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## From Silence to Satyagraha: Gandhi, Caste, and Colonial Punjab

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15856860>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Research Paper

**Accepted:** 25-06-2025

**Published:** 10-07-2025

#### Keywords:

*Untouchability, Colonial Punjab, Mahatma Gandhi, Adi Dharam Movement, Mango Ram Mugowalia, Caste Reform, Arya Samaj, Harijan Campaign.*

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the social, political, and religious dimensions of untouchability in colonial Punjab, focusing particularly on Mahatma Gandhi's intervention and the simultaneous efforts of regional reform movements. While caste-based discrimination in Punjab had distinctive regional features, the national anti-untouchability campaign led by Gandhi during the 1920s and 1930s left a considerable imprint on the province's social landscape. The study analyzes Gandhi's Harijan movement and its reception in Punjab, emphasizing how his strategy of Satyagraha and moral persuasion aimed at awakening public conscience. Simultaneously, the emergence of local reformers such as Mango Ram Mugowalia, who founded the Adi Dharam movement, reflected indigenous resistance and identity reassertion among the oppressed communities. The paper also explores how socio-religious organizations such as the Arya Samaj, Singh Sabhas, and Christian missions engaged with the marginalized, often blending humanitarian concern with institutional expansion. Reforms such as opening public wells and promoting the education of untouchable children signified both social progress and strategic inclusion. Drawing on archival records, contemporary writings, and reformist literature, this study seeks to situate Punjab within the broader anti-untouchability discourse of colonial India while



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highlighting its unique internal dynamics.

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## Introduction

The problem of untouchability in colonial India was both widespread and deeply entrenched in the socio-religious fabric of the subcontinent. While much of the scholarly discourse has focused on caste oppression in regions like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, or Uttar Pradesh, the province of Punjab often perceived as less rigid in caste hierarchy warrants critical examination. This paper investigates how untouchability manifested in colonial Punjab and how it was addressed through both national and local reform initiatives. The entry of Mahatma Gandhi into the anti-untouchability discourse, especially after the Poona Pact of 1932, marked a significant turning point. His Harijan campaign aimed not only at moral regeneration but also at practical inclusion of marginalized communities into the public and religious spheres. Gandhi's visits to Punjab and the responses he received from both upper-caste elites and local reformers provide valuable insights into the intersection of nationalism and caste reform. Equally significant were the regional voices like Mango Ram Mugowalia, who spearheaded the Adi Dharam movement. Unlike Gandhi's moral approach, Mugowalia emphasized identity reconstruction and the aboriginal origins of Dalits, creating a localized resistance grounded in self-respect and social assertion. Alongside, various religious and philanthropic organizations participated in reform activities, sometimes driven by genuine concern, and at other times, by the motive of religious expansion.

During the colonial period, British rule instigated significant transformations in Indian society, but its impact on untouchability was complex. While British legal reforms introduced the principle of equality before the law, in practice, the colonial administration often reinforced existing social hierarchies. Several factors contributed to the persistence and, in some instances, the intensification of untouchability during this era. The British were generally hesitant to intervene directly in social and religious matters, fearing a backlash from powerful upper-caste groups. Their policies of non-interference often resulted in the perpetuation of discriminatory practices. Colonial administrative practices, such as census enumeration and legal classifications, frequently solidified caste identities, rendering them more rigid and defined. While some economic developments generated new opportunities, untouchables often remained confined to traditional occupations, with limited access to land or resources. Modernization and urbanization had a dual impact. While offering some new opportunities, traditional prejudices often followed untouchables into urban settings.



However, the colonial period also witnessed the emergence of social reform movements that sought to challenge untouchability. Indian social reformers were instrumental in raising awareness about the injustices of untouchability and advocating for change. These movements can be broadly categorized as upper-caste reform movements, lower-caste movements, and the nationalist movement. Upper-caste reformers, such as the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Ram Mohan Roy, and the Arya Samaj, established by Dayananda Saraswati, advocated for the abolition of caste discrimination, and promoted equality, working towards the social upliftment of the depressed classes. Lower-caste movements, organized by members of the lower castes themselves, fought for their rights and dignity. Notably, Jyotirao Phule's Satya Shodhak Samaj in Maharashtra challenged Brahminical dominance and advocated for the rights of Shudras and untouchables, while E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar' Naicker's Self-Respect Movement in South India aimed to eradicate caste discrimination and promote the self-esteem of the lower castes. The Indian National Congress, while initially focused on political independence, also addressed untouchability under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, who dedicated a substantial portion of his life to combating this practice, which he termed a 'blot on Hinduism' and against the fundamental principles of humanity.<sup>i</sup> Among the social reformers, B.R. Ambedkar stands out as the most influential figure in the struggle against untouchability. Himself born into an 'untouchable' community; Ambedkar dedicated his life to advocating for the rights of the Dalits (the term he preferred). His contributions include providing a powerful critique of the caste system and untouchability in his writings and speeches, challenging its religious and social justifications; organizing untouchables into political organizations, such as the Depressed Classes League, to demand their rights and representation; and playing a key role in drafting the Indian Constitution, ensuring the inclusion of provisions for the abolition of untouchability (Article 17) and affirmative action for Dalits. The pursuit of genuine equality and social justice for the Dalits remains an ongoing struggle.

Mahatma Gandhi had a strong opinion against untouchability he opined that: "Untouchability is a snake with a thousand mouths through each of which it shows its poisonous fangs. It defies definition. It needs no sanction from Manu or the other ancient law-givers."<sup>ii</sup> Further he said:<sup>iii</sup>

"Untouchability, which has taken such deep roots in Hinduism, is altogether irreligious. Its removal has therefore been treated as an independent principle. The so-called untouchables have an equal place in the Ashram with other classes. The Ashram does not believe in caste which, it considers, has injured Hinduism, because its implications of superior and inferior status, and of pollution by contact are contrary to the law of Love...."



After the clash between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar over the Communal Award of 1932, Gandhi took a significant turn in his approach toward addressing the plight of the untouchables. The British Government's Communal Award had proposed separate electorates for various minority communities, including the Depressed Classes, which Ambedkar accepted as a necessary step for political empowerment and representation. Gandhi, however, strongly opposed the idea of separate electorates for untouchables not out of disregard for their suffering, but out of a deep fear that it would further fragment Hindu society. In his view, granting separate political identity to untouchables would permanently divide Hindus and deepen the already entrenched caste divisions. Gandhi believed that the separate electorates for untouchables, who were a part of the Hindu fold, would destroy the unity of Hindu society. Yet, he did not deny the historical oppression and marginalization faced by the untouchables. In fact, the confrontation with Ambedkar made Gandhi more acutely aware of the brutal realities of caste-based exclusion and the failure of upper-caste Hindus to treat their fellow beings with basic dignity and humanity. This realization became a turning point in Gandhi's socio-political journey. While he managed to avert the separate electorate for the Depressed Classes through the Poona Pact, he also recognized that moral and social action was necessary, beyond political negotiations. Gandhi intensified his efforts to eradicate untouchability, not just through personal campaigns but by integrating it into the larger agenda of the Indian National Congress. He launched a nationwide movement for the upliftment of the so-called Harijans (a term he used to mean children of God), promoting education, sanitation, and temple entry for them. He also started several Harijan Sevak Sanghs and encouraged constructive work that aimed at removing social discrimination. Moreover, Gandhi ensured that the Congress Working Committee adopted the removal of untouchability as a core component of its program. He urged every Congress worker to dedicate time and resources toward improving the lives of untouchables and insisted that true Swaraj (self-rule) could never be achieved unless the social fabric of Indian society was cleansed of this age-old injustice. He appealed to the moral conscience of the upper castes and emphasized that serving the untouchables was not charity, but a long-overdue act of justice and repentance.

### **Movement Against Untouchability in Punjab**

In colonial Punjab, as in much of India, the practice of untouchability was deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric, especially in rural areas where caste hierarchies remained rigid and oppressive. Though Punjab had a unique demographic profile with a significant presence of Muslims and Sikhs alongside Hindus the social status of Dalits, often referred to as Achhuts or depressed classes, remained degraded



across communities. They were denied access to public wells, temples, schools, and faced humiliation in everyday life. In many villages, the so-called untouchables lived in segregated areas, performed menial tasks, and were excluded from socio-religious functions. Despite the teachings of Sikhism that emphasized equality, caste prejudices persisted in practice, particularly among land-owning and dominant castes.

As per the census of 1911, the total number of untouchables in Punjab was 1.13 million.<sup>iv</sup> The correspondent of *Asli Kaumi Dard* shed light on the significant population of untouchables residing in colonial Punjab across different religious communities. According to the report, approximately twenty-one lakh individuals from the Hindu community in Punjab were categorized as untouchables. In the Sikh community, the number was estimated at around four lakhs, and a similar figure was observed among Muslims. However, the situation of untouchables within Islam was somewhat different. Although Islamic teachings did not endorse caste-based discrimination, and their socio-economic condition was relatively better compared to their Hindu and Sikh counterparts, these marginalized groups still faced subtle forms of exclusion and were not fully integrated into the mainstream of society.<sup>v</sup> This observation reflects the complex and pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination that transcended religious boundaries, making the question of untouchability a broader societal issue rather than one confined to any single faith.

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas and his emphasis on the constructive program, particularly the abolition of untouchability, found resonance among various sections of Punjabi society. Gandhi viewed the practice of untouchability as a moral and spiritual blot on Hindu society and considered its eradication essential for achieving true Swaraj (self-rule). His campaigns across India inspired local leaders and reformers in Punjab to take up the cause of social justice for Dalits. Gandhi's call for the upliftment of untouchables influenced many Congress workers and organizations in Punjab to actively engage with Dalit communities. He emphasized temple entry, access to public resources, and education for the so-called untouchables, and encouraged caste Hindus to break barriers of pollution and discrimination. As a result, several awareness campaigns, public meetings, and constructive activities began to emerge in Punjab as part of the larger national struggle. Though resistance and contradictions existed, especially from orthodox sections, Gandhi's moral authority and the momentum of the nationalist movement created a significant space for addressing the evils of untouchability in colonial Punjab.

The Arya Samaj played a significant role in the campaign against untouchability in Punjab by forming several organizations dedicated to social reform. One of the prominent leaders, Lala Lajpat Rai, who founded the *Servants of the People Society*, worked tirelessly for the upliftment of the untouchables



and to integrate them into the social mainstream. In line with this effort, a dedicated organization called *Achhut Uddhar Mandal* was established in Punjab with the specific aim of improving the conditions of the untouchable communities. In February 1932, the *Shraddhanand Dalit Uddhar Sabha* took a further step by organizing an *Untouchables' Conference*, which was commemorated as a 'Liberation Day' for the Dalit community. This event symbolized a growing assertion among the marginalized and highlighted the increasing support from reformist circles to dismantle the social stigma of untouchability. Such initiatives reflected both the reformist zeal of the Arya Samaj and the broader shift within Punjabi society toward recognizing and addressing the injustices faced by the oppressed castes.

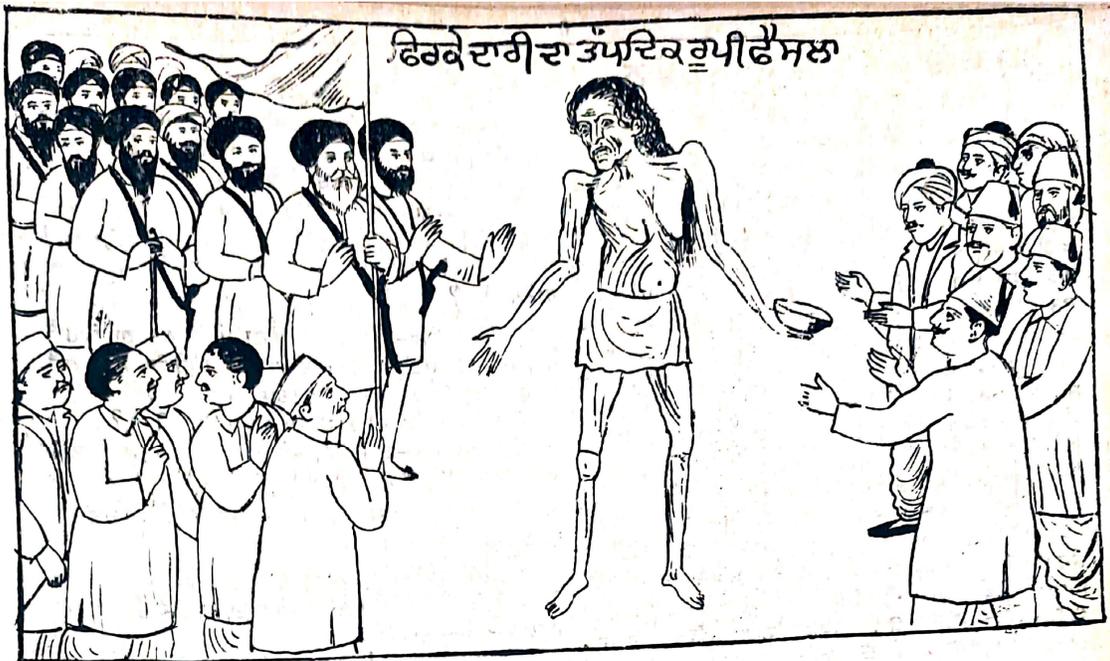


Fig: Cartoon considering communal award as tuberculosis



**Fig: Cartoons regarding opinion prevailing on communal award****Source: Both cartoons were published in *Asli Kaumi Dard*, 1932.**

Mahatma Gandhi visited Punjab to raise awareness about the betterment of untouchables, galvanizing efforts to improve their socio-religious conditions. Gandhian activists in Punjab diligently pursued initiatives to uplift untouchables, referred to as Harijans, during the early twentieth century. Their efforts encompassed enhancing access to public resources, promoting education, facilitating temple entry, and raising social awareness to combat untouchability. Significant strides were made in ensuring access to essential resources. In Amritsar, Messers Santaram Anantram Bhatia opened a well for untouchables, securing their right to clean water.<sup>vi</sup> In Rohtak, the Harijan Seva Sangha constructed a well in Sampla, accessible to all castes, at a cost of approximately Rs. 400, funded by L. Sham Lal, an advocate, with labor provided voluntarily by village sweepers. Two additional wells in Rohtak villages were also made available for untouchable use. Furthermore, a public *shivalya* temple in Rohtak was opened to Harijans, advancing religious inclusion.<sup>vii</sup>

Education emerged as a pivotal focus for uplifting untouchables. A free residential boarding school for Harijan boys was established in a village two miles from Amritsar, inaugurated by A.V. Thakkar. Temporarily housed in the Arabic-Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya building, it admitted 39 boys from Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts.<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, day schools were initiated in Akalgarh village (Ludhiana) and Sialkot to provide foundational education.<sup>ix</sup> Under the Dayanand Dalit-Uddhar Mandal in Hoshiarpur, a 'Purohit' class was introduced to train Harijan children as priests for religious ceremonies, challenging caste-based occupational barriers. A Hindu Ashram in Gandasinghwala, Amritsar, was also established to educate Harijan boys.<sup>x</sup> Efforts to dismantle religious exclusion included opening temples to untouchables. A temple in Jullundur was made accessible to Harijans, and the *shivalya* temple in Rohtak further exemplified this push for inclusivity. To foster attitudinal change among upper-caste communities, Gandhian organizations organized public meetings and conferences. Under the Valmik Achhut Mandal in Jullundur, a well-attended meeting at Basti Sheikh, chaired by Chaudhri Daulatram, a Harijan, featured Master Shadiram, an educated Harijan, who urged his community to maintain hygiene and abandon vices like alcohol to promote self-improvement. Additionally, Bhagat Dhanna Mal, a congressman from Ferozepur, pledged to eradicate untouchability within his influence, offering financial and personal support to Harijans across India.<sup>xi</sup> On his *Harijan* tour to Punjab Gandhi said:<sup>xii</sup>



“I have been touring in the Punjab for the last ten days continuously for with the Lala Mohanlal provincial secretary, and have visited Rohtak, Lahore, Amritsar, Sialkot, Jammu, Lyallpur, Jullundur, Adampur, and Hoshiarpur. In all these places district committees have already been formed and work had begun...In Sialkot, I learnt about the solid work extending over the last twenty-one years of Arya Megh Uddhar Sabha headed by Lala Gangaram advocate. I found Sanatanists at Jammu and Lyallpur, and Hindus and Sikhs at Sialkot, working shoulder to shoulder in the service of Harijans. At Jullundur I had the pleasure of meeting leaders of Ad-Dharmis... at Adampur I saw the famous khadi karyalaya and a wonderful exhibition of colored and printed khadi and contented Harijan weavers of villages....at Hoshiarpur I had much pleasure in seeing the work of Dayanand Dalit Uddhar Mandal in existence for the last eight years. Most interesting was the school run by Balmik Mandal in Hoshiarpur and aided by the Municipality...Speaking from a practical point of view. I found that untouchability in the plains of the Punjab does not mean the disability for Harijans except for Hindu women.... but the greatest disability that the Harijans suffer in the Punjab is that they were always placed at the mercy of their Zamindar....”

In the summer of 1932, the branch of the Harijan Sewak Sangh in Punjab came into existence, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's bold fast opposing separate electorates for the depressed classes. His commitment to their upliftment sent ripples of excitement through Punjab, prompting swift action. During the fast, numerous temples welcomed Harijans, signaling a shift in social attitudes. From 1932 to 1933, the Sangh pushed for Harijan children to join regular schools, challenging educational exclusion. To combat adult illiteracy, 28 learning centers were set up in various cities: seven each in Lahore and Rohtak, three in Amritsar, two each in Hissar, Ludhiana, Rawalpindi, and Sialkot, and one each in Jammu, Sheikhpura, and Ambala.<sup>xiii</sup> Vocational training centers also emerged, providing craft skills, free accommodation, meals, and education, though they reached fewer than 80 individuals. Scholarships supported Harijan boys' education, but the total funds distributed remained below Rs. 1,000. By 1933, the Sangh had spread to 14 districts, including Hissar, Rohtak, Ambala, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Amritsar, Jammu, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Lyallpur, Multan, Ferozepur, Sheikhpura, and Sialkot. Financially, the branch faced limitations, with an income of Rs. 11,023-15-0 and expenses of Rs. 8,192-5-0. A grant of Rs. 3,217-5-9 from the All-India Harijan Sewak Sangh covered 40% of its costs.<sup>xiv</sup>



Gandhi's visit in July 1934 spurred further efforts. Additional schools for Harijans opened, and more small scholarships were awarded. The Sheikhpura and Ludhiana branches tackled economic injustices like forced labor, while some branches secured jobs for Harijans.<sup>xv</sup> Clean drinking water was provided in the hilly regions of Kangra, Jammu, and Hoshiarpur, as well as the arid areas of Rohtak and Hissar.<sup>xvi</sup> To align with Mahatma Gandhi's vision, the Punjab Harijan Sewak Sangh aimed to complement rather than replicate government efforts, collaborating with authorities whenever feasible to uplift the depressed classes. Despite this, an effort to convince the Unionist Government to include Harijans in the Land Alienation Act, safeguarding their rural land rights, failed.<sup>xvii</sup> In 1934, Mahatma Gandhi visited Lahore and delivered a passionate appeal to the public, urging them to eliminate the practice of untouchability. He stressed that untouchability was a deep-rooted social evil and warned that if it continued, it would ultimately lead to the downfall of Hinduism itself. His message resonated with the audience, who responded not only with moral support but also with a financial contribution of ₹773 towards the welfare of the Harijans. This gesture reflected the growing awareness and willingness among people to support Gandhi's mission of social upliftment and equality. Conferences united workers from various groups. On March 21, 1936, Kasturba Gandhi presided over a gathering, praising the legacy of Guru Nanak Dev and the Arya Samaj in fighting untouchability in Punjab.<sup>xviii</sup>

Several other organizations, particularly the Shiromani Akali Dal, also took active steps to address the deeply entrenched issue of untouchability in colonial Punjab. One notable event was held on 13th April 1928, when a *Diwan* (public gathering) was organized under the leadership of key Sikh reformers such as Professor Ganga Singh, Master Tara Singh, Jaswant Singh, Gopal Singh, and Hajara Singh. In this gathering, the speakers vehemently condemned the practice of untouchability and emphasized that Sikhism, rooted in the ideals of equality and brotherhood, could not allow such social evils to persist. During the Diwan, several progressive resolutions were passed. It was unanimously declared that gurdwaras were spiritual and communal spaces open to all human beings, regardless of caste or religion. The resolutions stressed that no individual should be barred from entering and worshipping in gurdwaras due to their caste background. Furthermore, the participants advocated for communal dining (*langar*) to be shared without hesitation and for the untouchables to be treated with the same dignity and respect as fellow brothers in the faith. Continuing this initiative, another significant conference was organized in Lahore on 23rd May 1928. This gathering was chaired by prominent Sikh leader Sardar Kharak Singh, with active participation from reform-minded individuals such as Professor Ganga Singh, Amar Singh Jhabal, Professor Teja Singh, Bawa Harkishan Singh, Master Tara Singh,



Mangal Singh, Gopal Singh, Sher Singh, Jaswant Singh, Mehtab Singh, Kartar Singh Jhabbar, Sardul Singh Kavishar, and Teja Singh, among others. In this conference, the discussions focused on the urgent need to bring untouchables into the Sikh religious fold and to genuinely integrate them into the community. It was emphasized that meaningful change could only occur if untouchables were treated with compassion and respect in daily life. The leaders argued that social upliftment and religious inclusion must go hand in hand to strengthen both Sikhism and the broader moral fabric of society. These efforts reflected a broader reformist spirit that sought to align religious values with social justice, showing how religious institutions could play a pivotal role in combating caste-based discrimination.

Several poems were composed and published during the colonial period to advocate for the abolition of untouchability. As evident from the image below, poets used their literary expressions to spread the powerful message of unity and social equality. These poetic compositions aimed to awaken the conscience of society and encourage collective action against caste-based discrimination. Mahinder Singh's poem, for instance, metaphorically portrayed untouchability as a ghost a frightening and destructive force that haunted the moral fabric of society. He called upon the people to recognize this evil and defeat it with unity and compassion. Similarly, Santokh Singh's poem echoed the same sentiment, emphasizing that the time had come to erase this deep-rooted injustice and build a more humane and egalitarian society. Through such verses, poets contributed significantly to the reformist discourse of the time, reinforcing the idea that social change was possible only through awareness, unity, and active resistance to entrenched caste hierarchies.

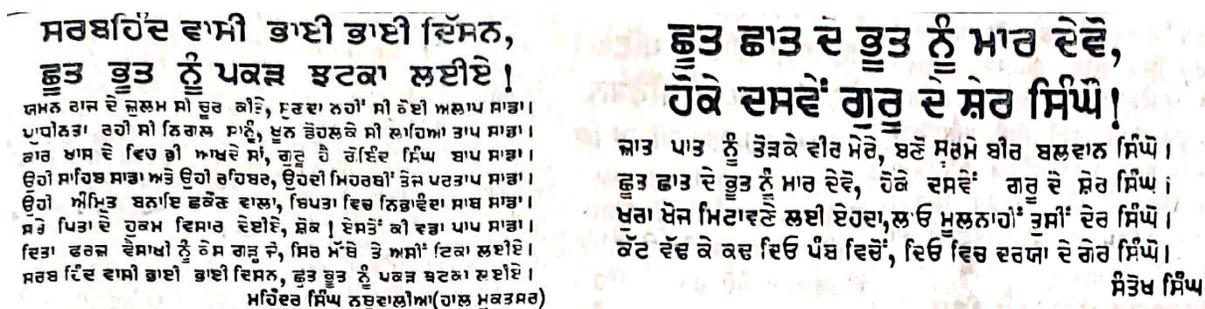


Fig: Poems on untouchability.

Source: *Asli kaumi Dard*, May 1929.



The *Acchut Uddhar Conference* held at Lahore on 27 May 1928, under the leadership of Amar Singh, marked a significant step in addressing the issue of untouchability within the Sikh community. The conference passed several key resolutions aimed at the upliftment and integration of untouchables into mainstream society. Firstly, it was unanimously declared that the practice of untouchability stands in direct violation of the fundamental tenets of Sikhism, which emphasizes equality and universal brotherhood. Secondly, to systematically eliminate this social evil, it was resolved that district-wise committees should be established to promote awareness and implement reforms at the grassroots level. Lastly, a practical step was proposed to ensure social inclusion: any individual considered untouchable could freely access public wells and other shared resources after embracing Sikhism. These resolutions reflect both a moral and institutional commitment to eradicating untouchability and demonstrate how religious identity was being mobilized to bring about social reform in colonial Punjab.

The Punjab Provincial Depressed Classes Conference, convened in 1933 under the leadership of Principal Ramdass, brought together delegates from across Punjab, and concluded with the adoption of several key resolutions. The conference expressed heartfelt gratitude to Mahatma Gandhi for successfully completing his prolonged fast and commended his dedicated efforts to improve the socio-economic conditions of Harijans. It urged the Punjab Government to officially recognize Harijans as cultivators for their contributions to agriculture. Additionally, the conference called for free education for children of depressed classes up to the 10th standard and the establishment of five scholarships per district to support their higher education. It further requested an increase in the representation of depressed classes to ten seats in the forthcoming constitution. Lastly, the conference appealed to caste Hindu organizations committed to Harijan upliftment to appoint Harijans to positions within their institutions, promoting greater inclusion and empowerment.<sup>xix</sup>

Despite all these efforts to abolish the untouchability all these reform programs sparked a sense of competition among religious groups, leading to growing tensions and rivalries. In Punjab, Sikh preachers began to view the reform efforts of Gandhi and the Arya Samaj with suspicion, often interpreting them as strategies for religious conversion rather than genuine social reform. A correspondent of the Punjabi newspaper *Asli Qaumi Dard*, while discussing the population of untouchables in Punjab, remarked that if even half of the untouchables accepted Sikhism, it would greatly contribute to the religion's growth and strength.<sup>xx</sup>

While the aim of uplifting the untouchables was widely appreciated, it became equally important for various religious communities to keep them within their own fold. This concern was driven not just by social or moral reasons but also by political motivations. Untouchables, despite their marginalization,

outnumbered the upper-caste populations in many regions. Since representation in legislative assemblies was based on the total number of adherents to a particular religion, every major religious group saw the inclusion of untouchables to increase their political influence. Thus, alongside social reform, a subtle yet intense form of religious politics unfolded. The reform of untouchables began to be closely linked with religious conversion. In Punjab, Sikhism was increasingly promoted as the only true path for the emancipation of untouchables, and campaigns encouraged them to adopt the Sikh faith. These efforts were not always devoid of strategic interests, as different groups competed to bring untouchables under their religious umbrella.

A poem written by Balbir Singh and published in *Sikh Sevak* sharply criticized Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Harijan. The poet mockingly suggested that even if Gandhi managed to raise crores of rupees for the Harijan fund, it would not erase the stigma of untouchability. He wrote that sharing meals or sitting together in temples with untouchables remained an unthinkable act for many orthodox Hindus. According to the poet, any current unity based on political interests was temporary and would likely dissolve in the future due to the deeply entrenched caste prejudices. The poet concluded by asserting that the only real solution to untouchability was for untouchables to drink *Amrit* and formally convert to Sikhism.<sup>xxi</sup> Such poems, filled with emotional appeal and sharp rhetoric, were part of a larger narrative being constructed at the time one where untouchables were lured or persuaded to embrace a particular religion as the only path to dignity and equality. These writings highlight how the issue of untouchability, though rooted in genuine social injustice, became entangled with religious and political agendas in colonial Punjab.



**Fig: The Quest for Equality at the Well.****Source: *Asli Kaumi Dard*, June 1928.**

The cartoon depicted above was published in the Punjabi newspaper *Asli Kaumi Dard*. The accompanying caption explained the scene: an untouchable, having taken refuge in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, approaches a well to draw water. In the illustration, individuals representing Hinduism and Islam are seen pulling him toward their respective sides, while Sikh figures are shown beating him with sticks. In response, the untouchable speaks out, saying, “Hinduism will not be able to digest me because it is very foundations rest on the notions of high and low caste. Islam, being not entirely Indian, feels foreign to my heart and does not appeal to me. I have come to seek shelter in the path of the True Guru do not strike me or push me away.”<sup>xxii</sup> Such cartoons were symbolic representations of the socio-religious climate of the time. They attempted to portray Sikhism as the most suitable and accepting religion for the upliftment of the untouchables. These visual commentaries reflected the contemporary narrative that while Hinduism and Islam either failed to accept or felt alien to the untouchables, Sikhism with its egalitarian values offered a spiritual home and social dignity.

Mahatma Gandhi advocated for constitutional measures to uplift untouchables, emphasizing that: “If it was in my power, I would certainly incorporate the question of the removal of untouchability as one of the fundamental rights in the new constitution of India. It should be considered a criminal offence if any Hindu is treated as an untouchable and I would insert a section in the Indian Penal Code to that effect. The congress will certainly be prepared to embody this principal in the constitution.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Mahatma Gandhi’s vision for the upliftment of untouchables underscored the necessity of robust constitutional remedies to eradicate untouchability. By advocating for its inclusion as a fundamental right and a criminal offense under the Indian Penal Code, Gandhi sought to secure legal protections and social justice for untouchables. His conviction in the Congress’s support for this principle highlights the critical role of constitutional reform in advancing equality and dignity for marginalized communities in India. In 1946, leaders of the local Harijan community met to Mahatma Gandhi and discussed their issues regarding to improve the condition of living of Harijans and pressed for some amenities such as:

- Free education for their children with boarding and lodging facilities.
- Arrangements to draft candidates from the Harijan community for training in mills, factories, workshops etc.
- Sustainable employment for the educator.



- Amelioration of the working conditions of Municipal workers.

The leaders also draw attention of Gandhi to the resolution which was passed by Valmiki Association of Simla regarding four reserved seats (out of total eight seats reserved for the Depressed Classes in Punjab) should be allotted to urban areas.<sup>xxiv</sup> The influence of Mahatma Gandhi's constructive programme, which emphasized social reform and unity within Hinduism, played a pivotal role in discouraging the conversion of untouchables to other religions. In response to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's proposal to abandon Hinduism to uplift untouchables, Chaudhari Bansilal, a Harijan Member of the Legislative Council (MLC), voiced strong opposition during a gathering of the Balmik (sweeper) community in Punjab. Bansilal emphatically declared, 'we are Hindus, and we cherish Hinduism,' reaffirming the community's commitment to their religious identity. He expressed optimism that Dr. Ambedkar would reconsider his stance and urged him to halt his advocacy for religious conversion. In Bansilal's view, such a move would be catastrophic for Harijans, potentially undermining their social and cultural standing. Furthermore, Bansilal asserted confidence that the Balmik community in Punjab would reject Ambedkar's call for conversion and disavow his leadership on this matter. He emphasized the importance of unity within Hinduism to advance the welfare of Harijans, cautioning against divisive strategies that could weaken their collective progress.<sup>xxv</sup>

In conclusion, social reformers in colonial India, particularly Mahatma Gandhi, made concerted efforts to eradicate untouchability, with Gandhi undertaking extensive tours to marginalized communities to raise awareness about their plight. In Punjab, these efforts elicited a mixed response, as local leaders like Babu Mangu Ram Mugowalia, founder of the Adi Dharam movement, amplified the issues faced by untouchables, advocating for their rights and dignity. Organizations such as the Arya Samaj and Shiromani Akali Dal also contributed by organizing conferences to promote awareness and providing free education to untouchable children, fostering social inclusion. However, these initiatives were not without controversy, as some critics in Punjab perceived the upliftment campaigns as opportunistic attempts to bolster follower numbers rather than genuine reform. Despite these internal conflicts and differing motivations, Gandhi's constructive programme left a significant and enduring impact on the upliftment of untouchables in Punjab, laying a foundation for greater social equity and challenging deep-rooted caste hierarchies.



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- <sup>iii</sup> *CWVG* Vol. 42, P.110.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Asli Kaumi Dard*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1929.
- <sup>v</sup> *Asli Kaumi Dard*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1929.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Harijan*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1933, P.1.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Harijan*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1933, P.1.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Harijan*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1933, P.1.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Harijan*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1933, P.1.
- <sup>x</sup> *Harijan*, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1933, P.1.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xii</sup> *Harijan*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1933, P.1.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Harijan*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1934.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> *Harijan*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1935.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Harijan*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1935.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *The Tribune*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1937.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *The Tribune*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1936.
- <sup>xix</sup> *The Times of India*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1933, P.13.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Asli Kaumi Dard*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1929.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Sikh Sevak*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1934. P.3.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Asli Kaumi Dard*, June 1928.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *The Times of India*, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1932, P.3.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *The Times of India*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1946, P.8.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *The Times of India*, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1936, P.4.