



Untouchability: Some Review

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ABSTRACT

Untouchability is one of the major problems of our country. It has its roots in the Indian society that is based on the caste system. The castes are further divided into sub-castes. The people of the lowest caste are treated untouchables. They do not belong to the fold of Hinduism. Nobody knows exactly about the origin of untouchability or the caste system itself.

Some historians try to trace the origin of the caste system to the Vedas, the ancient religious books of the Hindus. The Purusa Sukta in the Rig Veda describes the creation of four Vernas namely, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra. The indigenous people were outside the Verna system. They continued to fight against the invading Aryans. But they were subjugated in the long run. In order to preserve the purity of blood, social interaction was prohibited with the members of the vanquished group. Those who did not follow the rule or violated it were forced to live away from the dominating group. Such people became outcastes and later untouchables. An attempt is made in this paper to present untouchability of some review.

KEYWORDS : Untouchability

Introduction : Dr. Ambedkar analysed Hindu society before starting his struggle against untouchability and the caste system. He was a scholar as much as a man of action – in any case before becoming one. In his writings, Ambedkar tried hard to show the mechanisms of the caste system and clarified the origin of untouchability in order to support his fight for equality. For him, if the lower castes were not in a position to overthrow their oppressors, it was because of two reasons: they had partially internalised hierarchy; and because of the very characteristics of caste-based inequality. The internalization of hierarchy was largely due to what M.N. Srinivas was to call the sanskritisation process that Ambedkar, in fact, had identified more than 20 years before. As early as in 1916, Ambedkar presented his first research paper at Columbia University and explained that the caste system could not have been imposed by the Brahmins over society, but that it took shape when they were able to persuade other groups that their values were universally superior and that they had to be emulated by others, including endogamy, a marital rule which closed the system upon itself. The kind of inequality inherent in the caste system is called “graded inequality” by Ambedkar in a very perceptive way. In Untouchables or the Children of the India’s Ghetto, he contrasts it with other varieties of inequality which were not so difficult to abolish or correct. In the Ancient Regime, the Third State was able to raise itself against the aristocracy and the monarchy. In industrial societies, the working class can raise itself against the bourgeoisie. The type of inequality from which the caste ridden society suffers is of a different kind because its logic divides the dominated groups and, therefore, prevents them from overthrowing the oppressor. In a society of “graded inequality”, the Bahujan Samaj is divided into the lower castes (Shudras) and the Dalits and the Shudras and the Dalits themselves are divided into many jatis. One of the main objectives of Dr. Ambedkar was first to unite the Dalits and, then, the Bahujan Samaj and, second to endow them with a separate identity that would offer them an alternative route out of sanskritisation. In order to achieve this two-fold objective, he implemented five different strategies in the course of his almost four-decade long public career.

Untouchability: Untouchability means pollution by the touch of certain persons by reason of their birth in a particular caste or family. It leads to defilement, pollution and contamination. It is believed that the practice of untouchability is peculiar to the Hindu society. Untouchability as a social concept has become embodied in customs and as customs differ so does untouchability. The classes, which are commonly regarded, as untouchables are Chamars, Busadh, Dom, Halalkor, Hari, Mochi, Mushahar. Although they were outside the pole of Hindu society, which recognizes only four classes namely, Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, they were reckoned as part of the Hindu society for political purposes.¹ Before the Indian constitution that abolished untouchability in 1950, the untouchables were divided into three categories namely untouchables, unapproachable and unseeable. The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were called outcaste untouchables namely

Pariahs, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avarnas, Antyajas and Namashudras. Their touch and even voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. So they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste Hindu. According to the traditional terminology, the caste Hindus are called Savarnas and the untouchables are called Avarnas.³ There is difference between an untouchable and an impure person. An untouchable’s touch pollutes anyone but an impure’s touch pollutes only the Brahmins. The touch of the impure causes pollution only on the ceremonial occasion, whereas that of the untouchable causes pollution at all times.

Untouchables As Sons of the Soil : Ambedkar tried to endow the lower castes with a glorious history of sons of the soil to help them acquire an alternative – not-caste based – identity, to regain their self respect and overcome their divisions. In The Untouchables, who were they and why they became Untouchables? (1948), Ambedkar refutes Western authors explaining caste hierarchy by resorting to racial factors.³ His interpretation is strikingly complicated. He explains that all primitive societies have been one day or the other conquered by invaders who raised themselves above the native tribes. In breaking up, these tribes as a matter of rule give birth to a peripheral group that he calls the Broken Men. When the conquerors became stationary then, they resorted to the services of these Broken Men to protect themselves from the attacks of the tribes which remained nomadic. The Broken Men therefore found refuge, as guards of villages, in the suburbs of the latter because it was more logical from a point of view of topography and because the victorious tribes did not accept foreigners, of a different blood, within their group. Ambedkar applied this theory to India by presenting the Untouchables as the descendants of the Broken Men (Dalit, in Marathi) and, therefore, the original inhabitants of India, before the conquest of this country by the Aryan invaders.

According to Ambedkar these Broken Men were the most constant followers of Buddha soon after he began his teachings in the 6th century BC. And they remained Buddhists when the rest of the society returned to the Hindu fold under the pressure of Brahmins. Ambedkar drew two conclusions from it:

“It explains why the Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priests and do not even allow them to enter into their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism.”

Thus, Ambedkar did not contend himself with elaborating a theory of castes which culminated in the idea of graded inequality; he also devised an untouchable tradition susceptible to remedy the former. If they recognised themselves as sons of the soils and Buddhists, the

Untouchables could better surmount their divisions into so many jatis and take a stand together as an ethnic group against the system in its entirety. Omvedt underlines that by the end of his life Ambedkar was working on a grand theory of the origin of the Untouchables and the conflict between their civilisation and Hinduism. The notion of autochthony played a key role in this theory. Ambedkar argued that if Hindu India had been invaded by Muslims, Buddhist India had been subjugated by Brahmins outsiders much before. Moved considers that there was a racial ethnic element in all of this, in which Ambedkar identifies his heroes to some extent with non-Aryans, for instance, arguing that the Mauryan empire was that of the Nagas.

AMBEDKAR'S ANALYSIS OF UNTOUCHABILITY:

Ambedkar refer to the following features in order to deal with the origin of the untouchables among primitive and modern societies.

- (1) Primitive society consisted of nomadic communities whereas modern society consists of settled communities.
- (2) Primitive society consisted of tribal communities based on blood relationship whereas modern society consists of local communities based on territorial affiliation. Thus we can say that primitive society developed in two ways namely from a tribal to a territorial community and from a nomadic to a settled community.

According to Ambedkar, primitive society was nomadic. These tribes went from one place to another with their cattle. But as time went on, they discovered new wealth namely land. And they started to live in one community, which was called settled community. They learned the art of framing and of cultivating land. According to Ambedkar, two important features marked primitive society, its transition from nomadic life to the life of a settled community. All tribes in primitive society could not settle at one place at the same time. Some of them settled and some remained nomadic. The settled tribes were always in danger because the nomadic tribes felt envious of them. They systematically organized raids on the settled tribes with the motive of stealing wealth like cattle, corn, and women of the settled communities. The hostility between the settled and the nomadic tribes perpetually existed. This hostility found its expression in chronic war. The settled tribes of primitive society faced the problems of their defence. In such situation, the organized raids always disturbed normal life. In a tribal war it often happened that a tribe instead of being completely annihilated was defeated and routed. In many cases a defeated tribes became broken people. As a consequence of this, floating groups consisting of broken tribes were always roaming in all direction.

The primitive society was fundamentally tribal in its organization. Ever individual in primitive society belonged to a tribe. Outside the tribe no individual had any existence. Another important aspect is that tribal organization was based on common blood and common kinship. Therefore, an individual born in one tribe could not join another tribe and become a member of it. The broken people had, therefore, to live as stray individuals. In the primitive society where one tribe was fighting against the other tribes, a stray collection of broken people was always in danger of being attacked. They did not know where to go for their shelter and protection.

Ambedkar adduces two kinds of evidences to show that the untouchables were really the broken people.

The first set of the facts consists in the names Antya, Antyaja and Antyavasin, given to certain communities in the Hindu Scriptures. They have been derived from the root Anta. According to the Hindu order of Divine creation the word Anta signifies the end of creation and the word Antya means one who is born last namely, the untouchables in the order of Divine creation. But Ambedkar does not agree with this view. According to the Hindu theory of Divine creation, the Shudra is born last. The untouchable is outside the scope of this theory. Therefore, he is called Avarna i.e, out of Varna. Therefore, the Hindu theory of Divine creation cannot be applied to the untouchables. According to Ambedkar, the word Antya means not the end of the Divine creation but the end of the Hindu village. It was a name given to those people who lived on the outskirts of the village in the Hindu society.

The second set of facts support that the untouchables were broken people. They belonged to Mahars of Maharashtra, the single largest community of the untouchables. The relations between the untouch-

able Hindus and the touchable Hindus are worthy to be noted.

1. Mahars are to be found in every village.
2. Every village in Maharashtra has a wall, and the Mahars have their quarters outside the wall.
3. The Mahars do not do the duty of watch and ward on behalf of the village.
4. The Mahars claim fifty-two rights against the Hindu villages.

Ambedkar argues that if such evidences are available, it should be accepted that there was a time in primitive society when the broken people lived. The broken people belonging to other tribes came to settled tribes and struck a bargain. The untouchables were allowed to settle on the outskirts of the Hindu village. These two theories offer us enough support to say that the untouchables lived outside the Hindu village from the beginning because they were broken people and belonged to a different tribe and different blood.⁶⁰ Thus, it is clear that the untouchables were the broken people and they do not belong to the four Vernas.

The Broken People Became the Untouchables:

Eating of beef created a big gap between the settled community and the broken people. According to Ambedkar there was a time when the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins ate beef. In ancient times, animal sacrifice was a religious rite, according to which, the slaughter of cows and that of other animals was colossal and was frequently eaten by the Brahmin priests. The non Brahmins could not eat beef everyday because cow was a costly animal.

It is Buddhism that repudiated the sacrifices of cows and other animals. It created a strong feeling of reverence towards all sentient beings in the minds of the people. The prohibition attracted the people and they appreciated it. According to Ambedkar, it made a deep impression that even the broken people embraced Buddhism. They began to criticize the Brahmins for its colossal sacrifice. This is the reason why the Brahmins suffered at the hands of Buddhism, the religion of compassion, love and friendship. We have no positive evidence to show that members of the settled community never ate the flesh of the dead cow. But we have negative evidence that shows that the dead cow had become an exclusive possession and perquisite of the broken people. The evidence consists of facts that relate to the Mahars of the Maharashtra. The Mahars of the Maharashtra claimed the rights to take the dead animals. They claimed this right against every Hindu in the village. This means that no Hindu can eat the flesh of his own animal when it dies. He has to surrender it to the Mahar. Thus, it can be said that both the Hindus and the broken people used to eat beef. But the Hindus, in order to have supremacy over Buddhism, left eating beef. The broken people continued eating beef and so they are called untouchables. Ambedkar's analysis of the origin of untouchability gives us the picture of how untouchability developed and how it is practiced among different sect of people.

THE PROBLEMS OF UNTOUCHABLES:

1. **The Problems of Discrimination:** The discrimination practiced by the Hindus against the untouchables is impossible to imagine. In the past, the untouchables could not cover their heads, chests, or legs below the knees. Gold and silvers were also prohibited to them as well as shoes and parasols. An untouchable could not sit down in the presence of a member of a high caste, or could sit only in an inferior position. When an untouchable encountered a high caste man in the streets, he had to go down into the ditch, in order to leave the street clear.
2. **The Low Dignity and Status of the Untouchables:** The other form of discrimination is the low level of dignity and the status of the untouchables. If a Hindu leader becomes a leader, then he prefers to be called a great Indian leader. No one describes him as the leader of Kashmir Brahmin even though he is one. If a leader who happens to be an untouchable is to be referred to as the leader of the untouchables. If a Hindu becomes a doctor, he is regarded as a great Indian doctor. If a doctor happens to be untouchables he is regarded as the untouchable doctor.
3. **Absence of Freedom:** There are two aspects that apply to all of them. In the first place, if the rights to vote, live, and to express oneself are to be effective guarantee of freedom, they must not be merely formed, but whenever the occasion arises to exercise them, they can in fact be exercised. In the second place, the

rights that are essential to freedom must be such as to secure the liberties of all, not merely of a minority. A society in which some groups can do what they please, while others can do little of what they ought, may have virtues of its own; but freedom is not one of them.⁹¹ Absence of freedom means affirm others by denying oneself. It is a state in which the untouchables are compelled to fulfill the will of others by negating one's will. It will be clear from an example. I have seen personally in some parts of Bihar, the Mushahars are forced by the landlord to work in their fields with very low wages. The landlords have no dignity and respect for the Mushahars.

A Means for the Emancipation: The emancipation of the untouchables began by establishing an association called the *Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha* (Depressed Classes' Welfare Association) on 20th, July 1924 at Parel in Bombay. The aim of this association was to make the untouchables aware of their miserable plight, their legitimate rights and to arouse among them consciousness of their rights. In pursuance of this aim, Ambedkar gave them a three-pronged: "Educate, Organize and Agitate"⁹⁶ His direct participation and commitment to the movement for the upliftment of the untouchability is remarkable.