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EDUCATION OF THE MASSES

A LECTURE

to the

STUDENT CONGRESS, JAFFNA

BY

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IN THE

RIDGEWAY MEMORIAL HALL.



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Education of the Masses.

"GO AMONG THE PEOPLE."

"GIVE UP FOREIGN DRESS AND HABITS."

From the beginning of history an antagonism of interest seems to have divided mankind into the two great classes of "privileged" and "nonprivileged." In most societies, particularly in those founded on an economic basis, the privileged class, which comprises the more cunning and unscrupulous section of the people, prey upon the masses who form the general body of the working classes. This war of man against man has taken away all joy and hope from the lives of millions of our fellow creatures, and thrown them into misery and wretchedness. Neither philosophers nor politicians have been able to invent a remedy for this evil, and the condition of the masses has become more and more miserable.

In the savage days of infant civilizations, when the aristocracy of physical strength followed bloodshed and plunder as their honourable and regular occupations, man had certainly greater opportunities and means of resisting his enemies and oppressors. But in these days of

Gentler Manners and Enlightened Thought,

no man can be circumspect enough to escape the ingenious methods used by the privileged few to enslave and exploit the working classes. Hedged in on one side by the weapons of political power and the forces of capitalism, and on the other by the barriers of social conventions, and the ceremonies and formulas of religious creeds, the great body of people find all the avenues of life closed to them till perhaps the merciful hands of death come to their rescue. Utterly degraded and enslaved the working classes live like infuriated beasts in our

midst. They have become a positive danger to civilisation, and so long as they remain in this state of ignorance, filth and misery, there will be social unrest and anarchy.

Is it not possible to organise society in such a way as to prevent or at least to minimise these evils? That social harmony is possible is borne out by the facts of history as well as by the instincts of our rational nature. Also the oneness and interdependence of life demonstrates the great truth that the normal state of social relationship is one of social harmony. One may ask if ever there was an actual golden age of social harmony in any land. If the evidence of history is to be believed, there was such an age in Ancient India. At that time social institutions had an ethical purpose with the idea of duty rather than that of rights as the chief regulating principle. There was neither selfish exploitation, nor competition in those days, and a class like the slaving proletariat of modern cities was not even heard of. On the other hand the spirit of sacrifice characterised all social action, and cooperation was the rule and method of life. Under such ideal conditions, it was no wonder that all the social classes worked as one man for the common good.

It may be that in modern times even the dream of a golden age has passed away. But the attempts made all over the world to improve the condition of the masses encourage us to believe that some degree of social harmony can be aimed at and worked for, several ways and means of social amelioration have been proposed and adopted by various countries both in the West and in the East. But none of them has been found to be so far-reaching in its effects as that of the

Education of the Masses.

Questions concerning the welfare of the people such as old age pensions, the housing problem, and national insurance, can be more easily solved if there is a greater degree of enlightenment among the people. Even the vexed question of unemployment can be more successfully dealt with, as nothing

but a wide-spread of general education can destroy certain caste prejudices against particular industries and forms of manual work such as carpentry and weaving

The usual *Media* of popular education are lectures, day and night schools, newspapers, pamphlets, and theatres. But the method I would like to emphasise more than any other is the one of *personal contact*. *Go among the people and converse with them freely on subjects of social and national interest.* Go in the dress of the people, lest they fail to recognise you as one of their own. Speak with them in their own language; otherwise they will not listen to you. See how the great religious teachers succeeded. Being masters of popular speech they went among the people and talked to them of the highest truths of life, and of the wisdom of the ages, in a clear and convincing manner. In what dress did these teachers go among the people, and how did they live among them? Not in foreign costumes as we do, nor with outlandish ways of life, but in the dress of the people and living like one of them. They spoke to the high and low in the same unassuming way, and influenced large masses of mankind. It is said that when John Wesley sat at the cottage doors of the Cornish miners, and told them of the mercy of God, tears rolled down their furrowed cheeks. Consider if Wesley could have succeeded, had he stood on a pedestal of respectability and thought of teaching the people by distributing pamphlets among them.

If you make a careful study of the history of great national movements, you will find that they originated with those that went about sowing their ideas broad cast among the people. The French Revolution and the Bolshevik movements had their origin in personal propaganda work done by a few individuals who placed themselves

In Touch with the People.

Why is Mahatma Gandhi so successful in his work? It is mainly because he lives like them, and talks to them in their own speech. There were Bannerjees and Pals who had cried themselves hoarse before his time; but they never moved

people. A tourist from China once said, in the course of a lecture, that, just before the establishment of the Republic in China, he found Chinese students educated in the universities of the West moving freely with the people, and talking to them on the way side about the benefits of a constitutional monarchy.

How far is this particular method of popular education adopted in Jaffna? The educated classes look down upon the masses with contempt, but lecture to them occasionally and also send out doses of pious newspaper articles. As for the rest, adopting a foreign costume, and certain expensive habits of life, they have set up an artificial barrier between themselves and the people. It rests with you, young men, to take up the great work of educating the people. Carry the light of Knowledge to every door. *Let the difference between you and the masses be one of character and culture rather than that of dress or speech or habit.*

Who are the teachers of the masses today? Have not the people fallen under the influence of rowdies, and designing village magnates who know that it is to their interests that the people be ignorant and poor. They encourage them to spend their money in drink, expensive marriage ceremonies and law-suits. As you know well many of the rowdies who now lead the people are also lawyer's touts. I say nothing more of the learned profession of the law as it is practised in Jaffna, and of the influence of its members upon the public.

If the educated have any influence at all on the people, it is the baneful one of making them admire foreign dress, customs, and manners. This foolish admiration of foreign things has been one of the chief causes of the degradation of the people. It has impressed the popular imagination with the idea of the superiority of foreign things. The result is that the people have been filled with Self-Contempt, and a feeling of dissatisfaction with their surrounding. Very few Jaffna men have confidence in themselves, and in their own

undertakings. I have often heard people say with self-complacency, "Oh! we are blacks, we are out dogs." Can

National Degradation

go any further? It is hard work to pull the people out of this mire of despondency. Teach the people to rise above this feeling of inferiority and helplessness. So long as you use foreign articles, we can neither become self-reliant, nor make the people forget that brooding sense of inferiority with which they are obsessed. Let those who want to be real teachers of the people eschew the use of foreign goods themselves, and dissuade others from using them.

I cannot but blush for some of our elderly men who can never get out, except in their trousers! How weak and wanting in self-confidence they are? Do they think that their soul lives in their trousers? To win the respect of the people, they think they must appear in a foreign garb. How can such men reconcile the people to their dress, habits and surroundings? Yet they are the people's leaders and teachers!

I leave it to you, young men, to decide for yourselves as to which is the more immediate work you have to undertake, whether to rescue the people from the hands of the rowdies, or to lead them away from the influence of our hypocritical leaders.

I also like to say a few words on the aims of popular education. To form the taste of the people will be the chief means of civilizing them and raising their character. If you know what a man likes, you know how to manage him and what you can make of him. It is by their taste that you must lay hold of the people. Drive away coarseness and caprice from their pleasures, and their arts will be sober. Only beautiful forms and movements have the power of acting as a retraining influence on the senses and the passions, and of kindling thought. Like nature, beauty is a law to the senses and an impulse to reason. Help the people to be clean in body, and mind and they will of themselves become enlightened.

How dirty are Jaffna homes? If we cannot keep our furniture clean, let us do without them. A floor smeared with cow's dung is a much more agreeable place to sit in, than a chair laden with dirt and dust. Broken chairs, beds, lamps, torn mats, and all things out of shape fill more than half the space of sitting-rooms and old bungalows, and make the whole surroundings ugly. The lower classes live and move in dirt. They have no change of clothing. The mats which they use for all purposes of personal and household use are dirty and torn. Their pillows are matted with dirt. The baskets and household utensils they use are never cleaned or washed. As they live and move in such surroundings their habits also must be coarse and their conduct capricious. Drinking is the only amusement with most people. Their language is vulgar and indecent, and no statement is made except with the assertion of an oath. In short,

The People have no Taste.

Everywhere they behave like market crowds, jostling each other and behaving as if nobody else lived in the world. To educate such a people, multiply around them the symbols of perfection, and surround them with noble and ingenious forms.

If you lead clean lives yourselves and keep your surroundings beautiful, your neighbours also will learn to be neat, and will gradually shun coarse and vulgar ways. Also provide the people with the means of amusement. If you do not, they will find their entertainment in taverns, in the Law Courts, and in the theatres run by professionals. The theatre, for instance, can be made an excellent medium of popular instruction. Through the theatre, the leaps and bounds of the drunkard and his shouts of joy can be converted into the graceful movements of the dance and the rapturous melodies of song. Well-chosen plays have the power of elevating our thoughts, and purifying our emotions. Tragedies, for instance, give us an idea of the splendid and terrible evolution of events, and show man in conflict with

chance. They also remind us of the absolute grandeur, strength, and dignity of human nature. Dramatised stories of tragic interest such as those of Harischandra and Rama have never ceased to exert a wholesome influence on the life of the masses. Another method of influencing the people is through games. Mix freely in games with the lads of your neighbourhood. Revive your national games that the people also may take an interest in them.

It should also not be forgotten that religion is the most important factor in popular education. Sociologists say that nothing moves mankind like an

Appeal to the Religious Instinct.

Our ancestors knew this law and conducted mass education through festivals, religious processions, readings and recitals in temples. Till very recently the annual recitation of the Puranas and Ithihasas held in connection with temple festivals was the chief method of mass education in Jaffna. Except in certain villages, this is very much neglected at present.

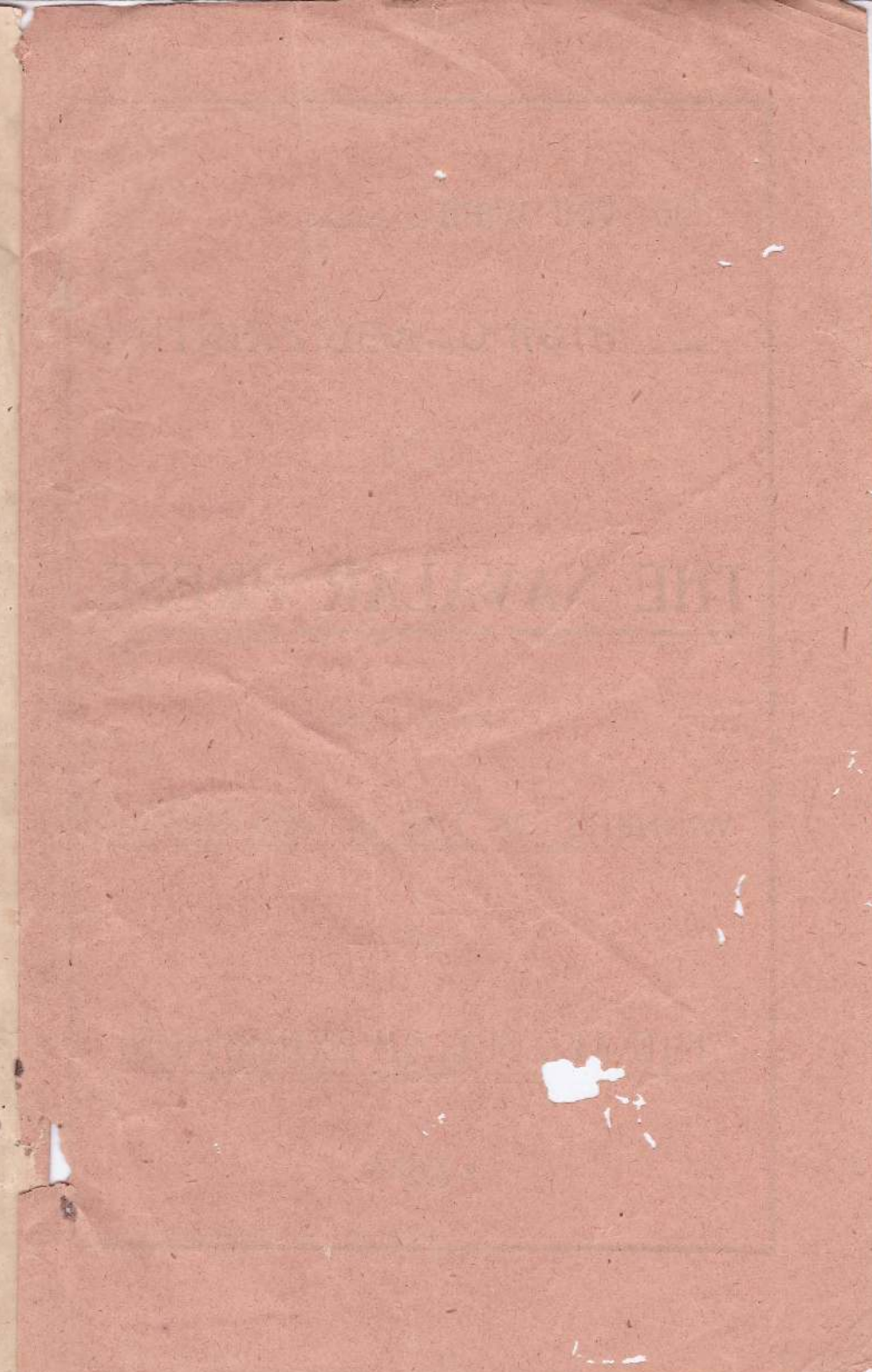
I must also say a word about our modern methods of education, some of which I condemn. Our modern lecture halls and political meetings are quite foreign to our people, and they fight shy of them. There is a spirit of assertion in the platform speaker which offends the taste of our people. The influence of the newspapers is altogether baneful. Some of them at least must be stopped from circulation. What end is gained by graphic accounts of abduction cases, tavern brawls and murders? Will not our men and women be virtuous and chaste, if they are not daily treated to the pictures of an ugly and sensuous world. Again newspapers serve as media of advertisements for foreign goods and medicines, and must be avoided. Teach the people, if you want, through occasional pamphlets and leaflets.

To educate the people in habits of thrift and industry, revive the co-operative system of work which is followed

by our farmers here and there, and extend it to trade and credit. The practice of employing hired labour must be discouraged as much as possible. Again, the question of unemployment is not one peculiar to educated young men. It has become a serious problem with the masses. You must destroy some of the barriers which have made certain trades the monopoly of certain castes.

Above all, you must have faith in the great future of our country. Take up the great work of educating the masses in the spirit of service and true fellowship, and I assure you that in the near future you will realise your ideal of National Regeneration.





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