



Untouchability – A thesis by Ambedkar

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I. UNTOUCHABILITY – ORIGIN

The scholarly traits and higher degrees of Ambedkar, empowered him to juxtaposed the dark face of caste hierarchy of Indian society. Being a son of 'Mahar', he encountered this humiliating treatment very closely. Ambedkar witnessed the high towers of 'varnashram' and the supremacy of 'Brahmins', whom he named as caste hierarchy. On the other hand for the 'Brahmins', who were following this 'varna vyavastha', because the other ashrams were practicing it and situated them on the top-most position. Whatever, might be the reasons were, but the 'Sudras' who were considered 'legs' or 'lower portion of the body of Purush', (as described in 'Purush Sukta'), were categorized into a new category, even lower than Sudras, called 'Untouchables'. According to 'Navsrajan (a grass root Dalit organization)',
"Untouchability is a direct product of the caste system. It is not merely the inability to touch a human being of a certain caste or sub-caste. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people that relates to a deeper psychological process of thought and belief, invisible to the naked eye, translated into various physical acts and behaviors, norms and practices."(2)

Now-a-days we witness mountaineering the ideology of caste and agitations colloquing untouchability. Intellectuals, thinkers, researchers, reformers, are idolizing Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and his achievements, his philanthropy made it possible to structured and implemented the Constitution of India and to disquisitions, tussles against untouchability, women rights and equality for all the classes and castes. His workmanship not only highlighted the problem but constituted on national and international platform.

Before launching upon the discussion and put our best efforts to explore the contents of untouchability, it is necessary to deal with some of the front matters-

Who are untouchables?

Are the Hindu only people in the world who observe untouchability?

Whether primitive shudras later called untouchables?

Why they are titled 'Broken man' by Ambedkar ?

Was Beef eating categorized them separated from Shudras ?

Idea of Conversion?

The present paper "Untouchable-who are they and why they became untouchables" is a sequel of his treatise called- "The Shudras –who were they and How they came in the fourth Varna of the Indo-Aryan Society", which was published in 1946, written by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. Dr B R Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was one of the architects of the Indian Constitution. He was a well-known politician and an eminent jurist. Ambedkar's efforts to eradicate the social evils like untouchability and caste restrictions were remarkable. After graduating from Elfinstone College, Bombay in 1912, he joined Columbia University, USA where he was awarded Ph.D. Later he joined the London School of Economics & obtained a degree of D.Sc. (Economics) & was called to the Bar from Gray's Inn. The leader, throughout his life, fought for the rights of the dalits and other socially backward classes.

II. UNTOUCHABILITY –THE IDEA OF POLLUTION

Hindu Varnashram was divided into four parts, known as 'Chatturvarnashram'. Evidences certified not only through 'Purush Sukta' but by other Hindu scriptures like-"Vaisstha Dharma Sutra", Apastamba Dharma Sutra, Rigveda and later 'ManuSmriti' also favored the same compartmentalization. It elaborated the constitution of society into four categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Each preceding caste is superior by birth. The preaching and study of Scriptures were restricted up to Brahmins only. Other two-kshatriya and Vaishyas were not limited to discuss or participate in religious or Vedic practices and to acquire knowledge and

that's why they all three were called twice-born (first from the womb of their biological mother and second by Saraswati). But Shudras were restricted from all these practices and that's why called one- born only.

Division of society, also based on the nature and nurture of the individuals and also their professions, is a phenomenon found in many parts of the civilized world. In the special context of India's ancient history when races and cultures battled and blended, this division also took a unique shape. This is known as the 'jātipaddhati'. Jāti also means birth. Since children usually adopted the professions of their fathers and forefathers, jāti acquired a functional character in a self contained economy and a social structure, based on traditional values.

The Varna system from which the jāti is supposed to have originated was a simple division based on two attributes:

1. **Guna** - Natural characteristics
2. **Karma** - action, acts, vocation

This gradually developed into a labyrinth of jātis and upajātis most of which were grouped under an umbrella term called the 'śūdras.' Even among such jāti-s, a few were pushed to the lowest rung of the social ladder because of their unclean food habits and amoral attitude which were unacceptable to the rest of society. Hence they were named as 'antyaaja' ('the last-born').

Probably for the same reason they were also considered asprśyas or untouchables. However, neither in the Vedas nor in the earlier smṛtis and dharmasāstras it has been mentioned of them being treated as such, but only as śūdras. The practice of untouchability seems to be a post-Vedic phenomenon.

Some of the jāti-s signified as antyajās are:

- Caṇḍāla
- Rajaka - the washerman
- Carmakāra - worker in hides
- Buruḍa - bamboo worker
- Kaivarta - fisherman
- Bhilla - of a forest-tribe or a hill-tribe

During the medieval ages, these jāti-s had often risen in social status due to their organization and wealth. Though jāti barriers have existed in some form all along at social levels, birth in a low jāti has never been considered a bar to spiritual enlightenment as depicted in the story of Dharmavyādha.^[1]

The question is- why this categorization was necessitated? And the answer is, Brahminial hierarchy, which was losing its grip over the society and especially weakening the religion. Others started to oppose it and started to raise their voices against it. A new religious approach also started to be practiced, craning the withered classes of the society under the umbrella of Buddhism. This religion not only resisted the conventional practices but also started to initiate the withered classes and people. Assembling of Shudras refuted the Brahminial society which was shielding under the umbrella of king, Hindu customs and traditions and which determined them, blasting the Buddhist era from the homogenous course of Hindu Brahminial History. The end of nineteenth century with the doom of Mughal empire and with the accumulation of British conglomerate yielded the posture surmount as the compartments were left to survive.(1)

Promontory Indian freedom struggle and vicinity of Mahatma during late nineteenth and early twentieth century sensitized the issue of caste with other issues. And Dr. Ambedkar, as an illuminator, persuaded the caste hierarchy.

III. WHO WERE THE UNTOUCHABLES?

On the basis of the following observations, untouchability can be defined, according to *Gopal Guru*, "Untouchability as a social concern finds its most profound expression and a different discipline, the dalit and not the dalit literature. On the flip side in some of the influential disciplines like political science, it figures only marginally, while in others, like economics and philosophy it is completely blacked out."(2)

Other than in literary sense *Sarukkai* in his article, '*Phenomenology of untouchability*'(3) offers a wider philosophical group of the notion of untouchability. In his understanding, the idea of 'touch (and skin) becomes important for touch and skinning from a primal sense of body. *Sarukkai* refers to a certain practice of the upper caste such as refusing to touch and share water with people who have been called the Untouchable and who are today collectively called dalit.

IV. BUT ARE THE HINDUS THE ONLY PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO OBSERVE UNTOUCHABILITY?

Primitive society not only believed in the notion of defilement but they believed in the transmission of evil from one person to another through birth, marriage and death or the touch of dead bodies. For example- in

America's Tribes, initiation and puberty in both male and female count as pollution and they observe a special dietary to regain the chastity. Among the Polynesians, the taboo character of a chief is violated by the touch of an inferior. That is a different issue that in this case the danger falls upon the inferior. In the Tonga island, anyone who touches a chief contacted taboo which was removed by touching the sole of the foot of a superior chief. Contact with strange people regarded as a source of untouchability by the primitive man. In Australia when one tribe approaches another, the member carry lighted sticks to purify the air. In a matter of pollution there is nothing to distinguish the Hindus from the primitive or ancient people. They recognize pollution is abundantly clear from the Manusmriti. Manusmriti treated birth, death and menstruation as a source of impurity. To get rid from this defilement Manusmriti suggested a transmission through a scapegoat namely by touching the cow or looking at the sun after sipping water.

Besides the individual pollution Hindus also accept the territorial pollution and communal pollution and sanctification customs like Romans and Greeks. Every village has an annual jatra(4). An animal is purchased on behalf of the village, taken round the village and sacrificed. The blood sprinkled round the village and towards the end the meat is distributed among the villagers including Brahmins. Thus the village and the villagers were purified.

The Buddhist view of the body is also important, especially in the context of untouchability. One reason is that the Buddhists rejected a brahminical outlook towards individuals, society and god. The other reason is that following Ambedkar, Buddhism has become the preferred religion for many Dalits. The body has often been used as a metaphor for the world. For the Buddha, the body was indeed the world in that it is within the body that there is the arising and ceasing of the world (Lang 2003: 24). The belief in the impurity of the body in the Buddhist tradition seems to be all pervading. Right from birth to death the body is the site of impurity of various kind for the Buddhists, understanding the body is important because it also helps to understand "how human beings remain trapped within them".

It means, that the racial pollution was crowd-pleasing not only in India, gambled by upper caste societies but credo of other nations also to supervene this compartmentalization. But it was different then India because in Indian societies along with racial infections the caste hierarchy was also intrigued which was initiated by Hindus themselves, who always censured their divisions without any explanation.

V. WHY WERE THEY SEPERATED FROM SHUDRAS AND STARTED TO LIVE OUTSIDE THE VILLEGE?

The census report of India published in 1870 by Census Commissioners at the interval of every ten years contained a wealth of information nowhere else to be found regarding the social and religious life of the people of India. Before the census of 1911 the census commissioner had a column called 'Population by Religion'. Under this heading the population was shown

1. Muslims 2. Hindus 3. Christians.

The census report for the year 1911 marked a new departure from the prevailing practice and divided Hindus for the first time under three separate categories-

1. Hindus
2. Animists and Tribal
3. The depressed class or untouchables

The 1911s classification has been continued ever since.

Although there is no clarification about the criteria adopted by the commission of this new classification but possibly the presentation of Muslim Community under the leadership of H.H. The Aga Khan in 1909 to the Viceroy, Lord Minto for a separate electoral is the root of this separation in which they mentioned,

"The Mohamedans of India number, according to the census taken in the year 1901 over sixty two millions or between one-fifth and one-fourth of the total population of his Majesty's Indian dominions and if a reduction be made for the uncivilized portion of the community enumerated under the heads of animist and other minor religion, as well as for those classes who are ordinarily classified as Hindus but properly speaking are not Hindus at all, the proportion of Mohamedans to the Hindu majority becomes much larger. We therefore desire to submit that under any system of representation extended or limited a community in itself more numerous than the entire population of any first class European power except Russia may justly lay claim to adequate recognition as an important factor in the state."

It was very surprising that the commission on the basis of the presentation of Muslims, categorized the Hindus into two category-

1. Those who were hundred percent Hindus and
2. Those who were not.

Those who were not hundred percent Hindus were included caste and tribes which-

1. Deny the supremacy of Brahmins.
2. Do not receive the Mantras from a Brahmin or other recognized Hindu Guru.'

3. Deny the authority of Vedas.
4. Do not worship the Hindu Gods.
5. Have no Brahmin priest at all.
6. Are not served by good Brahmins as a family priests.
7. Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temples.
8. Cause pollution either by touch or within a certain distance
9. Burry their dead.
10. Eat Beef and do no reverence to the cow.

May be because of not receiving any mantras from any Brahmin or not having any Brahmin priest they were started to treat lower than Brahmins and because of eating beef and doing minimal jobs they were started to stay out of the village and that's why called 'Outcaste'. Most importantly they have their own priest most knowledgeable and intellectual person reared for themselves.

Although these are considered as mere speculations because no clear cut details or evidences are available. Even the enquiry of commission considered one-sided only with the perspective of Brahmins only. The fact was that untouchables were also not looked upon themselves as untouchables and Brahmins as superior. This fact is noted down by *Mr. Hemingsway*, the Editor of the *Gazetteer of the Tanjore district*. Who says- "These castes strongly object to the entrance of a Brahmin into their quarters believing that harm will result to them there from."

What is the explanation of this strange phenomena? Brahman were not having any sensible exposition of this discern but on a factual ground the untouchables were not untouchables but the members of other caste outside the door of the house ,of the society and later on of the village.

VI. OTHER EXPLANATIONS OF UNTOUCABILITY AND THE REASON OF THEIR DIVISION

Testimony ratify that many other practices other than this which was constituted in 1911s report , are recorded by the historians and also systematized by Ambedkar in the first cell of his this thesis. The genealogy of the term , However goes back to late thirteen century. 'Workari Sampradaya's(5) legend 'Chokamela'(a thirteen-fourteen century Maharastrian Mahar sant) and 'Eknath'(a sixteen century Brahman), wrote poems in the persona of Mahar who were wiser in spiritual matters than Brahmins. Both ,offered the model of change in regard of untouchability. first Brahmanical, anti upper caste, anti- patriarchal ideology and under joining can be traced to the writings and socio-political activism of Jyotiba Rao Phule, The lower caste (Chamar) Maharastian, social reformer who founded "The Satya Shodak Samaj(1857) much before the so called nationalist, Congress began to associated with the hegemony of Hinduism, Phule published his first Marathi text-"Gulamgiri(Slavery)", where he called for the end of Hindu-Aryan domination by invoking the primitive people and Aryan Invasion theories. He called Aryans Invaders who were outsiders and because of wearing white skin, they drudged the Dravinians who wore black skin. His historical materialist analysis of the origin of caste system and decoupling it into two categories-Shudras and Ati-sudras(untouchables) , along with the reinterpretation of Indian Mythology, challenged the existing Brhaminical ideologies used to legitimized the caste system."

He strongly believed 'lack of education' as a responsible factor for it. He wrote – "Vidyevina mati geli; Mativina neeti geli;, neetivina gati geli;

Gatrivina vita gele; vittavina shudra khachale; itke anartha eka avidyene kele."

Which means lack of education leads to lack of wisdom, which leads to lack of morals, which leads of progress, which leads to lack leads to oppression of the lower class. See what state of society one lack of education can cause.

Was Beef eating categorized them separated from Shudras?

According to the circular issued by Census Commissioner Beef eating situated them at the bottom. **No Hindu community however low , will touch cow's flesh.** The circular stamped that it was well established that untouchables eat beef. It means the Hindus were categories first on the basis of knowledge and priestly rights and then on the basis of food taboos. The categorization was-

Those who were vegetarians and non-vegetarians.

Second those who eat beef and those who were non-beef eaters.

Unquestionably, there is no need to enter into these crapshoots .But this theory, receives supports from the Hindu Shastras. The Veda Vyas Smriti contain the following verse which specifies the communities which are included in the category of Antyajjas and the reason why they were so included-

“The charmakers(Cobblers),the Bhatta(Soldier), the Bhilla, the Rajala(washerman), the Puskara, the Nata(Actor), the Vrata, the Meda, the Chandala, the dasa, the Svapaka and the Kolika- these are known as Antyajas as well as others who eat cow’s flesh.”

This rectifies that those who were beef eaters were treated as untouchables.

On the contrary the statement of Dr. Jha, provides the fact through other ways. Dr. D.N.Jha in his book “The Myth of Holi Cow” mentioned,-

“The Vedic Aryans sacrificed the cow in religious sacrifices and ate its flesh. The cow was most frequently used in similes and metaphors in the Vedic texts and these may have been taken literally in the course of time.”

Asking about the eschewing of Beef eating he cited-

“It was only in the early Christian centuries, around the middle of the first millennium A.D., that the Brahminical texts began to discourage and even disapprove of cow slaughter.

This change of attitude can be understood against the general background of the transformation of the rural society in post -Mauryan centuries, especially from around the middle of the first millennium A.D., which ushered in a phase of unprecedented agrarian expansion. Brahmins emerged as a feudal land owning class and, unlike in the earlier period, became more and more involved in agriculture. This led to the recognition of the pivotal role of animal husbandry, and the disapproval of killing of cattle by the Brahmins. All this is encapsulated in the concept of *kali* age in which many age-old practices came to be forbidden”

But, it’s not a new customary practice which was adopted or forbidden by any caste, in ‘Ashwamedh’a and ‘Rajsuya’ animals were sacrificed in huge numbers . It might be the atmosphere of scorn created by Brahmins against Buddhist and so they situated the beef-eating kept with ‘Broken Man’ and situated the main cause of untouchability was beef-eating.

Was Conversion the only elevator for Untouchables-

The year of 2500th anniversary of Buddhism in India saw the beginning of conversion movements. But, Conversion as a way out of the untouchable status was not new in India. Islam and Christianity drew large numbers of conversions. The social conversion of Mahar Caste, an untouchable caste of Maharastra, which culminated in conversion, roughly parallels in time the revival of intellectual interest in Buddhism, but it touches that revival chiefly through the figure of its twentieth century leader, Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. Ambedkar’s own life reveals some of the factors that produces the Mahar upward movement. His father and grandfather had already broken away from the traditional position of the Mahar as a village servant. In 1935 when he announced that he “ would not die a Hindu”, Buddhism was not seen as a viable alternatives for the Mahars. But when a wave of positive responses started to sooth him after his declaration ,in 1936 , finally, in a Mahar conference in Bombay he declared his hind-most decision of conversion, augmentation to the benefits package(honor and equality) for Mahars not only in Temple entry but even to consume all other natural and social resources equally .

But, the speculation of Ambedkar cannot be disregarded,

“ It is therefore unnecessary for me to apologies for having resorted to constructing links between where they were missing. Nor can my thesis be said to be vitiated on that account for nowhere is the construction of links based on pure conjecture. The thesis in great part is based on facts and inferences from facts. And where it is not based on facts or inferences from facts, it is based on circumstantial evidence of presumptive character resting on considerable degree of probability. There is nothing that I have urged in support of my thesis which I have asked my readers to accept or trust. I have at least shown that there exists a preponderance of probability in favor of what I have asserted.”

VII. NOTES

1. Commenting on the possibility of religion both in United State and in India, Gramsci used the Italian word ‘Torpoid(torpor).
2. Confronting Untouchability by Gopal Guru(published in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 43, No. 28 (Jul. 12 - 18, 2008), pp. 31-33)
3. Phenomenology of Untouchability by Sunder Sarukkai(published in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 44, No. 37 (SEPTEMBER 12-18, 2009), pp. 39-48)
4. .. **Zatra** is the **Konkani language** term for the pilgrimage festivals celebrated at Hindu temples in Goa; the **Hindi** and **Marathi** language equivalents are **Yatra** and **Jatra**. During the Zatra, the idol(s) or **murtis** of the Hindu deity or deities are taken out on special procession either in a "**Palkhi**" (sort of a **Palanquin**) or in a large, multi-storied chariot called the **Rath**. Traditionally, every temple observes this festival once a year on the traditional day. All zatras usually occur after **Diwali** in October and continues until the **Shigmo** festival in March.
5. **Varkari** (meaning "a pilgrim") is a **sampradaya** (religious movement) within the **bhakti** spiritual tradition of **Hinduism**, geographically associated with the Indian states of **Maharashtra** and northern **Karnataka**. Varkaris worship Vitthal (also known as **Vithoba**), the presiding deity of **Pandharpur**, regarded as a form of **Krishna**. Saints and **gurus** of the **bhakti movement** associated with the Varkaris include **Jñāneśvar**, **Namdev**, **Chokhamela**, **Eknath**, and **Tukaram**, all of whom are accorded the title of **Sant**.

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