

# Untouchability in Untouchables: A Study in the Philosophy of Babasaheb Ambedkar

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**Abstract:** From time immemorial, in India, untouchability is there as a big social problem. A major portion of people residing in India are marked as untouchable and forced to live in the marginal area of a village bearing the stigma of untouchable. Being untouchable they are not allowed to take part in various social, religious programmes conducted by the higher castes. This caste culture is so prominent that even today untouchables are consciously separated from the main stream and tortured publicly, physically and mentally without any protest. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar keenly observed the situation and began to fight against it. Surprisingly Ambedkar observed that untouchables are not only the victims of caste system existing in India and not only oppressed by the higher caste, but also there is a tendency to use the concept of oppression among untouchables. In a word there is untouchability among the untouchable communities. This is characterized as the inner crises of the untouchable communities. So Dr. Ambedkar had to fight at the same time against two demons- to fight against the hierarchy of caste system established by Manu and the hierarchy maintained by the untouchable communities created by them. In our paper we shall show the causes of the emergence of untouchability among untouchable communities and at the same time we shall show the process followed by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to eradicate the same from the Indian society by fighting against the prevalent casteism in India in favour of his cherished society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In this connection Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted to actualize the concept of humanism which is called by the scholars Material Humanism.

**Keywords:** untouchability, social hierarchy, caste system, transmitted, material humanism

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar critically examined the causes of untouchability along with its origin in India. At the same time he showed his interest to cultivate the origin of untouchability in untouchables. The curse of untouchability is not only there in between higher castes of Hindu and lower castes; it has its live presence among the untouchable castes also. Generally the common people think that untouchable castes are on the same boat and they share a common feature regarding their origin and existence. But a careful investigation will reveal an unknown truth regarding this matter. With great surprise we will see that untouchability is there among the untouchables also. Those, who are untouchables, maintain consciously a hierarchy among themselves. There is hatred in an untouchable caste for the others. Not only that the people of an untouchable caste has different attitudes to their fellow members.

Now it is the open secret that there is untouchability in untouchables. A *pseudo* social hierarchy is there to make discrimination against one another untouchable caste. But this is not without reason. Rather there are various reasons for the existence of untouchability among untouchable communities.

The concept of untouchability in untouchables can be explained in two different ways. Untouchability is there among the lower castes, i.e. among the Shudras. It can be designated as class based untouchability. On the other hand, there is untouchability among the people of a caste. One member hates the other members of his own caste and maintains a distance according to his position in the society. It can be designated as sub-caste based untouchability.

Generally, it is said that a person who is not permitted to touch the higher caste is an untouchable person. At the same time the person is segregated by the higher caste and forced to live in the outskirts of a village. This person is designated as *antaja* or *dalit*, etc. The word 'untouchability' comes from with the word 'untouchable'. Untouchability indicates the concept of touching pollution. A person who comes from *dalit* or *antaja* is an untouchable person and by virtue of his untouchability this person pollutes a person of higher caste or a thing used by higher caste only by touching. Untouchability is a quality inherited by an untouchable person from his ancestors by birth. Untouchable person are called broken men by the higher caste as they used to eat beef.

So, the concept of untouchability is purely a social concept and gradually it has become a custom in Indian society practised by the higher castes to keep a way the polluted touched of the untouchable persons. As a custom the concept of untouchability pleases the role discrimination. Not only that, as a social custom untouchability is considered as an offence in different castes.

In the past the ancient people believed that some special cases, some special things and some special relations are there which indicate untouchability which is transmitted through these special things. So, they were very much aware regarding the prevalent customs and also interested to avoid such incidents and situations.

One untouchable hates the others and also receives the same treatment from the others. This peculiar situation forces them to remain as untouchables and they do not find any way to come out of the situation.

In this small paper we shall try to find out the picture of untouchability in untouchables following Dr.B.R.Ambedkar's philosophy. The name of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar in Indian history is recognized as the source of inspiration for fighting against the curse untouchability with a special philosophical concept of social humanism. Social humanism is a concept that wants to offer to all human being a social identity and social prestige. From soul Dr. Ambedkar declared an unending war against untouchability and with desire in heart to do something for

the untouchables in India. He believed that his only mission was to the development condition of the untouchables and if the untouchables could be cured then untouchability would vanish with the success of the mission. He spent his whole life for the betterment of the untouchables and for the elimination of untouchability from our country.

At first the origin of untouchability will be discussed following Ambedkar. Though it is said that all men are equal in the sense of their origin; all are hamosepense. Yet untouchability is there in our society. There are two main reasons of the origin of untouchables – one is the condemned and hatred of the broken men as of Buddhists by the Brahmanism; the other is continuation of beef eating by the broken men. So from the very beginning of the society untouchables are there and they are hatred by the Brahmin. But untouchability is also there among the untouchable persons.

Babasaheb Ambedkar observed that untouchables are not slaves but they are treated as slaves. Slaves have some advantages. The master is bound to take care of the health and well being of the slaves, as slaves were the property of the master. But untouchable's condition is more pathetic than the slaves because the untouchables, as free individual had neither fair start, nor equal opportunity, nor square deal. In support of this view we can quote, "From this point of view, untouchability is not only worse than slavery but is positively cruel as compared to slavery."<sup>1</sup>

Ambedkar says, "the Untouchables unlike the slaves are owned by the Hindus for purposes which further their interests and are disowned by them, when owning them places them under burden. The untouchables can claim none of the advantages of an unfree social order and are left to bear all the disadvantages of a free social order."<sup>2</sup>

Without delay we are coming to the main theme of the paper. In Indian villages the whole population is divided into two sections – 1) touchables, 2) untouchables. The touchables live inside the village having strong economy, where as untouchables live outside the village in separate quarters as a poor community. Untouchables have no power and social prestige where as touchables enjoy all of them.

Babasaheb Ambedkar sketches a clear picture of the condition of the untouchables. The observation of Ambedkar is like this-

- i. The untouchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation.
- ii. The quarters of the untouchables must be located towards the South, since the South is the most inauspicious of the four directions. A breach of this rule shall be deemed to be an offence.

- iii. The untouchable must observe the rule of distance pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be. It is an offence to break the rule.
- iv. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to acquire wealth, such as land or cattle.
- v. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to build a house with tiled roof.
- vi. It is an offence for a member of an untouchable community to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments.
- vii. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to give high sounding names to their children. Their names be such as to indicate contempt.
- viii. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu.
- ix. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village.
- x. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to take a procession of Untouchables through the village.
- xi. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community not to salute a Hindu. xii. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community to speak a cultured language.
- xiii. It is an offence for a member of the untouchable community, if he happens to come into the village on a sacred day which the Hindus treat as the day of fast and at or about the time of the breaking of fast; to go about speaking, on the ground that their breath is held to foul the air and the food of the Hindus.
- xiv. It is an offence for an untouchable to wear the outward marks of a touchable and pass himself as a touchable.
- xv. An untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as— (a) having a contemptible name. (b) Not wearing clean clothes. (c) Not having tiled roof. (d) Not wearing silver and gold ornaments.<sup>3</sup>

The observation of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is as clear as daylight. The untouchability is nothing but an offence. A person who is born as untouchable is bound to follow the situations forcefully. This attitude of the higher caste is not only in-humane but also unethical. The struggle of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was against the casteism and he wanted to wipe out all the discrimination based on caste system.

There is no doubt that untouchables are bound to offer duties to the society without remuneration. In the sense all untouchables are equal. "In an agricultural country, agriculture can be the main source of living. But this source of earning a living is generally not open to the Untouchables. This is so for a variety of reasons. In the first place purchase of land is beyond their means. Secondly even if an Untouchable has the money to purchase land he has no opportunity to do so. In most parts the Hindus would resent an Untouchable coming forward to purchase land and thereby trying to become the equal of the Touchable class of Hindus. Such an act of daring on the part of an Untouchable would not only be frowned upon but might easily invite punishment. In some parts they are disabled by law from purchasing land. For instance in the Province of Punjab there is a law called the Land Alienation Act. This law specifies the communities which can purchase land and the Untouchables are excluded from the list. The result is that in most part the Untouchables are forced to be landless labours. As labour they cannot demand reasonable wages. They have to work for the Hindu farmer for such wages as their masters choose to give. On this issue the Hindu farmers can combine to keep the wages to the lowest level possible for it is to their interests to do so. On the other hand, the Untouchables have no holding power. They must earn or starve. Nor have they any bargaining power. They must submit to the rate fixed or suffer violence."<sup>4</sup>

Untouchability is there in Indian society and it is practised widely. But in the untouchables communities there are also discrimination among themselves. If anyone observes minutely, he will come across this peculiar concept. Apparently, untouchables are united as a group and the whole society is divided into two sections – touchables and untouchables depending on the social customs prevalent throughout the society from the very beginning. The peculiarity is that untouchable is also divided into three categories- untouchable, unapproachable, and unseeable. These three groups consciously follow the discrimination to maintain their hierarchy. This is the irony of the hierarchy that appears against the dalit. It is also there in disguise in untouchables communities. It is in disguise because no one has interest to focus on the matter to cultivate the reality of the untouchable communities. They are also separated from each other maintaining the distance to keep them more pure than the others. This discrimination is practised consciously in respect of social relation, rituals and custom. In case of marriage it is practised widely. One group of untouchable is not allowed to marry a girl or a boy of the other groups. In this way, they are scattered and keep away themselves from the unity. One group of untouchable does not feel sympathy for the other when they are tortured by the higher castes. Some untouchable groups are there whose touch polluted only the Brahmins and the things used by the Brahmin. The other portions of the higher-caste will not be polluted by touch of the untouchables. These two groups have hierarchy in them. One group treats the other as untouchables.

But the sense of untouchability is also present among the untouchable persons. There is

also hierarchy among Untouchables. Some castes are there who are being hatred by the others. Persons who clean the latrine of the rich are hatred by the upper Untouchables. In Bengali we can sketch a picture of the situations. The people of the community 'suri', 'bagdi', 'muchhi', 'mathar', 'rajbanshi', 'bauri', 'dom', 'hari', 'pod', 'jaliakaibarta', etc. are untouchables. If you look deeply you will find that all the said castes do not behave with others similarly. Though all of them are hatred by the higher castes; they do not have mutual respect to others. One untouchable caste hates the other untouchables and demands the superiority. Dr. Ambedkar clearly pictured the situation of the untouchables and also the position of the untouchables among the untouchables. All the concepts of the untouchability are there among the untouchables like higher castes. Not only that, but also all these concepts are transmitted from generations to generations. This is designated as sub-class based untouchability.

In India, there are "four hundred and twenty nine"<sup>5</sup> castes who are untouchables. Untouchables are treated in two different ways. A person's position in his own caste is designated as personal untouchability. Some time a person who engaged in unethical works is called untouchable by his own fellow caste member. In this situation this person gets punishment for his deed. He may be avoided by all the members of his own caste and also his presence in religious rituals may be prohibited. This incident, in Bengali is called *Jatichutya* or elimination from the caste. After some time he may be again included in his own caste after doing jobs according to the prescription of the authority of the same caste. It is called *Prayaschitta*.

On the other hand one caste treats the other as untouchables. Generally no 'Aguri' (one of the untouchable caste in Bengal) is ready to establish marriage relation with Dosadh (the other untouchable caste). The Aguri think that they deserve better positions than the Dosadh. Similarly the Dosadh thinks that they are higher than the Aguri. This is called class based untouchability. This is the real situations of the untouchable castes in present India.

It is thought that the concept of untouchability runs through the Shudras from generations to generations. There are so many differences among the low castes among the Shudras and this gradation gears-up the untouchability among the untouchables. The powerful persons having land, kettle and others worldly possessing dominates the other person of his fellow caste. So discrimination on the basis of caste and creeds is also there among the untouchables.

In this case this untouchability is designated as untouchability among human beings. Untouchable communities also follow some principles of untouchability. At the time of birth, death and menstruation the principles of untouchability is followed strictly.

In Smriti, Manu recognizes physical defilement and also notional defilement. Manu treated birth death and menstruation as sources of impurity. With regard to death, defilement was very extensive in its range. It followed the rule of sanctity. Death caused defilement to members of the family of the dead person technically called Sapindas and Samanodakas It not only

included maternal relatives such as maternal uncle but also remote relatives. It extended even to nonrelatives such as (1) teacher, (2) teacher's son, (3) teacher's wife, (4) pupil, (5) fellow students, (6) Shrotriya, (7) king, (8) friend, (9) members of the household, (10) those who carried the corpse and those who touched the corpse.<sup>6</sup>

Manu also prescribes the period of defilement. It varies. For the death of a Sapinda it is ten days, for children three days, for fellow students one day. Defilement does not vanish by the mere lapse of the prescribed period. At the end of the period there must be performed ceremony for purification appropriate to the occasion. For the purposes of purification Manu treats the subject of defilement from three aspects: (1) physical defilement, (2) psychological defilement, and (3) ethical defilement. The rule for the purification of ethical defilement which occurs when a person entertains evil thoughts is more admonitions and exhortations. But the rituals for the removal of notional and physical defilement are the same. They include the use of water, Earth, cow's urine, the kusha grass and ashes. Earth, cow's urine, Kusha grass and ashes are prescribed as purificatory agents for removing physical impurities caused by the touch of inanimate objects. Water is the chief agent for the removal of notional defilement. It is used in three ways (1) sipping, (2) bath, and (3) ablution. Later on *panchagavya* became the most important agency for removing notional defilement. It consists of a mixture of the five products of the cow, namely, milk, urine, dung, curds and butter.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the individual pollution the Hindus believe also in territorial and communal pollution and purification is very much like the system that prevailed among the early Romans. Every village has an annual *jatra*. An animal, generally a he-buffalo, is purchased on behalf of the village. The animal is taken round the village and is sacrificed, the blood is sprinkled round the village and towards the end till meat is distributed among the villagers. Every Hindu, every Brahmin even though he may not be a beef eater is bound to accept his share of the meat. This is not mentioned in any of the Smritis but it has the sanction of custom which among the Hindus is so strong that it always overrides law.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of untouchability in untouchables indicates a situation of discrimination among the discriminated groups. According to the philosophy of humanism, this situation is also not ethically acceptable. According to the philosophy of humanism all men deserve equal treatment and all should have the equal opportunity to express their inner qualities. The main three pillars of humanism are Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. The concept of untouchability destroys all three pillars of humanism. So the concept resides among the lower castes must be eradicated to form a unity to fight against the higher castes who want to oppose to the eradication of the concept of untouchability because of their own interests. Dr. Ambedkar invited all the untouchable people to keep aside their sub-caste interests for the interest of humanity. To Ambedkar individual interest and the interest of a particular group must be overthrown for the sake of the whole community and humanity. The social customs of the untouchables are

not created by any religious book, but by the social behavior of the people. Surely the existence of untauchability is a fact that goes against humanism. The lower castes of Indian society who are segregated suffer not only by the segregation of the higher caste but also by the lower castes. This can be designated as the primary field of application in the concept of untauchability which forces the different lower castes to remain untouched. So the concept of casteism can be implicated successfully by the higher caste without any protest.

Again, it can be said that a new kind of untauchability is emerging among the untouchables. It is based on the criteria of prosperity and it is the negative results of the reservation laws. At present, with the help of the reservation laws dalits are enjoying opportunities to get employment in different sectors of the society. After getting employment most of the employees are trying to live in towns to lead a sophisticated life and at the same time they want to make relation with the higher castes. Consciously they are building an invisible wall to the people of their fellow caste. In this way, they are creating a new group. This group can be designated as *Dalit-Elit* group. The attitude of this group is simply to make an invisible fence around their personality and in this way they keep themselves separate. The other portions of the people, who are economically weak, remain as earlier without any hope. The people who live in the villages and who are poor are hated by the '*dalit-elit*' people. So, at present in our society we find a new kind of untauchability which is not able to pollute the economically higher class only by touching but certainly the economically strong portion of the community feels uneasy with the presence of the weaker section.

In the concluding part it can be said that untouchability is there among the all castes, creeds in India. The Varna Hindus think that the Shudras are supposed to do all the jobs for the service of the society or for the services of the Varna Hindus without any question. Shudras are bound to produce material prosperity not for themselves but for the higher castes. That is the main source of the sufferings of the Shudras. It should be kept in mind that the segregation is not made out of their wills but because of the ignorance. All people should be treated as human being and no discrimination should be made on the basis of caste and creeds.

Babasaheb Ambedkar started his fighting against untouchability not only to eliminate these concepts from Varna Hindus, but also to eliminate it from the Shudras. In this way, he thinks that India will appear as a strong nation to fight against all kinds of discrimination to offer a better world.

We can quote from Dr. Ambedkar to establish the relevance and effective concepts. "Such is the picture of the inside life in an Indian village. In this Republic, there is no place for democracy. There is no room for equality. There is no room for liberty and there is no room for fraternity. The Indian village is the very negation of a Republic. If it is a republic, it is a republic of the touchables, by the touchables and for the touchables. The republic is an Empire



of the Hindus over the untouchables. It is a kind of colonialism of the Hindus designed to exploit the untouchables. The untouchables have no rights. They are there only to wait, serve and submit. They are there to do or to die. They have no rights because they are outside the village republic and because they are outside the so-called republic, they are outside the Hindu fold. This is a vicious circle. But this is a fact which cannot be gainsaid.”<sup>99</sup> This broad picture is also there in the untouchables communities in small scale but with same force. The practice of untouchability is nothing but a curse. It forces the untouchable castes to remain separate and to show submission to the higher caste. Dr. Ambedkar with full energy was trying to make understand the matter to the low castes and also was trying to unite them to fight against the curse of untouchability to have social prestige and social identity. Untouchables are untouchables and they have to fight for their survival with dignity is the main theme of the philosophy of Babasaheb Ambedkar. It can be designated as Social Humanism. Social humanism is a concept that indicates a situation where each and every member of the society will enjoy equal opportunity to inculcate the culture of the society with social prestige and identity. Again, a society where every right for a human being is enjoyed by his or her without any religious or other forces is called a society for all. The wheel of the economic development will run through the space of social humanism to establish India as super power in the world.

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