancipation of the untouchables at the exact psychological moment. With amazing courage, and the instinct of true genius, he is now prepared to cast his whole political career into the balance and to sacrifice life itself, if necessary, for this great cause.

With the joy of a saint or a martyr, he is waiting impatiently

this ultimate challenge of death. "I claim," he has declared, "that my life now—whatever remains of it—is a hostage for the removal of untouchability."

What, then, in its origin, is this "untouchable problem" of India? What, again, is the meaning of these strange "fasts unto death" which Mr. Gandhi so disconcertingly announces?

The ancient Sanskrit word for "color"—varna—was used also, in its social meaning, for "caste." Thus "caste" and "color" were identical. This points to the Hindu system of "caste" and "out-caste," "touchable" and "untouchable," representing in origin the perpetuation of an ancient color bar. Such a color bar in India goes back cer-



Times Wide World Photo.
Mahatma Gandhi.

tainly more than 3,000 years, and possibly as far as 4,000 years—i. e., to 2000 B. C.

At such an extremely remote date, when the white Aryan races poured over into India as invaders from the uplands of Central Asia, they imposed a rigid color bar upon the darker aboriginal peoples who were already in possession of the soil. The white race desired to keep its own racial purity, and therefore set up this ban or religion, or tabu.

The Traditional Color Bar.

This color bar was so rigidly maintained that it has gone on perpetuating itself even up to the present day. The darker peoples have thus become segregated in India from the lighter races. The dark-skinned aboriginals, in the process of time, have become the "untouchables," or depressed classes. The light-skinned races are now the high-caste people of India, forming the backbone of Hinduism.

Furthermore, these aboriginals, after their complete subjection, were set to perform menial occupations, which were regarded as pollution by the high-caste Hindus. Thus the whole race became polluted in the eyes of the caste Hindus, and the gap between the depressed classes and the high-caste Hindus became wider and wider. The degradation of the former became at last almost complete.

Just as the origin of untouchability is explained by ancient Hindu practice, so Mahatma Gandhi's "fasting unto death" goes back to an old Hindu custom. When a great penance or sacrifice had to be offered in order to remedy some national or individual wrong, a deeply religious person would fast with such austerity that life itself would be forfeited. Mahatma Gandhi regards this "monster" of untouchability, as he calls it, as a national curse for which Hindus are specially guilty. He feels that his own life must be sacrificed in order to remove the evil.

The prospect of death in no way daunts Gandhi. Even if the way of spiritual suffering which he has chosen seems strange to us, we can appreciate the fact that it is familiar to the Orient.

I quote below a portion of a letter written by him to one of his most intimate friends. "The earlier fast," he writes, "had a political tinge about it, and superficial critics were able to say that it was aimed against the British Government. But this time the ordeal, if it has to come, will be such that it will not be possible to give any political color to it. It will be a purely religious fast; and you will recall that the last fast was only broken on the clearest possible understanding that I might have to resume if there was any breach of faith by the so-called caste Hindus."

Gandhi's Decision.

In another letter to a friend, during his earlier fast, he wrote:

"The conception of giving my life for the Untouchables is not of yesterday. It is very old. There was no call from within for many years. But the British Cabinet's decision, last August, came like a violent alarm bell awakening me from slumber, and telling me: 'This is the time.' It therefore provided the psychological moment, and I instinctively seized it.

"In reality it covers the very things you would have me die for and live for—one and the same thing in essence. For he who sees life in death, and death in life, is the real seer. It may be this is my last letter to you. If I die, I shall die in the faith that comrades like you, with whom God has blessed me, will continue the work of the country—which is also the work of humanity—in the same spirit wherein it was begun.

"Meanwhile pray for me, that God may give me strength enough to walk steadily through the veil. If Hinduism is to live, Untouchability must die. If the interests of the country are to be one with those of humanity; if the good of one faith is to be the good of all faiths, this will come only by the strictest adherence to truth and non-violence in thought, word and deed."

Once more I may quote from a letter which Mahatma Gandhi has written to me personally, in reply to one of mine, in which I urged him to have some consideration for "Brother Ass"—as St. Francis called it—his body.

"I assure you I do not want to kill 'Brother Ass,'" he wrote back. "He is in God's safe keeping. If God means not to spare him, neither your effort nor mine can save him. For the present he is flourishing on goat's milk and plenty of fruit, with home-made brown bread thrown in."

An Answer to Criticism.

Thus almost gayly he is facing the future. On one point more than any other, perhaps, he is peculiarly sensitive to criticism; for it has recently been brought up against him that, owing to his "fast unto death," he is really imposing on outsiders a subtle form of coercion which can hardly be distinguished from violence. To this criticism Mr. Gandhi replies:

"My answer simply is that I must not be expected to surrender my cherished convictions because I hold a prominent position in the Indian world, or because I have some political influence. I cannot barter away my faith, or suppress its movement, for the sake of retaining my social position or political influence. Everything is subservient and is derivable from that faith. Ask me to deny or suppress it and it would be worse than asking me to commit suicide.

"I would also venture to suggest that those who subordinate their convictions to their regard for my position or political influence can only have shallow convictions. Convictions are made of sterner stuff than that. People have been known to stake their all for the sake of their convictions, which may be called their religion.

"God will take care of the fasting fraternity. Those who fast will do so for defending truth as they see it; and God, the God of Truth, will do what He likes with them. If their fast is in answer to the inner urge from God, it will be its own reward; and it will be well with them whether the purpose to which it is directed is apparently fulfilled or not."

Let there be no mistake concerning the future of Mr. Gandhi. Even if the atmosphere ahead may grow clear for the time being, nevertheless it is by no means yet set fair and altogether unclouded. For orthodoxy, in all its ancient stronghold, is busily gathering together its stormy forces for a final struggle; and into that struggle, whenever the call comes, Mr. Gandhi is determined to throw nothing less than his life.