



GABBAN-MAHAR
(A friend of the author)

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

THE purpose of this series of small volumes on the leading forms which religious life has taken in India is to produce really reliable information for the use of all who are seeking the welfare of India. Editors and writers alike desire to work in the spirit of the best modern science, looking only for the truth. But, while doing so and seeking to bring to the interpretation of the systems under review such imagination and sympathy as characterize the best study in the domain of religion today, they believe they are able to shed on their work fresh light drawn from the close religious intercourse which they have each had with the people who live by the faith herein described; and their study of the relevant literature, has in every instance been largely supplemented by persistent questioning of those likely to be able to give information. In each case the religion described is brought into relation with Christianity. It is believed that all readers, in India at least, will recognise the value of this practical method of bringing out the salient features of Indian religious life.

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF INDIA

THE MAHAR FOLK

A Study of Untouchables in Maharashtra

BY

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FORMERLY AT POONA AND NAGPUR

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Years have elapsed since Dr. J. N. Farquhar did me the honour of asking me to write an account of the Mahars. At that time my work in the Poona district had led me into many villages, and I had met people of all classes; and I thought that I knew the Mahars and their mind. But the demand for a written word about them showed me that much special study and research were required to fulfil Dr. Farquhar's desire. I regret that I was never able to submit any of my work on this subject to him.

From time to time the staff of the Scottish Church in Poona was called on to help at other stations; and so there came to me the privilege of serving in Kolaba, Ahmednagar and Nagpur. That made possible wide research among the Mahar people; and the more one searched the more there remained to investigate. And so the writing out in full of the knowledge thus gained was long delayed; and many of my Mahar friends must have lost hope of ever seeing in print what they had helped me to glean of folklore. I had myself lost hope of publishing my study when five years in a drawer began to make some of the facts mouldy. But the Rev. J. Z. Hodge of the National Christian Council showed a most helpful interest in the publication; and by his efforts my studies are now set up in type. I am most grateful to Mr. Hodge.

My indebtedness to books for information about the Mahars is acknowledged throughout in footnotes. For the understanding of the folk poetry and for the discovery of old charters I am specially under obligation to Mr. Manohar Uzgara and to the Rev. Sumitra Thorat of Poona. Much help was given generously by Mr. Kamble of Poona and Martandrao Master of Saswad. The late Rev. Vinayakrao Uzgara helped me in the Ahmednagar district. My gratitude

to these and many other helpers has not faded with the years.

Questions regarding customs, legends and cult have often remained unanswered; and I feel that much of scientific interest has yet to be gleaned. If any readers can supplement or correct my information I shall be glad to receive fuller knowledge. It has to be remembered, however, that the far spread fragments of this people cannot be easily cemented together for the formulation of uniform tribal custom and belief.

It is impossible to study a people so mishandled by fate as the Mahars have been without feeling pity for them, and indignation towards the system which oppressed them. Such emotion often warps scientific judgment. But moral indignation is one of the facts which science must explain. If I do seem to advocate warmly the claim of the Mahar for justice, it is because the facts have shown that the claim is reasonable. If I seem very hard on Brahmanism in its treatment of the outcaste, I am not just airing an individual opinion or even repeating the opinions of anti-Brahmanic classes. Many of my closest friends have been Brahmans, and they have helped me to understand that the best in their life and their literature condemns the absurdities of the caste system.

Some matters are necessarily dealt with in a general way and the lack of particular treatment may cause obscurity. For example, I have found that words like 'outcaste' and 'untouchable' perplex many people in Britain. Why should any person be born outcaste and why should the touch of a clean, decent man bring defilement? Why indeed? "It's gey an easy spairin." If one were dealing with the whole Hindu social system one might go into detail; but that would demand extensive treatment. I am just seeking to show what kind of people constitute the chief outcaste class in the Maratha country. This may help to throw light on the whole social order which is dominated by Brahmanic belief and custom; and I hope it may help to put matters right that are wrong.

In a similar way there may be obscurity in my references to the religion whose centre is Pandharpur. If one were

dealing specially with India's doctrine of salvation by God's sovereign grace it would be necessary to treat historically, and with much attention to an extensive vernacular literature, the whole Bhagavata Dharma which flourished at Pandharpur as in other centres in India. In the present essay I must just take for granted that there has been a great revelation of God's grace at Pandharpur; and I have sought to interpret to those who do not understand the Marathi language the nature of the contribution made by Mahars to the praise of the Name.

My hope is that this essay may contribute something in its incompleteness to an understanding of the social order in India and of the soul of that great land.

*The Manse of Kilmallie,
Corpach
by Fort William,
September, 1938.*

ALEXANDER ROBERTSON.

PREFACE

THE Depressed Classes of India, or the 'Harijans'—to give them the new name bestowed on them by Mahatma Gandhi—have in recent years acquired an importance which thirty years ago one would not have believed to be possible. People have known about untouchability for as long as they have known about Hinduism, and many have regarded it as a disease like plague or cholera for the fighting of which all true lovers of men should use every means at their command. But the average man or woman had little detailed knowledge of the life of the Untouchables, and what they had related very largely to the more striking disabilities and injustices to which they were subjected. The Untouchables themselves were inarticulate. They had neither education, nor wealth, nor social or political influence. In any movement which affected them the initiative had to come from without.

In recent years a great change has taken place. These outcaste people have come into possession of considerable political power. As a class and as communities their self-consciousness is growing. They are resenting their disabilities and claiming for themselves the right to a fuller and freer life. They are organizing themselves, and there are appearing among them leaders, some of whom are men of outstanding ability. The attention of the people of India has been directed to them in a new way, and there has been a real awakening of conscience in regard to them. It is impossible to forecast what the outcome of all this will be. In these days almost everything in India is changing, and the future of these unfortunate people will certainly be very different in many ways from their past.

The Mahars are one of the most important of these communities in Western India. They have received special prominence recently through the resolution which a Con-

ference of members of the community, led by Dr. Ambedkar, passed at Yeola, pledging themselves to leave Hinduism. People have been led to ask what manner of people these are. Mr. Robertson in this very important little book answers the question. He has special qualifications for this task. He has just retired from India after having lived for thirty-five years in Maharashtra. He worked first as a missionary in Poona District, and later as Professor of Philosophy in Hislop College, Nagpur. In both these districts, as well as in other parts of Western India, he came into intimate contact with large groups of Mahars. He came to know them as a friend. It is this fact that gives to his study its peculiar value, for he has brought to bear on his task not only that capacity for observation of which only a trained mind is capable, but a deep sympathy with and love for the people. He presents the Mahar to us not as a mere object of scientific interest, but as a man; and as a man possessing all the worth and dignity, and all the capacity for practical, intellectual and spiritual attainment, that are found in other members of God's great family. May this book lead to a greater understanding of this remarkable community, and to a greater sympathy with them and with other under-privileged communities in their aspirations.

JOHN MCKENZIE.

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