

What Path to Salvation



(Speech delivered by Dr. Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 1st May 1936, Bombay)

Translated from the Marathi "*Mukti Kon Pathe*" by Vasant Moon

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You must have come to know by now that this Conference has been purposefully called upon to brood over the declaration of Conversion which I made recently. The subject of conversion is very dear to me. According to me, the whole of your future depends upon this subject. I have no hesitation in saying that you have clearly understood the gravity of this problem. Had it not been so, you would not have assembled here in such large numbers. I am very happy to see this (gathering).

Since the time of the declaration of Conversion, our men have conducted several meetings at various places and expressed their views and opinions, which I hope must have reached you. But we have had no opportunity so far to gather, and to discuss and decide the problem of conversion at one place. I was much more concerned for such an opportunity. You will all agree that planning is very necessary for making the movement of Conversion a success. Conversion is not a children's game. It is not a subject of entertainment. It deals with how to make man's life successful. Just as a boatman has to make all necessary preparation before he starts on a voyage, so also we have to make such preparation. Without preparation, it will be impossible to reach the other shore.

But just as the boatman does not collect luggage unless he gets an idea of the number of passengers boarding the boat, so also is the case with me. Unless I get an idea as to how many persons are willing to leave the Hindu fold, I cannot start preparation for conversion. When I expressed to some workers of Bombay that I would not be able to judge the public opinion unless we meet at a conference, they shouldered the responsibility of this conference voluntarily, without putting up any excuse about expenses and labour. What pains they had to take, has already been described by our revered leader and the President of the Reception Committee, Shri Rawji Dagduji Dolas, in his speech. I am extremely indebted to the Reception Committee of the Conference for arranging the meeting, after making such strenuous efforts.

Some people may raise an objection as to why the conference is called [with the participation] only of the Mahars. If the declaration of Conversion is meant for all the Untouchables, why has a meeting of all the Untouchables not been convened? Before starting the discussion on the issues before the conference, I feel it obligatory to reply to these questions. There are various reasons for convening a conference of the Mahars alone.

Firstly, neither any safeguards nor any social rights are to be demanded from the Hindus through this conference. The only question before this conference is, what should be done for the betterment of our life? How to carve out the path for our future life? This question can be solved, and needs to be solved, by the respective castes separately, discussing it through their respective conferences. This is one of the reasons why I have not called a conference of all the Untouchables.

There is another reason for convening a conference of Mahars only. About ten months have passed since the declaration of Conversion was made. During this period, sufficient efforts have been made to awaken the public conscience. I felt that this was the proper time to judge the public opinion. In my opinion, the holding of meetings of each caste separately is the simplest way to judge the opinion. In order to materialize [=give substance to] the problem of conversion, it is very necessary to judge the public opinion. And I believe the public opinion judged through the meetings of each caste separately will be more representative and reliable than the opinion arrived at through a common meeting of all the Untouchable castes. In order to avert this situation, and to ensure the [knowledge of] public opinion, this meeting of Mahars alone has been called.

Although the other communities are not included, they will not be at a loss. If they do not intend to convert, they have no reason to regret their not being included in this conference. If at all they wish to leave their religion, nothing can come in their way simply because they have not participated in this conference. The other communities, like the Mahars, are free to hold meetings and express their public opinion. I would advise them to hold such meetings, and whatever help is needed from me shall be extended to them to the best of my capacity.

This much is enough as introduction. Now I turn to the main subject. For a common man, this subject of conversion is important as well as difficult to understand. It is equally difficult to grasp the subject. It is not an easy task to satisfy the common man on the subject of conversion. I realise that unless you are all satisfied, it is difficult to bring the idea of conversion into reality. I shall therefore try my level best to explain the subject as simply as possible.

The Material Aspect of Conversion

There are two aspects of conversion: social as well as religious, material as well as spiritual. Whatever may be the aspect or line of thinking, it is necessary to understand at the beginning the nature of Untouchability and how it is practiced. Without this understanding, you will not be able to realise the real meaning underlying my declaration of Conversion. In order to have a clear understanding of the problem of Untouchability and its practice in real life, I would want you to recall the stories of atrocities perpetrated against you.

The instances of beating by the caste Hindus for the simple reason that you have claimed the right to enroll your children in the Government school, or the right to draw water from the public well, or the right to take out a marriage procession with the groom on horseback, are very common. You all know such instances, as they happen right before your eyes. But there are several other causes for which atrocities are committed on the Untouchables by the caste Hindus--causes which, if they are revealed, the foreigners will be surprised to hear.

The Untouchables are beaten for putting on clothes of superior quality. They are whipped because they used utensils made of metal like copper, etc. Their houses are burnt for having purchased land for cultivation. They are beaten for putting on the sacred thread on their body. They are beaten for refusing to carry away dead animals and eat the carrion, or for walking through the village road with socks and shoes on, or for not bowing down before a caste Hindu, or for taking water in a copper pot while going out in the field to ease (defecate). Recently, an instance has been noticed where the Untouchables were beaten for serving chapattis' at a dinner party.

You must have heard of, and some of you must also have experienced, such types of atrocities. Where beating is not possible, you must be aware as to how the weapon of boycott is used against you. You all know how the caste Hindus have made your daily life unbearable by prohibiting you from labour, by disallowing your cattle from grazing through the jungle [=uncultivated land], and by prohibiting your men from entering into the village. But perhaps very few of you have realized as to why all this happens! What is at the root of their tyranny? To me, it is very necessary for us to understand it.

This is a Matter of Class Struggle

The instances cited above have nothing to do with the virtues or vices of an individual. This is not a feud between two rival men. The problem of Untouchability is a matter of class struggle. It is a struggle between caste Hindus and the Untouchables. This is not a matter of doing injustice against one man. This is a matter of injustice being done by one class against another. This class struggle has its relation with the social status. This struggle indicates how one class should keep its relations with the other class. From the instances given above, one thing is clear. This struggle starts as soon as you start claiming equal treatment with others. Had it not been so, there would have been no struggle for a simple reason like serving chapatti's, wearing superior-quality clothes, putting on the sacred thread, fetching water in a metal pot, seating the bridegroom on horseback, etc. In all these cases, you lose your money.

Why then do the caste Hindus get irritated? The reason for their anger is very simple. Your behavior with them on a par insults them. Your status is low. You are impure, you must remain at the lowest rung; then alone they will allow you to live happily. The moment you cross your level, the struggle starts. The above instances also prove one more fact. Untouchability is not a timely or temporary feature. It is a permanent one. To put it straight, it can be said that the struggle between the Hindus and the Untouchables is a permanent phenomenon. It is eternal, because the religion which has given you the lowest level in the society is itself eternal, according to the belief of the high-caste people. No change according to times and

circumstances is possible. You are the lowest of the rungs today. You shall remain the lowest forever. This means the struggle between Hindus and Untouchables will continue forever. How you will survive through this struggle, is a main question. And unless you think it over, there is no escape.

Those who desire to behave in obedience to the wishes of the Hindus, those who wish to be their slaves, need not think over this problem. But those who wish to live a life with self-respect and equality will have to think it over. How should we survive through this struggle? For me, it is not difficult to answer this question. Those who have assembled here will have to agree that in any struggle, one who holds strength becomes the victor. One who has no strength need not expect success? This has been proved by experience, and I do not need to cite examples to prove it.

Gain the Strength

The question that follows, which you must consider, is whether you have enough strength to survive through this struggle. Three types of strength are known to man: (1) manpower; (2) finance; and (3) mental strength. Which of these do you think that you possess?

So far as manpower is concerned, it is clear that you are in a minority. In Bombay Presidency, Untouchables are only one-eighth of the total population. And that too, an unorganized [one-eighth]. The castes among them do not allow them to organize. They are not even compact. They are scattered through the villages. Under these circumstances, this small population is of no use to the Untouchables at their crucial hours.

Financial strength is also just the same. It is an undisputed fact that you have a little bit of manpower; but finances you have none. You have no trade, no business, no service, no land. The piece of bread thrown by the higher castes is your means of livelihood. You have no food, no clothes. What financial strength can you have? You have no capacity to get redress from the law courts. Thousands of Untouchables tolerate insult, tyranny, and oppression at the hands of Hindus without a sigh of complaint, because they have no capacity to bear the expenses of the courts.

As regards mental strength, the condition is still worse. The tolerance of insults and tyranny without grudge and complaint has killed the sense of retort and revolt. Confidence, vigour, and ambition have completely vanished from you. All of you have become helpless, unenergetic, and pale. Everywhere there is an atmosphere of defeatism and pessimism. Even the slight idea that you can do something, cannot peep (penetrate) into your minds.

Why this Oppression Against You?

If whatever I have described above is correct, then you will have to agree with the conclusion that follows. The conclusion is: if you depend upon your own strength, you will never be able to face the tyranny of the Hindus. I have no doubt that you are oppressed because you have no strength. It is not that you alone are in a minority. The Muslims are equally small in number. Like Mahar-Mangs, they too have few houses in the village. But no one dares to trouble the Muslims, while you are always a victim of tyranny. Why is this so? Though there are two houses of Muslims in the village, nobody dares to harm them, while the whole village practices tyranny against you though you have about ten houses. Why does this happen? This is a very pertinent question, and you will have to find a suitable answer for this.

In my opinion, there is only one answer to this question. The Hindus realise that the strength of the whole of the Muslim population in India stands behind those two houses of Muslims living in the village; and therefore they do not dare to touch them. These two houses also enjoy a free and fearless life because they are aware that if any Hindu commits aggression against them, the whole Muslim community from Punjab to Madras will rush down to protect them at any cost.

On the contrary [=by contrast], Hindus are sure that no one will come to your rescue, nobody will help you, no financial help will reach you, nor will the officers help you in any eventuality. The Tehsildar and police belong to the caste Hindus, and in cases of disputes between the Hindus and the Untouchables, they are more faithful to their caste than towards their duty. The Hindus practice injustice and tyranny against you only because you are helpless.

From the above discussion, two facts are very clear. Firstly, you cannot face the tyranny without strength. And secondly, you do not possess enough strength to face the tyranny. With these two conclusions, a third one automatically follows. That is, the strength required to face the tyranny needs to be secured from outside. How you will be able to secure this strength is really an important question. And you will have to think this over with an unbiased mind.

Strength Needs to be Brought from Outside

Casteism and religious fanaticism, as I see it, has had a very peculiar effect on the minds and morality of the people of this country. In this country, nobody feels pain at poverty and suffering. And if at all anybody is moved, he does not try to eradicate it. People [give] help in poverty, sorrows, and suffering, only to those who belong to their caste or religion. Though this sense of morality is perverted, it cannot be forgotten that it is prevalent in this country. In the village, the Untouchables suffer at the hands of Hindus.

It is not that there are no men of other religions, and that they do not realise the oppression of Untouchables as unjust. Knowing full well that the oppression of the Untouchables by the Hindus is most unjustified, they do not rush to the rescue of the Untouchables. If you ask them why do they not help you, they would say, "What business do we have to interfere? Had you been the members of our religion, we would have helped you."

From this you will understand one thing: that unless you establish close relations with some other society, unless you join some other religion, you cannot get the strength from outside. It clearly means, you must leave your present religion and assimilate yourselves with some other society. Without that, you cannot gain the strength of that society. So long as you do not have strength, you and your future generations will have to lead a life in the same pitiable condition.

The Spiritual Aspect of Conversion

Until now, we have discussed how conversion is necessary for material gains. Now I propose to put forth my thoughts as to how this conversion is equally necessary for spiritual well-being. What is religion? Why is it necessary? Let us first try to understand. Several people have tried to define religion. But amongst all of these definitions, only one is most meaningful and agreeable to all. "That which knits the people together is religion." This is the true definition of religion. This is not my definition. Mr. Tilak, the foremost leader of the Sanatani Hindus himself, is the author of this definition. So nobody can accuse me of having interpolated [=invented] the definition of religion.

However, I have not accepted it [merely] for argument's sake. I accept it (as a principle). Religion means the rules imposed for the maintenance of society. Mine is also the same concept of religion. Although this definition logically appears to be correct, it does not disclose or clarify the nature of the rules which maintain the society. The question still remains as to what should be the nature of the rules which govern society. This question is more important than that of definition. Because the question of which religion is necessary for a man, does not depend on its definition but on the motive and nature of the rules that bind and govern the society. What should be the real nature of religion? While deciding this question, another question follows. What should be the relation between a man and the society?

The modern social philosophers have proposed three answers to this question. Some have proposed that the ultimate goal of the society is to achieve happiness for the individual. Some say the society exists for the development of man's inherent qualities and energies, and to help him develop his self. However, some put up (maintain) that the chief object of the social organisation is not the development or happiness of the individual, but to create an ideal society.

The concept of the Hindu religion is, however, much different from all these concepts. There is no place for an individual in Hindu society. The Hindu religion is constituted on the class concept. The Hindu religion does not teach as to how an individual should behave with another individual.

A religion which does not recognize the individual is not acceptable to me personally. Although society is necessary for the individual, social welfare cannot be the ultimate goal of religion. To me, individual welfare and progress is the real aim of religion. Although the individual is a part of the society, his relation with the society is not like that of the body and its organs, or that of the cart and its wheels.

Society and the Individual

Unlike a drop of water which submerges its existence with the ocean in which it is dropped, man does not lose his identity in the society in which he lives. The man's life is independent. He is born not for the service of the society, but for the development of his self. For this reason alone, one man cannot make another a slave, in the developed countries. A religion in which the individual has no importance is not acceptable to me. Likewise, Hinduism does not recognize the importance of an individual, and hence it cannot be acceptable to me.

So also, I do not accept a religion in which one class alone has a right to gain knowledge; another has only a right to use arms; the third one, to trade; and the fourth, only to serve. Everyone needs knowledge. Everybody needs arms. Everyone wants money. The religion which forgets this, and with a view to educate a few persons keeps the rest in the dark, is not a religion but a strategy to keep the people in mental slavery. A religion which permits some to bear the arms and prohibits the rest, is not a religion but a plan to keep the latter in perpetual slavery. A religion which opens the path of acquiring property for some, and compels others to depend on these few even for the daily necessities of life, is not a religion, but an utter selfishness.

This is what is called the Chaturvarnya of Hinduism. I have clearly stated my views about it. It is for you now to think whether this Hinduism is beneficial to you. The basic idea underlying a religion is to create an atmosphere for the spiritual development of an individual. If this is agreed upon, it is clear that you cannot develop yourself at all in Hinduism.

Three factors are required for the uplift of an individual. They are: Sympathy, Equality, and Liberty. Can you say by experience that any of these factors exist for you in Hinduism?

Is there any Sympathy for you in Hinduism?

So far as sympathy is concerned, it is nil. Wherever you go, nobody looks at you sympathetically. You all have good (ample) experience of it. Not only this, but the Hindus have no sense of brotherhood towards you. You are treated by them worse than foreigners. If one looks at the relations of the neighboring Hindus and the Untouchables of the village, no one can say that they are brothers. They can rather be called two opposite armies in warring camps.

The Hindus have not the slightest affinity towards you, as they have towards Muslims. They consider Muslims closer than you. Hindus and Muslims are helpful to each other in local boards, in legislative councils, and in business. But is there a single instance of such sympathetic consideration shown towards you by the caste Hindus? On the contrary: they always cultivate hatred against you in their minds. What dreadful effects this hatred has produced, can be heard from those who have had occasion to go to the court for justice or to the police for help.

Does any one of you believe that the court will do justice, and the police will act rightly? And if not, what is the reason for [their] cultivating such a sense of hatred? In my opinion, there is only one reason: you do not believe that the Hindus will rightly use their authority, because they lack sympathy towards you. And if it is so, what is the use of living in the midst of such hatred?

Is there Equality for You in Hinduism?

In fact, this question should not be asked. Such a living example of inequality will not be found anywhere in the world. Nowhere in the history of mankind can be seen inequality more intense than Untouchability. On account of [this] superiority-inferiority complex, one may not offer his daughter to another in marriage, or one may not dine with others. Such examples of inequality are not uncommon. But is there a system anywhere existing, except in Hindu religion and Hindu society, where a man is treated [as] so low as [for others] not to touch him? Can anybody believe that there exists an animal called man by whose touch the water is polluted, and the god becomes unworthy for worship?

Is there any difference between the treatment given to an Untouchable and to a leper? Though the people have nausea in their minds for a leper, they have at least sympathy for him. But people have nausea as well as hatred against you. Your condition is worse than [that of] a leper. Even today, if anyone hears words from the mouth of a Mahar at the time of breaking the fast, he will not touch the food. Such filth is attached to your body and your words. Some people say that Untouchability is a stigma on Hindu religion. This statement, however, does not convey any sense at all. Nobody believes that the Hindu religion is dirty. The majority of the Hindus, however, believe that you are dirty, you are polluted.

How have you been brought to this condition? I think you have been forced to this condition because you continued to be Hindus. Those of you who have become Muslims are treated by the Hindus neither as Untouchables nor even as unequal's. The same is the case with those who became Christians. An instance recently happened at Travancore [that is] worth mentioning. The Untouchables called Thiya in that region are prohibited from walking on the streets. A few days ago, some of these Untouchables embraced the Sikh religion. All of a sudden, the ban prohibiting them from walking on the street was withdrawn. What does all this show? It proves that if there is any reason for your being treated as Untouchables and unequal's, it is your relation with the Hindu religion.

In such a state of inequality and injustice, some Hindus try to soothe the Untouchables. They say, "Get educated yourselves, be clean, and then we will touch you, we will treat you on par." In fact, we all know by experience that the condition of an educated, moneyed, and clean Mahar is as bad as that of an uneducated, poor, and dirty one. Leave aside for the time being this aspect, and consider: if one is not respected because he is uneducated, poor, and not a well-dressed person, what should a common Mahar do? How can he secure equality, who cannot gain education, achieve property, or dress highly?

The principle of equality as taught in Christianity and Islam has no concern whatsoever with knowledge, wealth, or dress, as outward aspects. Both these religions consider a sense of humanity as the mean feature of religion. They preach that the sense of humanity should be respected by all; and none should disrespect others, none should treat others as unequals. These teachings are completely wanting in the Hindu religion. What is the use of such a religion, in which man's sense of humanity has no value? And what is the good in clinging to it?

In reply to this, some Hindus cite the **Upanishads**, and proudly say that the God is all-pervading, according to the principle enunciated in the **Upanishads**. It may be pointed out here that the religion and science are two different things. It is necessary to consider whether a particular theory is a principle of science, or a teaching of religion. That the God is all-pervading is the principle of science (philosophy) and not of religion. Religion has a direct relation with the behavior of a man. The principle of the God being omnipresent is not the teaching of religion, it is a principle of science [=philosophy]. This statement is supported by the fact that the Hindus do not act according to the above principle. On the contrary: if Hindus insist on this very point, and say that the principle of God being omnipresent is not a principle of philosophy but is a basic principle of this religion, I would simply say that nowhere in the world such meanness would be found as exists among Hindus. The Hindus can be ranked among those cruel people whose utterances and acts are two poles as under apart. They have (as in the proverb) *"Ram on their tongue, and a knife under their armpit."* They speak like saints and act as butchers.

Do not keep company with those who believe that the God is omnipresent, but treat men worse than animals. They are hypocrites. Do not keep contact with those who feed ants with sugar, but kill men by prohibiting them to drink water. Are you aware what effects their company has produced upon you? You have ceased to be respected. You have no status at all. To say that the Hindus alone do not pay you any respect is only a half-truth. Not only the Hindus, but the Muslims and the Christians too, consider you the lowliest of the lowly. In fact, the teachings of Islam and Christianity do not create the sense of high and low. Then why do the followers of these two religions treat you as low? Because the Hindus consider you as the lowest of the low, the Muslims and Christians also consider you likewise. They fear that if they treat you on par, the Hindus will treat them also as low. Thus we are not low in the eyes of the Hindus alone. We are the lowest in the whole of India, because of the treatment given [us] by the Hindus. If you have to get rid of this shameful condition, if you have to cleanse this filth and make use of this precious life, there is only one way--and that is to throw away the shackles of the Hindu religion and the Hindu society in which you are groaning.

Have you had any Freedom in the Hindu Religion?

Some people might say that you have had a freedom of trade guaranteed by law, like any other citizen of the country. You are also said to have got the personal liberty like others. You will have to think deeply over such statements--whether they really carry any meaning. What is the good in saying, "You have freedom of trade," to a person who is deprived of any business by virtue of his birth, by the society? What is the truth in consoling with the words, "You are at liberty to enjoy your property, nobody else will touch your money," to a person to whom all the doors of means of livelihood and acquiring property are closed? To tell a person who is treated as unfit for entry into any service due to the defilement attached to him by birth, and working under whom is most contemptuous [=contemptible] for others, that he has a right to serve, is making a fun of him.

The law may guarantee various rights. But those alone can be called real rights, which are permitted by the society to be exercised by you. The law guarantees to the Untouchables the right to wear decent clothes. But if the Hindus do not allow them to put on these clothes, what is the use of this right? The law guarantees to the Untouchables the right to fetch water in metal pots, the right to use metal utensils, the right to put tiles on their houses; but if the Hindu society does not allow them to exercise these rights, what is the use of such rights? Various instances of such types can be cited. In short, that which is permitted by the society to be exercised can alone be called a right. A right which is guaranteed by law but is opposed by the society is of no use at all.

The Untouchables are in need of social liberty, more than that which is guaranteed by law. So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by law to you is of no avail. Some persons might advise you that you have physical freedom. Of course, you can go anywhere, can speak anything you wish, subject to the restrictions imposed by law. But what is the use of such freedom? Man has a body as well as a mind. He needs physical as well as mental freedom. Mere physical freedom is of no use. Freedom of the mind is of prime importance. Really speaking, what is meant to a man by physical freedom? It means he is free to act according to his own free will. A prisoner is unchained and is set free. What is the principle underlying this? The principle is, he should be free to act according to his free will, and he should be able to make the maximum use of the abilities he possesses. But what is the use of such freedom of a man whose mind is not free? The freedom of mind is the real freedom.

A person, whose mind is not free, though he is not in chains, is a slave. One whose mind is not free, though he is not in jail, is a prisoner. One whose mind is not free, though he is alive, is dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one's existence. What is the proof, then, to judge that the flame of mental freedom is not extinguished from a person? To whom can we say that his mind is free? I call him free who with consciousness awake, realises his rights, responsibilities, and duties; he who is not a slave of circumstances, and is always bent upon changing them in his favour, I call him free. One who is not a slave of usage, customs, and traditions, or of the teachings because they are brought down from the ancestors; one whose flame of reason is not extinguished--I call him a free man.

He who has not surrendered himself, who does not act on the teachings of others blindly; who does not keep faith on anything unless [it has been] examined critically in the light of the cause and effect theory; who is always prepared to protect his rights; who is not afraid of public criticism; who has enough intellect and self-respect so as not to become a doll in the hands of others--I call such a man a free man. He who does not lead his life under the direction of others, who carves out his own aim of life according to his own reason, and decides himself as to how and in what way the life should be led--I call him a free man. In short, a man who is the master of his own [life], him alone I consider a free man.

In the light of the above observations, are you free? Have you any freedom to carve out your own life and your aim? In my opinion, not only you have no freedom, but you are worse than slaves. Your slavery has no parallel. In the Hindu religion, one cannot have freedom of speech. A Hindu must surrender his freedom of speech. He must act according to the **Vedas**. If the **Vedas** do not support the actions, instructions must be sought from the **Smritis**, and if the **Smritis** fail to provide any such instructions, he must follow in the footsteps of the great men. He is not supposed to reason. Hence, so long as you are in the Hindu religion, you cannot expect to have freedom of thought.

Some people might argue that the Hindu religion did not force you alone into mental slavery, but has snatched away the freedom of mind of all other communities. It is quite true that all the Hindus are living under a state of mental slavery. But from this nobody should conclude that the sufferings of all are alike. Everyone in the Hindu religion is not equally affected by the adverse effects this mental slavery has produced. This mental slavery is in no way detrimental to the material happiness of the caste Hindus. Though the caste Hindus are slaves of the above-mentioned trio--viz., **Vedas**, **Smritis**, and the dictates of great men--they are given a high position in the Hindu social system. They are empowered to rule over others. It is an undisputed fact that the whole Hindu religion is the creation of the high-caste Hindus for the welfare and prosperity of the high-castes.

Society, which they call religion, has assigned you the role of the slave. So that you may not be able to escape from this slavery, every arrangement is made in the structure of the society. And that is why you are more in need of breaking the bondage of the mental slavery of this religion than is any other community. Hinduism has marred your progress from all sides. It has sacked [=devastated] your mental freedom and made you slaves. In the outer world also, it has doomed you to the condition of a slave. If you want to be free, you must change your religion.

Untouchables' Organisation and Conversion

The present movement of the Untouchables has been very severely criticized. It has been said that there are several castes among the Untouchables, and every caste practices untouchability. Mahars and Mangs do not dine together. Both these castes do not touch the scavengers, and practice untouchability against them. It is therefore asked what right these people have to expect from others the non-observance of the practice of untouchability, when they themselves practice casteism and untouchability amongst themselves. The untouchables are generally advised to abolish castes and untouchability from amongst them, and then come [to the caste Hindus] for redress.

There is a little truth in this argument. But the allegations made in this against the Untouchables are absolutely false. It cannot be denied that the castes included in the (category of) Untouchables practice untouchability. But equally, it is false to say that they are in any way responsible for this crime. Casteism and untouchability originated not from the Untouchables, but from the high-caste Hindus. And if this is true, the responsibility for this age-old tradition falls on the caste Hindus and not on the Untouchables. While practicing untouchability and casteism, the Untouchables merely follow the lesson taught by the caste Hindus. If this lesson is not true, the burden of its being untruthful falls on those who taught it, and not on those who learnt it.

Though this reply may appear to be correct, it does not satisfy me. Though we are not responsible for the causes due to which castes and untouchability have taken root among us, it will be insane not to fight them but to allow them to continue as they are. Though we are not responsible for the introduction of untouchability and castes among us, we are surely responsible for their annihilation. And I am glad that all of us have realised this responsibility.

I am sure there is no leader among the Mahars who advocates the practice of casteism. If comparison is to be made, it will have to be made among the leaders. Compare the educated class of the Mahar community with that of the Brahmins, and one will have to admit that the educated Mahars are more eager to abolish castes. This can well be proved by facts also. Not only the educated class of Mahars, but even the uneducated and illiterate Mahars, is the protagonists (advocates) of the abolition of castes. This also can be proved. Today, there is not a single person in the Mahar community who is opposed to the inter-caste dining among the Mahars and the Mangs. I feel greatly satisfied that you have realised the necessity of the abolition of castes--for which I extend my heartiest congratulations.

But have you ever thought as to how the efforts toward the abolition of castes can be made successful? Castes cannot be abolished by inter-caste dinners or stray instances of inter-caste marriages. Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of the mind. The teachings of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice casteism; we observe untouchability, because we are asked to do it by the Hindu religion in which we live. A bitter thing can be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be made Amrit (nectar). To talk of annihilating castes is like talking of changing poison into Amrit. In short, so long as we remain in a religion which teaches man to treat man as a leper, the sense of discrimination on account of caste, which is deeply rooted in our minds, cannot go. For annihilating castes and untouchability from among the Untouchables, change of religion is the only antidote.

The Distinction between "Change in Name" and "Change in Religion"

So far, I have placed before you the points in favour of conversion. I hope this has been good food for your thoughts. Those who consider this discussion very difficult and complicated--I propose to put up [=provide] simple thoughts in simple language for them.

What is there in conversion which can be called novel? Really speaking, what sort of social relations do you have with the caste Hindus at present? You are as separate from the Hindus as Muslims and Christians are. The same is [true of] their relation with you. Your society, and that of the Hindus, are two distinct groups. By (our choosing) conversion, nobody can say or feel that one society has been split up. You will remain separate from the Hindus, as you are today. Nothing new will happen on

account of this conversion. If this is true, then why should some people be afraid of conversion? I, at least, do not find any reason for such fear.

Secondly, though, you undoubtedly have understood the importance of a change of name. If anybody from among you is asked about his caste, he tells it as Chokhamela, Harijan, or Walmiki, but does not say that he is a Mahar. Nobody can change a name unless certain conditions demand it. There is a very simple reason for such a change of name. An unknown [=unknowing] person cannot distinguish between a touchable and an Untouchable. And so long as a Hindu does not come to know the caste of a person, he cannot have born in him the hatred of that person for being an Untouchable. The caste Hindus and Untouchables behave in very friendly ways during journeys, so long as they are unaware of their castes. They exchange betels, bidis, cigarettes, fruits, etc. But as soon as the Hindu comes to know that the person with whom he is talking is an Untouchable, a sense of hatred germinates in his mind. He thinks that he is deceived. He gets angry, and ultimately this temporary friendship ends in abuses and quarrels.

Such experiences are not new to you. Why does all this happen? The names that depict your caste are considered so filthy that even their utterance is enough to create a vomiting sensation in the heart of Hindus. Thus by calling oneself a Chokhamela instead of a Mahar, you try to deceive the people. But you know, people are not deceived. Whether you call yourself a Chokhamela or a Harijan, people understand what you are. By your actions, you have proved the necessity of a change of name. Then what objection should there be to a change of religion? Changing a religion is like changing a name.

A change of religion, followed by a change of name, will be more beneficial to you. To call oneself a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, or a Sikh, is not merely a change of religion, but is also a change of name. That is a real change of name. This new name will have no filth attached to it. It is an overall change. No one will search for the origin of it. The change of name as Chokhamela or Harijan has no meaning at all. In this case, all the hatred, contempt, etc., attached to the original name passes to the new name. So long as you remain in the Hindu religion, you will have to change the name. [To seek change] by calling oneself a Hindu is not enough. Nobody recognizes that there is a man called a Hindu. So also, calling oneself a Mahar will not serve the purpose. As soon as you utter this name, you will not be allowed to come near. So I ask you, why should you not change your name permanently by changing your religion, instead of changing to one name today and another tomorrow, and thus remaining in the state of a pendulum?

The Role of Opponents

Since the beginning of this movement of conversion, various people raised various objections to it. Let us now examine the truth, if any, in such objections. Some Hindus, pretending to be religious preachers, advise you, saying, "Religion is not a thing that can be consumed. Religion cannot be changed as we change our coat daily. You wish to leave this Hindu religion and embrace another one. Then do you think that your ancestors who clung to this religion for so long a period were fools?" Some wise men have raised this question.

I do not find any substance in this objection. A congenital idiot alone can say that one should stick to his religion because it is ancestral. No sane man will accept such a proposition. Those who advocate such an argument seem not to have read history at all. The ancient Aryan religion was called Vedic religion. It has three distinct characteristics: beef eating, drinking, and merry-making was the religion of the day. Thousands of people followed it in India, and even now some people dream of going back to it. If the ancient religion alone is to be adhered to, then why did the people of India leave it and accept Buddhism? Why did they divorce [themselves] from the Vedic religion?

It cannot be denied that our ancestors lived in the ancient religion, but I cannot say that they remained there voluntarily. The Chaturvarnya system prevailed in this country for a pretty long time. In this system, the Brahmins were permitted to learn, the Kshatriyas to fight, the Vaishyas to earn property, and the Shudras to serve. This way of life was the rule of the day. In those days, the Shudras had no learning, no property, and no food and clothing. Your ancestors were thus forced to live in penniless and armless (disarmed) conditions. Under these circumstances, no man with common sense can say that they accepted that religion voluntarily. Here it is also necessary to consider whether it was possible for your ancestors to revolt against this religion. Had it been possible for them to revolt, and had they still not acted upon [the possibility], only then can we say that they had accepted this religion voluntarily.

But if we try to look into the then-prevalent conditions, it will be clear that our ancestors were forced to live in that religion. Thus this Hindu religion is not the religion of our ancestors, but it was a slavery forced upon them. Our ancestors had no means to fight this slavery, and hence they could not revolt. They were compelled to live in this religion. Nobody can blame them for this helplessness. Rather, anyone will pity them. But now nobody can force any type of slavery upon the present generation. We have all sorts of freedom. If the present generation do not avail [themselves] of such freedom and free themselves, one will have to call them, most regretfully, the most mean, slavish, and dependent people who ever lived on earth.

The Difference between Man and Animal

Only a fool can say that one should cling to one's own religion only because it is ancestral. No sane person can accept such an argument. "You should live in the same circumstances in which you are living at present" may be worthy advice for the animals, but it can never be for man. The difference between an animal and a man is that the man can make progress, while the animal cannot. No progress can be made without change. Conversion is a sort of change. And if no progress can be made without change, i.e. conversion, obviously conversion becomes essential. The ancestral religion cannot be a hindrance in the path of a progressive man.

There is still one more argument against conversion. They say, "Conversion is a sort of escapism. Today a number of Hindus are bent upon improving the Hindu religion. Untouchability and caste can be eradicated with the help of these Hindu reformers. It is therefore not proper to change the religion at this juncture." Whatever opinion anybody may possess about the Hindu social reformers, I personally have nausea for them. I have no regard for them. I have had very bitter experience of them. That those people, who live in their own caste, die in their own caste, marry in their own caste, should befool the people with false slogans, saying, "We will break the caste!", is really surprising. And if the Untouchables do not believe them, they get annoyed with them! Is it not astonishing?

When I hear the slogans shouted by these Hindu social reformers, I recollect the efforts made by the American white people for the emancipation of the American Negroes. Years ago, the condition of the Negroes in America was just the same as that of Untouchables in India. The difference between the two was that the slavery of Negroes had the sanction of the law; while that of your [people], by religion. So, some reformers were trying for abolition of the slavery of the Negroes. But can those white reformers be compared with their counterparts, the Hindu social reformers in India? The American white reformers fought battles in war with their kith and kin for the emancipation of the Negroes. They killed thousands of whites who defended the slavery of the Negro people, and also sacrificed their own blood for this cause.

When we read these chapters through the pages of history, the social reformers in India cut a very sorry figure before them. These so-called benefactors of the Untouchables of India called "reformers" need to be asked the following questions: Are you prepared to fight a civil war with your Hindu brethren, like the whites in America who fought with their white brothers for the cause of the coloured people? And if not, why these proclamations of reforms?

Now let us take the example of Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest of the Hindus who claim to fight for the cause of the Untouchables. To what extent can he go? Mahatma Gandhi, who pilots the non-violent agitation against the British Government, is not prepared to hurt the feelings of the Hindus, the oppressors of the

Untouchables. He is not willing to launch a peaceful Satyagraha against them. He is not even prepared to take legal action against the Hindus. What is the good of such Hindu reformers for us? I don't see any.

Does the Fault Lie with the Untouchables Alone?

Some Hindus attend the meetings of the Untouchables and rebuke the caste Hindus. Some will advise the Untouchables from their stage, preaching, "Brothers, live clean, educate yourselves, stand on your own feet, etc. etc." Really speaking, if anybody is to be blamed for the stigma of Untouchability, it is the caste Hindus alone. It is the caste Hindu class which commits this wrong. Yet no one will try to gather these caste Hindus and preach to them. Those who preach to the Untouchables to continue their agitation with the help of the Hindus and by remaining in the Hindu fold--I would like to remind them of a couple of illustrations from history.

I remember to have read a conversation between an American and an English soldier during the last World War. I find it most appropriate at this juncture. How long the war should be continued, was the subject of discussion. In reply to a question, the Englishman said with great pride, "We shall fight the war till the last Frenchman dies." When the Hindu social reformers proclaim that they shall fight to the last for the cause of the Untouchables, it means that they propose to fight till the last Untouchable dies. This is the meaning, as I understand it, of their proclamation. One who fights for a cause at the cost of the lives of others cannot be expected to win the battle.

If we are to die in our struggle for freedom, what is the use of fighting at the wrong place? To reform the Hindu society is neither our aim nor our field of action. Our aim is to gain freedom. We have nothing to do with anything else. If we can gain our freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility for the reform of the Hindu religion? And why should we sacrifice our strength and property for that? No one should misunderstand the object of our movement as being Hindu social reform. The object of our movement is to achieve social freedom for the Untouchables. It is equally true that this freedom cannot be secured without conversion.

I do accept that the Untouchables need equality as well. And to secure equality is also one of their objectives. But nobody can say that this equality can be achieved only by remaining as Hindus and not otherwise. There are two ways of achieving equality. One, by remaining in the Hindu fold. Mere removal of the sense of being a touchable or an Untouchable will not serve the purpose: equality can be achieved only when inter-caste dinners and marriages take place. This means that the Chaturvarna must be abolished, and the Brahminic religion must be uprooted. Is it possible? And if not, will it be wise to expect equality of treatment by remaining in the Hindu religion? And can you be successful in your efforts to bring equality? Of

course not. The path of conversion is far simpler than this. Hindu society gives treatment of equality to Muslims and Christians. Obviously, social equality is easily achieved by conversion. If this is true, then why should you not adopt this simple path of conversion?

According to me, this conversion of religion will bring happiness to both--the Untouchables as well as the Hindus. So long as you remain Hindus, you will have to struggle for social intercourse, for food and water, and for inter-caste marriages. And so long as this quarrel continues, relations between you and the Hindus will be strained, and you will be their perpetual enemies. By conversion, the roots of all the quarrels will vanish. Then you will have no right to claim temple entry in the Hindu temples, much less the need for the same. There will be no reason for you to struggle for the social rights--e.g., inter-caste dinners, inter-caste marriages, etc. Once these quarrels cease to exist, mutual love and affection will automatically develop.

Look at the present relations between the Hindus on the one hand, and the Christians and Muslims on the other. The Hindus do not allow the Muslims and the Christians to enter their temples, just as they do not allow you. They also have no inter-caste marriages or inter-dining with them. Irrespective of this, the affinity and love which these people have with the caste Hindus, is not extended to you by the Hindus. The reason for this differential or step-motherly treatment with you is that you have to struggle with the Hindus for social and religious rights, unlike the Christians and the Muslims--only because you live as Hindus.

Secondly, although these religions have no social rights in the Hindu society, that is to say, although they have no inter-dining and inter-marriage with the Hindus, the Hindus treat them on a par. Thus by conversion, if equality of treatment can be achieved and an affinity between Hindus and Untouchables can be brought about, then why should the Untouchables not adopt this simple and happy path for securing equality? Looking at the problem from this angle, it will be seen that this path of conversion is the only right path of freedom, which ultimately leads to equality. It is neither cowardice nor escapism. It is the wise step.

One more argument is put forth against Conversion. Some Hindus argue, "Conversion is worthless if you do it out of frustration with the caste system. Wherever you may go, you will face caste. Muslims have their own castes. If you become Christians, there are also castes." This is what these Hindus plead. Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that the Caste system has crept into other religions also in this country. But the burden of nurturing this great sin lies with the Hindus alone. This disease originally started from the Hindus, and thereafter infected others. Although the castes exist among Muslims and Christians alike, it will be meaningless? to liken it with that of the Hindus.

There is a great distinction between the caste system of the Hindus and that of the Muslims and Christians. Firstly, it must be noted that though castes exist among Christians and Muslims, it is not the chief characteristic of their body social. If one asks, "Who are you?" and someone says, "I am a Hindu," one is not satisfied with this reply. He is further asked, "What is your caste?" And unless this is replied to, no one can have the idea of his social status. From this it is evident how caste has prime importance in the Hindu religion, and how minor it is in Christianity and among the Muslims.

There is one more difference between the caste system of the Hindus and that of the Muslims and Christians. The caste system among the Hindus has the foundation of religion. The castes in other religions have no sanction of their religion. If Hindus proclaim [that they intend] to disband the caste system, their religion will come in the way. On the other hand, if the Muslims and Christians start movements for abolishing the caste system in their religion, their religion will not obstruct. Hindus cannot destroy their castes without destroying their religion. Muslims and Christians need not destroy their religion for eradication of the castes. Rather, their religion will support such movements to a great extent.

Even if for the sake of argument it is admitted that castes exist everywhere, it cannot be concluded that one should remain in the Hindu fold. If the caste system is useless, then the logical conclusion is that one should accept a kind of society in which the caste system has no serious adverse effect upon the person, or wherein the castes can be abolished early and easily, in a simple manner.

Some of the Hindus say, "What can be done by conversion alone? First improve your financial and educational status." Some of our people are confused and puzzled by such questions. I therefore feel it necessary to discuss it here. Firstly, the question is, who is going to improve your financial and educational conditions? You yourself, or those who argue as above? I do not think that those who advise you will be able to do anything but showing their lip-sympathy. Nor do I find any efforts toward this direction from their side. On the contrary: every Hindu tries to improve the economic status of his own caste. His outlook is limited to his own caste alone. Brahmins are engaged in establishing maternity homes for Brahmin women, providing scholarships to Brahmin pupils, and securing jobs for the unemployed Brahmin personnel. Saraswats (one of the castes amongst the Brahmins) are also doing the same.

Everybody is for himself, and those who have no benefactor are at the mercy of God. This is the present-day condition of the society. If you yourself have to rise, if no one else is to come to your aid--if this be the situation, what is the purpose in listening to the advice of the Hindus? There is no other motive in such advice but to misguide you and kill (waste) your time. If you are to improve yourselves, then that [misguiding and time-wasting effect] is what they mean, so nobody need pay attention to their

gossip. Although this may seem enough, I do not propose to leave this point here. I propose to refute this argument.

What can be achieved by Conversion Alone?

I am simply surprised by the question which some Hindus ask, as to what can be achieved by conversion alone. Most of the present-day Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians in India were formerly Hindus, the majority of them being from the Shudras and Untouchables. Do these critics mean to say that those who left the Hindu fold and embraced Sikhism or Christianity, have made no progress at all? And if this is not true, and if it is admitted that conversion has brought a distinct improvement in their condition, then to say that the Untouchables will not be benefited by conversion carries no meaning.

This statement that "nothing can be achieved by conversion" has another implied meaning, and that is that "religion is bogus and useless; there is neither gain nor loss from religion." If this be the case, then why do the advocates of this argument insist upon the Untouchables' remaining in the Hindu religion? I do not understand. If they do not find any meaning in religion, why should they unnecessarily argue for and against conversion?

Those Hindus, who ask as to what can be achieved by conversion alone, can be accosted with the similar question: i.e., what can be achieved by self-government alone? If financial and educational progress is the condition precedent (prerequisite) for freedom, what is the good of self-government? And if the country is to be benefited by self-government alone, the Untouchables are also bound to be benefited by conversion.

After giving deep thought to the problem, everybody will have to admit that conversion is as necessary to the Untouchables as self-government is to India. The ultimate object of both is the same. There is not the slightest difference in their ultimate goal. This ultimate aim is to attain freedom. And if the freedom is necessary for the life of mankind, conversion of the Untouchables, which brings them complete freedom, cannot be called worthless by any stretch of the imagination.

Progress or Conversion--What First?

I think it necessary here to discuss the question as to what should be initiated first, whether economic progress or conversion. I do not agree with the view that economic progress should precede. This issue whether religious conversion or economic progress should precede is as dry as that which dealt with political reform versus social reform. Several methods are required to be applied for the development and progress of the society. Each of these methods has its own

significance. No definite seriatim (sequence) can be applied for the application of these methods.

If however anybody insists on such a seriatum with regard to conversion and economic reform, I will place the former as the first. I fail to understand how you can achieve economic progress so long as you have the stigma of being an Untouchable. If any one of you opens a shop, as soon as it is known that the shopkeeper is an Untouchable, nobody will purchase articles from you. If any one of you applies for a job, and it is disclosed that the applicant is an Untouchable, he will not get the job. If anyone intends to sell his land, and one of you proposes to purchase it, once it has been known that the purchaser is an Untouchable, nobody will sell the land. Whatever methods you may adopt for your own economic progress, your efforts will be frustrated due to untouchability. Untouchability is a permanent handicap on your path of progress. And unless you remove it, your path cannot be safe. Without conversion, this hurdle cannot be removed.

Some of your young ones are after education, and they are collecting money for this purpose from whatever source they find proper. Due to this temptation of money, some are inclined to remain Untouchables and make their progress [as such]. To these youngsters, I wish to ask one question. After the completion of your education, if you do not get a job suited to your qualifications, what will you do? What is the reason that most of our educated persons are unemployed today? To me, the chief cause for this unemployment is untouchability. Your caliber has no scope due to your untouchability. Because of untouchability, you have been ousted from the military services. You are not employed in the police department on account of your untouchability. Due to untouchability, you cannot secure even the post of a peon. You are not promoted to the higher rank only because you are an Untouchable.

Untouchability is a curse. You have been completely ruined and all your virtues have turned into dust. Under these circumstances, what more qualifications can you add? And even if you add them, what is the use? So, if you sincerely desire that your qualifications should be valued, that your education should be of some use to you, you must throw away the shackles of untouchability, which means that you must change your religion.

Doubts about Conversion

So far, the arguments put forth by the critics have been discussed. Now I propose to clarify the doubts expressed by the sympathisers of conversion. In the first place, it has reached my ears that some of the Mahars are worried as to what will be the fate of their Watan (hereditary rights of a village servant). The high-caste Hindus are also reported to have threatened the Mahars that they will be deprived of their services as village servants, if they leave the Hindu religion.

All of you are aware that I am least worried if the Mahar Watan is abolished. During the last ten years, I have been advocating that if there is anything that dooms the fate of Mahars, it is the Mahar Watan alone. And the day, on which you will be freed from these chains of Mahar-ness (Maharki), I think your path of liberation will be open to you.

However, for those who need this Mahar Watan, I can assure them that their Watan will not come in trouble (be endangered) by their conversion. In this regard, the Act of 1850 can be referred to. Under the provisions of this Act, no rights of a person or his successors with respect to his property are affected by virtue of his conversion. As for those who feel this reference of law to be insufficient, their attention is drawn to the circumstances prevalent in Nagar District. A number of persons from the Mahar community in this District have become Christians. At some places, we find that in one family, some are Christians while others still remain as Mahars. However, the Watan rights of these converted Christians have not been vanquished [=removed]. This may be confirmed from the Mahars of Nagar. So no one should fear that their Watan will come in peril by conversion.

A second doubt is about political rights. Some people express [concern] as to what will happen to our political safeguards if we convert. Nobody can say that I do not realise the importance of the political safeguards the Untouchables have achieved. Nobody else has taken so much pain and has made so much effort for securing political rights for the Untouchables as I have done. But I feel it is not proper to depend solely on political rights. These political safeguards are not granted on the condition that they shall be everlasting. They are bound to be ended sometime. According to the Communal Award of the British Government, our political safeguards were limited for twenty years. Although no such limitation has been fixed by the Poona Pact, nobody can say they are everlasting.

Those who depend upon these political safeguards must think about what will happen after these safeguards are withdrawn. On the day on which our political rights cease to exist, we will have to depend upon our social strength. I have already told you that this social strength is wanting in us. So also I have proved in the beginning, that this strength cannot be achieved without conversion. No one should think only of the present. To forget what is eternally beneficial, and to be lured by temporary gains, is bound to lead to suffering. Under these circumstances, one must think what is permanently beneficial. In my opinion, conversion is the only remedy, for eternal bliss. Nobody should hesitate, even if political rights are required to be sacrificed for this purpose.

Conversion brings no harm to political safeguards. I do not understand why political safeguards should at all come in trouble [=be endangered] by conversion. Wherever you may go, your political rights and safeguards will accompany you. I have no doubt about it. If you become Muslims, you will get political rights as Muslims. If you become Christians, you will get your political rights as Christians. If you become

Sikhs, you will have your political safeguards as Sikhs. Political rights are based on population. The political safeguards of any society [=group] will increase with the increase of its population.

Nobody should misunderstand (wrongly think) that if we leave the Hindu society, all the fifteen seats allotted to us will go back to Hindus. If we become Muslims, our fifteen seats will be added to the seats reserved for Muslims. Likewise, if we become Christians, our seats will be added to the seats reserved for Christians. In short, our political rights will accompany us. So nobody should be afraid of it.

On the other hand, if we remain Hindus and do not convert, [think about] whether our rights will be safe. This you must think carefully about. Suppose the Hindus have passed a law whereby untouchability is prohibited and its practice is made punishable. Then they ask you, "We have abolished untouchability by law. Now you are no longer Untouchables. At the most, you are simply poor and backward. But other castes are equally backward. We have not provided any political safeguards for these backward communities. Then why should you be given such political safeguards?" What will be your reply to these questions?

The reply of the Muslims and the Christians will be very simple. They will say, "We are not granted political safeguards and rights because we are poor, illiterate, or backward, but because our religion is different, our society is different, and so on. And so long as our religion is different from yours, we must get our share in the political rights." This will be their appropriate reply. As long as you are Hindus, you cannot take this stand--that you are entitled to political safeguards because your society, your religion, is altogether different. You will be able to take this stand on the day on which you liberate yourselves from the serfdom of Hindu society. And unless you stand on such a sound footing and claim political safeguards, your political rights and safeguards cannot be considered to be permanent and free from danger.

Looking from this perspective, conversion becomes a means for strengthening political safeguards, rather than becoming a hindrance. If you remain Hindus, you are sure to lose your political safeguards. If you want to save them, leave this religion. Political safeguards will be permanent only through conversion.

Conclusion

I have decided for myself. My conversion is sure as anything. My conversion is not for any material gain. There is nothing which I cannot achieve by remaining an Untouchable. My conversion is purely out of my spiritual attitude. The Hindu religion does not appeal to my conscience. It does not appeal to my self-respect. However, your conversion will be both for material as well as for spiritual gains. Some persons mock and laugh at the idea of conversion for material gain. I do not feel hesitant in calling such persons stupid.

The religion which preaches what will happen to your soul after death may be useful for the rich. They may entertain themselves in such religion at their own leisure (by dreaming the future of their soul after death). It is quite natural that those who have enjoyed all sorts of pleasures in their lifetime may consider such religion as a real religion, which promises to them these pleasures even after death.

But what of those who by remaining in a particular religion have been reduced to the state of dust, who have been denied the basic necessities of life such as food and clothing, who have not been treated even as human beings, and have since [=thus] completely lost the sense of being human? Are these people not supposed to think of religion from a material point of view? Are they expected to look at the sky and merely pray? What good is this superfluous Vedanta of the easy-going, self-satisfied, rich people, to the poor ones?

Religion is for Man

I tell you all very specifically; religion is for man and not man for religion. For getting human treatment, convert yourselves. Convert for getting organized. Convert for becoming strong. Convert for securing equality. Convert for getting liberty. Convert so that your domestic life should be happy.

Why do you remain in a religion which does not treat you as human beings? Why do you remain in a religion which prohibits you from entering temples? Why do you remain in a religion which prohibits you from securing drinking water from the public well? Why do you remain in a religion which comes in your way for getting a job? Why do you remain in a religion which insults you at every step?

A religion, in which man's human behavior with man is prohibited, is not religion, but a display of force. A religion which does not recognize a man as man is not a religion but a disease. A religion in which the touch of animals is permitted, but the touch of human beings is prohibited, is not a religion but a mockery. A religion which precludes some classes from education forbids them to accumulate wealth and to bear arms, is not a religion but a mockery of human beings. A religion that compels the ignorant to be ignorant, and the poor to be poor, is not a religion but a punishment.

I have tried here, with the best of my knowledge, to analyse and explain all the probable problems arising out of conversion. This discourse might have become a lengthy one, but I had decided to be elaborate from the beginning. It was imperative for me to discuss and reply to the points raised by the opponents of conversion. Nobody should leave the Hindu religion unless he fully realises the utility of this declaration. So as to clear up all doubts, I had to discuss this problem so much in detail.

How far you will agree with my views, I cannot say. But I hope you will give deep thought to them. To speak that which pleases the audience and earn goodwill may be a convenient principle for the man in the street. But it does not befit the leader. I consider him a leader who, without fear or favour, tells the people what is good and what is bad for them. It is my duty to tell you what is good for you, even if you don't like it. I must do my duty. And now I have done it. It is now for you to decide and discharge your responsibility.

I have deliberately divided this problem of conversion into two parts. Whether to leave the Hindu religion or to remain in it is the first part of the problem. If the Hindu religion is to be abandoned, what other religion should be adopted, or whether a new religion should be established--this is the second part of the problem. Today, I wish to know your decision on the first part. Unless the first aspect is decided, it is futile to discuss or prepare for the latter. Therefore you must decide the first point. You will have no other opportunity. Whatever decision you will arrive at in this conference, it will be of the utmost use for me, to chalk out my future programme.

If you decide against conversion, this question will be closed forever. Then whatever is to be done for myself, I will do. If at all you decide in favour of conversion, then you will have to promise me organised and en-masse conversion. If the decision is taken in favour of conversion, and the people start embracing any religion they like individually, I will not dabble in your conversion. I wish you all to join me. Whatever religion we may accept, I am prepared to put all my sincere efforts and labour for the welfare of our people in that religion.

You should not, however, be led away by emotion, and follow me only because I say so. You should consent only if it appeals to your reason. I will not at all feel [angry?] if you decide not to join me. Rather, I will feel relieved of the responsibility. This is therefore a crucial occasion. You must bear in mind that your today's decision will carve out a path for posterity, for future generations. But if you decide to remain slaves, your future generations will also be slaves. Hence yours is the most difficult task.

Be Thy Own Light

What message should I give you on this occasion? While I thought over it, I recollected the message given by the Lord Bhagwan Buddha to his Bhikkhu Sangh (Congregation of Monks) just before his Mahaparinirvan, and which has been quoted in "***Mahaparinibban Sutta.***" Once the Bhagwan, after having recovered from an illness, was resting on a seat under a tree. His disciple the Venerable Anand approached the Buddha and, having saluted, sat beside him. Then he said to the Buddha, "***I have seen the Lord in his illness as well as in his happiness. But from the beginning of the present illness, my body has become heavy like lead. My mind is not in peace. I can't concentrate on the Dhamma. However, I***

feel consolation and satisfaction that the Lord will not attain the Parinibban until he gives a message to the Sangh."

Then the Lord replied thus: ***"Ananda! What does the Sangh expect from me? Ananda, I have preached the Dhamma with an open heart, without concealing anything. The Tathagata (Buddha) has not kept anything concealed, as some other teachers do. So Ananda, what more can I tell to the Bhikkhu Sangh? So Ananda, be self-illuminating like the lamp. Don't be dependent for light, like the Earth. Don't be a satellite. Be a light unto thyself. Believe in Self. Don't be dependent on others. Be truthful. Always take refuge in the Truth, and do not surrender to anybody!"***

I also take your leave in the words of the Buddha. ***"Be your own guide. Take refuge in reason. Do not listen to the advice of others. Do not succumb to others. Be truthful. Take refuge in truth. Never surrender to anybody!"*** If you keep in mind this message of Lord Buddha at this juncture, I am sure your decision will not be wrong.