

Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi on Religion and Equality: A Forgotten Voice of Reform

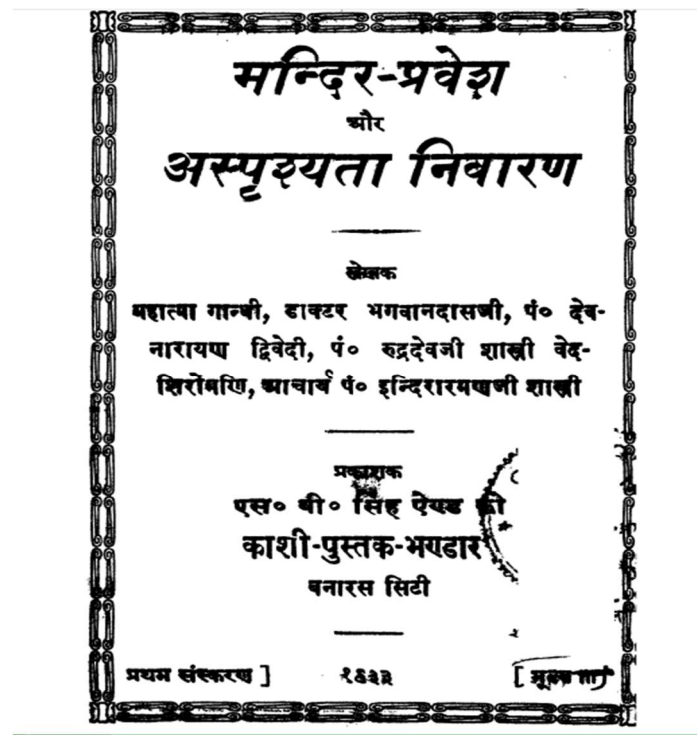
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Abstract

This document examines the intellectual and social contributions of Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi, a prominent Hindi author and reformer, specifically focusing on his philosophical defense of equality in the early 20th century. Central to this analysis is Pt. Dwivedi's 1933 chapter, "*Adhunik Yug Mein Achhoot aur Dharma*" (Untouchables and Religion in the Modern Era), published in the landmark anthology *Mandir-Pravesh aur Asprishyata Nivaran*. Pt. Dwivedi argues that the practice of untouchability is not a tenet of faith but a historical distortion of the liberal essence of Sanatana Dharma, which he posits as inherently inclusive and capable of absorbing diverse belief systems.

By invoking scriptural precedents such as the revered status of *Shabari*, *Nishad*, and *Ajamila*, Pt. Dwivedi contends that the path of devotion (*bhakti*) has always been universal, transcending social hierarchies. He characterizes the temple entry movement as a moral imperative of the age—*Yuga-Dharma*—warning that the exclusion of marginalized groups leads to the moral and spiritual decline of religion itself. Using an anatomical metaphor, he envisions society as a living body where the exclusion of any "limb" renders the whole diseased, calling for the recognition of a shared humanity across all castes. Alongside influential figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhagwan Das, Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi's work represents a critical effort to dismantle systemic discrimination using the very scriptural traditions often used to justify it. Today, the preservation of this rare text in the LBSNAA Library underscores its lasting relevance for social justice and administrative ethics in India.

Keywords: *Sanatana Dharma, Untouchability (Asprishyata), Temple Entry Movement, Social Reform, Indian Social History.*



Introduction

The year 1933 stands as a landmark in India's social history, defined by the publication of the seminal work *Mandir-Pravesh aur Asprishyata Nivaran* (Temple Entry and the Removal of Untouchability). This book serves as a profound historical record of India's social reform era. Published by S.B. Singh and Kashi Pustak Bhandar in Banaras (Varanasi), it brought together the voices of some of the most influential thinkers of the time, at a moment when the question of "untouchable upliftment" (Achutoddhar) was being debated with great urgency across the nation.

A central contribution to this collection is the chapter by the noted Hindi author Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi (pp. 122–127), titled "*Adhunik Yug Mein Achhoot aur Dharma*" (Untouchables and Religion in the Modern Era). In this essay, Pt. Dwivedi presents a powerful philosophical defence of equality, arguing that the perceived conflict between religion and untouchability arises from a misunderstanding of the true, liberal essence of Sanatana Dharma. He also addresses contemporary anxieties that religious reform movements were undermining faith, asserting instead that such fears stem from a failure to comprehend its inherently inclusive spirit.

2. The Philosophical Defense of Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi

A cornerstone of this collection is the contribution by the renowned Hindi author Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi. His chapter, titled "Adhunik Yug Mein Achhoot Aur Dharma" (Untouchables and Religion in the Modern Era), spans pages 122 to 127 and offers a rigorous philosophical defense of equality. Pt. Dwivedi argues that the perceived conflict between religious tradition and the removal of untouchability arises from a fundamental misunderstanding of the true, liberal essence of Sanatana Dharma.

He directly confronts contemporary anxieties that the "ship of religion" was sinking due to reform movements, contending that such fears result from a failure to grasp this same liberal core.

3. The Liberal Core of Sanatana Dharma

Pt. Dwivedi emphasises that Hinduism has historically possessed a remarkable capacity to absorb diverse communities and belief systems.

According to him, the narrow-minded exclusion of certain groups is not intrinsic to the religion but rather a distortion produced by historical neglect and social degeneration. True religion, he argues, guarantees equal rights to all its adherents and cannot be treated as a divisible or exclusionary domain.

4. Key Pillars of Reformist Thought

Pt. Dwivedi's arguments for a more inclusive society are built upon four primary themes:

- **The Liberal Core of Sanatana Dharma:** Hinduism has historically been broad enough to absorb countless group and religious ideologies. Pt. Dwivedi posits that current narrow-mindedness and exclusion are distortions caused by "time and carelessness" rather than being inherent to the faith. He maintains that true religion provides equal rights to every follower and cannot be treated like a property to be partitioned.
- **Historical Precedents for Inclusivity:** To counter the belief that untouchability is an eternal religious tenet, Pt. Dwivedi invokes the history of sacred figures. He asks rhetorically how figures like *Shabari*, *Nishad*, and *Ajamila*—who came from "lower" or "fallen" backgrounds—could have achieved their legendary spiritual status if exclusion were truly the rule of Sanatana Dharma. Their acceptance in scripture proves that the right to devotion (*bhakti*) is universal.
- **The Cruelty of Exclusion:** Pt. Dwivedi offers a sharp critique of the "cruelty and inhumanity" shown toward Harijans (untouchables), noting they were even stripped of their right to worship. He warns that those who believe they are protecting religion by closing temple doors are actually causing its "destruction". He asserts that the movement for temple entry is a necessary religious evolution, or *Yuga-Dharma*, that cannot be stopped.
- **A Call for Social Unity:** The author concludes with a powerful anatomical metaphor: society is like a body, and the Harijans are its limbs. To cast them off is to leave the body deformed and suffering. Pt. Dwivedi makes a passionate plea for the "higher castes" to recognize that the "same flesh and blood, the same external and internal senses" reside in the bodies of the Harijans as they do in their own.

5. A Constellation of Reformers

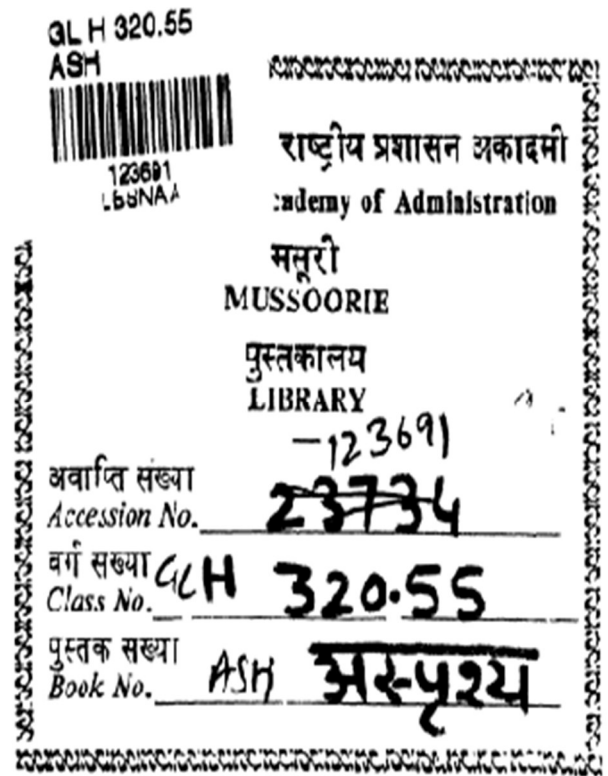
The volume is not merely a single author's intervention but an intellectual collective of reformist thought. Alongside Pt. Devnarayan Dwivedi, it includes contributions from several prominent figures who sought to transform Hindu society from within:

- **Mahatma Gandhi**, who regarded temple entry as a "test of the Hindu heart" and tied the movement to his moral and political vision.
- **Dr. Bhagwan Das**, whose scholarly advocacy strongly supported the eradication of untouchability.
- **Pt. Rudradev Shastri (Ved-Shiromani)**, who examined the Varna system and religious rights through Vedic interpretation.
- **Acharya Pt. Indiraman Shastri**, who articulated the ritual and spiritual rights of marginalised communities.
- **Pt. Ramnarayan Mishra**, Headmaster of Hindu School, Kashi, who emphasised the importance of such reformist literature for every household.

Together, these thinkers represent a powerful convergence of spiritual, intellectual, and political efforts aimed at dismantling systemic discrimination using the very scriptural traditions often misused to justify it.

6. A Rare Treasure in Mussoorie

Today, a rare copy of this important text is preserved in the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) Library in Mussoorie (Accession No. 123691). Its presence in an institution dedicated to training India's future administrators highlights the continuing relevance of its message. The text stands as a testament to the moral courage and intellectual depth of early twentieth-century reformers who sought to align religion with justice, equality, and human dignity.



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