



UNTOUCHABILITY

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ABSTARCT

The objective of my thesis is to explain and examine the concept of Socio-Philosophical implication of Untouchability after B. R. Ambedkar . Untouchability is not a legal term as nothing is constitutionally defined as untouchable. Untouchability is a social sanction embodied in the society as a custom. According to Ambedkar, Hinduism and Hindu civilization is the source and locus of untouchability. The fourfold division of castes gave birth to thousands of castes each associated with a particular occupation or skill and some were placed bellow even the lowest members of the society and treated worse than animals. They were untouchables. During the birth of Ambedkar, the Mahar community in which he belongs was treated as untouchables. The origin of untouchability has brought to the surface two sources of which one is the general atmosphere of scorn and contempt spread by the Brahmins against those who were Buddhists and the second is the habit of beef eating kept on by the broken man. All broken men are untouchables and all Buddhists are broken man for being retained their habit of beef eating. So, all Buddhists, according to Brahmins, were untouchables.

INTRODUCTION

An Indian social reformer and politician who came from a social group that was considered untouchable, theorized that untouchability originated because of the deliberate policy of the upper-caste Brahmanas. According to him, the Brahmanas despised the people who gave up the Brahmanism in favour of Buddhism. Later scholars such as Vivekanand Jha have refuted this theory.

Nripendra Kumar Dutt, a professor of history, theorized that the concept of untouchability originated from the "pariah"-like treatment accorded to the indigenious people of India by the early Dravidians, and that the concept was borrowed by the Indo-Aryans from the Dravidians. Scholars such as R. S. Sharma have rejected this theory, arguing that there is no evidence that Dravidians practised untouchability before coming into contact with the Indo-Aryans.

Austrian ethnologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf theorized that untouchability originated as class stratification in urban areas of the Indus Valley civilisation. According to this theory, the

poorer workers involved in 'unclean' occupations such as sweeping or leather work were historically segregated and banished outside the city limits. Over time, personal cleanliness came to be identified with "purity", and the concept of untouchability eventually spread to rural areas as well. After the decline of the Indus Valley towns, these untouchables probably spread to other parts of India. Scholars such as Suvira Jaiswal reject this theory, arguing that it lacks evidence, and does not explain why the concept of untouchability is more pronounced in rural areas.

American scholar George L. Hart, based on his interpretation of Old Tamil texts such as Purananuru, traced the origin of untouchability to ancient Tamil society. According to him, in this society, certain occupational groups were thought to be involved in controlling the malevolent supernatural forces; as an example, Hart mentions the Paraiyars, who played the drums during battles and solemn events such as births and deaths. People from these occupational groups came to be avoided by others, who believed that they were "dangerous and had the power to pollute the others". Jaiswal dismisses the evidence produced by Hart as "extremely weak" and contradictory. Jaiswal points out that the authors of the ancient Tamil texts included several Brahmanas (a fact accepted by Hart); thus, the society described in these texts was already under Brahmanical influence, and could have borrowed the concept of untouchability from them.

British anthropologist John Henry Hutton traced the origin of untouchability to the taboo on accepting food cooked by a person from a different caste. This taboo presumably originated because of cleanliness concerns, and ultimately, led to other prejudices such as the taboo on marrying outside one's caste. Jaiswal argues that this theory cannot explain how various social groups were isolated as untouchable or accorded a social rank. Jaiswal also notes that several passages from the ancient Vedic texts indicate that there was no taboo against accepting food from people belonging to a different varna or tribe. For example, some Shrauta Sutras mandate that a performer of the Vishvajit sacrifice must live with the Nishadas (a tribe regarded as untouchable in later period) for three days, in their village, and eat their food.

Scholars such as Suvira Jaiswal, R. S. Sharma, and Vivekanand Jha characterize untouchability as a relatively later development after the establishment of the varna and caste system.[18] Jha notes that the earliest Vedic text Rigveda makes no mention of untouchability, and even the later Vedic texts, which revile certain groups such as the Chandalas, do not suggest that untouchability existed in the contemporary society. According to Jha, in the later period, several groups began to be characterized as untouchable, a development which reached its peak during 600–1200 AD. Sharma theorizes that institution of untouchability arose when the aboriginal tribes with "low material culture" and "uncertain means of livelihood" came to be regarded as impure by the privileged classes who despised manual labour, and regarded associated impurity with "certain material objects".

According to Jaiswal, when the members of aboriginal groups were assimilated into the Brahmanical society, the privileged among them may have tried to assert their higher status by disassociating themselves from their lower-status counterparts, who were gradually branded as untouchables.

Meaning of untouchability

Untouchability is a form of social institution that legitimises and enforces practices that are discriminatory, humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative against people belonging to certain social groups. Although comparable forms of discrimination are found all over the world, untouchability involving the caste system is largely unique to South Asia.

Characteristics

According to Sarah Pinto, an anthropologist, modern untouchability in India applies to people whose work relates to "meat, and bodily fluids". Based on the punishments prescribed in The Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955 the following practices could be understood to have been associated with Untouchability in India:

- Prohibition from eating with other members
- Provision of separate cups in village tea stalls
- Separate seating arrangements and utensils in restaurants
- Segregation in seating and food arrangements at village functions and festivals
- Prohibition from entering places of public worship
- Prohibition from wearing sandals or holding umbrellas in front of higher caste members
- Prohibition from entering other caste homes
- Prohibition from using common village paths
- Separate burial/cremation grounds
- Prohibition from accessing common/public properties and resources (wells, ponds, temples, etc.)
- Segregation (separate seating area) of children in schools
- Social boycotts by other castes for refusing to perform their "duties"

Government action in India

India is home to over 200 million Dalits. At the time of Indian independence, Dalit activists began calling for separate electorates for untouchables in India to allow fair representation. Officially labeled the Minorities Act, it would guarantee representation for Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and Untouchables in the newly formed Indian government. The Act was supported by British representatives such as Ramsay MacDonald. According to the textbook *Religions in the Modern World*, B. R. Ambedkar, who was also a supporter of the Act, was considered to be the "untouchable leader" who made great efforts to eliminate caste system privileges that included participation in public festivals, access to temples, and wedding rituals. In 1932, Ambedkar proposed that the untouchables create a separate electorate that ultimately led Gandhi to fast until it was rejected.