

# Sensory Caste Hierarchies: Touching the Unseen

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## Abstract:

This paper will attempt to explore the idea of untouchability as a form of social relationship within the caste system. It aims to explore how physical contact, or its avoidance, is used to control social processes and maintain social discrimination.

This paper will look at how conflict operates through feelings of shame and rejection and examine how certain emotional experiences, such as touch or closeness, can be used to mark people as "clean" or "unclean" in accordance to layers of nature, resulting in social exclusion and marginalization. Through an analysis of data collected through primary survey and critical thinking, the paper will attempt to challenge the social norms and practices associated with conflict.

**Keywords:** caste, touch, untouchability, marginalization, clean, unclean, social discrimination.

## Introduction:

Evolutionary theorists view stratification and centralized authority as civilized notions. There are frequent mentions of the peculiarity of Hindu social structure with reference to the institution of caste. In India caste is considered as a social institution which is interwoven with the Hindu religion. Caste System is not a function of

occupation, rather a ritual of purity and pollution, determining the status of a person in the society. Worst affected by caste incompetence are the untouchables, spread all over India. Their contact is believed to be polluting. For instance, Louis Dumont notes that in the Southern part of India, there are strong checks on territorial mobility of lower castes. Restrictions are imposed on untouchables for various activities such as access to public transport, drawing water from common wells, visiting temples, educational institutions, buying essential goods from common shop etc. It is thus

extremely essential to explore the intricacies of how the caste system, through the tool of untouchability, and the dictates of purity and pollution, push entire communities to the margins of the society. In a survey conducted with 35 participants through the questionnaire method, almost 17% of them openly accepted the fact that their household still witnesses practice of caste hierarchies, while 20% presented a dicey opinion on the issue.

## Genesis :

The Purushsukta of the 10 Mandala of the Rig Veda contains the earliest mention of the varna system . Although this was different from the caste system as it was initially occupation based, it became rigid during the Later vedic period, turning into an ascribed status. However, the caste system has always been dynamic with groups falling under the outcastes. For instance, The Mahabharata contains mentions of Eklavya belonging to the tribal community. As the society grew complex, the number of groups

increased, leading to occupational groups consolidating into different castes. For example goldsmiths, washer man, etc.

According to Marxist theory of oriental despotism Asiatic societies are static. However, in opposition to this we find that throughout history the caste system witnessed multiple changes. During the later Mauryan period, from 1 CE Satavahana dynasty began giving land grants and in order to maintain the records new bureaucracy began to emerge in the form of Kayastha community, which completely got consolidated during the Gupta period. The early medieval period saw the emergence of Rajputs. Whose origins are highly debated among historians. Smriti literature explicitly mentions *aparad-dharma* (duty in times of crisis) which stated that Brahmins could take up cultivation and other works of the 'lower' castes during unideal circumstances.

Apart from this during the later Gupta period regional stagnation of the economy also saw both Vaishyas and Shudras working as peasants.

Therefore the caste system has always been fluid, yet there is no denying the fact that it is one of the most prominent tools of oppression in the Indian society. Especially working through the system of untouchability. The earliest historical mentions of untouchability can be found in the account of Chinese traveler Fa Hien who mentions how the Chandala community was forced to live outside regular settlements and where clappers on the streets as even their shadow was considered polluting.

Thus, the Indian subcontinent has been witnessed to oppression and marginalization through caste divisions from the ancient period onwards. This got officially consolidated during the colonial period with the beginning of documentation of communities and caste categories.

### **Rituals:**

Untouchability in its literal meaning refers to the practice of ostracizing a minority group by segregating them from the mainstream society by social custom or legal mandate. This custom has been prevalent since 400 CE. The practice of untouchability can be seen across the country. Untouchability implies social distancing from groups

like Dalits, Tribals, Chamars. The system of untouchability is also a shameful custom followed in India. Until and unless untouchability system is eradicated from the society, equality in the society can be least expected. The most critical aspects of untouchability manifest themselves through rituals by an exclusion at various levels. Caste distinctions thus permeate various aspects of social, religious, and cultural life in caste-based societies.

There are multiple studies which indicate the relevance of rituals in regulating and defining social intercourse. For instance, marriage ceremonies may involve elaborate rituals and customs specific to each caste, reinforcing social boundaries and

hierarchies, for example through endogamy. In case of death, the ritual of "shuddhi" or purification may be performed by higher castes after coming into contact with individuals from lower castes, and there are specific rites and rituals performed by members of the deceased person's caste. Caste groups are also associated with specific occupations.

For example, members of the priestly caste may perform elaborate religious rituals, while those from lower castes may be involved in more menial tasks such as those related to manual labor. Dietary restrictions and taboos are often associated with caste practices, with higher castes adhering to stricter dietary rules to maintain their purity. 31.4% of the participants agreed to the fact that they or their

families do not accept food from other families without any consideration of their caste or community. Also, menstruating women are not allowed to enter the kitchen. Menstrual distancing is still practiced in more than 14% of the families out of the participant body which clearly reflects the persistent hold of taboos related to menstruation which manifest themselves in physical distancing.

### **Intersectionality and Sensory Inequalities:**

The term intersectionality implies the interconnected nature of social categorizations. By analyzing the caste system and untouchability through the framework of intersectionality and sensory inequalities, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of caste-based discrimination and its impact on individuals and communities. This perspective underscores the importance of addressing not only the overt manifestations of discrimination but also the underlying structures of power and privilege that perpetuate inequality.

The exploration of intersectionality and sensory hierarchies in the context of caste-based discrimination displays a multifaceted nature of oppression. Considering how caste intersects with other social identities and how sensory experiences are used to reinforce social hierarchies, helps us gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of social discrimination within the society. Furthermore, examination of sensory hierarchies elucidates how sensory experiences, such as touch, sight, smell, and sound, are used to reinforce caste-based discrimination. Practices like untouchability thus serve to exclude and marginalize lower castes from mainstream society.

An important example of this is the system of Devdasi (slave of god) which literally means 'at the feet of the god'. AmritSrinivasan's work on reform and revival of the Devdasi system talks about how before 1947 this was a tradition where lower class

women or girls use to dance as a source of entertainment for the upper castes. Despite several reforms and attempts to even ban the tradition, it emerged in a new form i.e., Bharat Natyam which is recognized as a pure form of classical art. A popular narrative by Premchand also highlights intersectional perpetuation of caste hierarchies is Thakur ka Kuan, a poignant tale that illustrates the deep-rooted discrimination and oppression inherent in the caste system in India through the domination of upper caste on lower caste by denying access to resources. Daryll Forde defines status of caste in Cochin on the basis of prestige, wealth and power. Here the royals had a special rank and belonged to Kshatriya group, the aristocracy comprised of Nambudri Brahmins, dependent on religious prestige. Nayars also owned land and provide personal services to Brahmins while the untouchables were the jungle groups of the hills.

### **Tactile Exclusions:**

Tactile Exclusion is a multi-dimensional process that includes various practices such as participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources integration into cultural processes etc. The untouchables are the individuals involved in impure occupations, i.e. removing the carcasses of dead animals and birds, cleaning the sewers, manual scavengers, sweepers and rag-pickers. Historically, Dalits have lived in segregated areas within the village or town or are pushed to the outskirts of human settlements. They are prohibited from entering certain spaces, have no involvement in decision making and so on. Signs of untouchability are prevalent with separate sitting areas, eating utensils, separate wells etc. Scavenging, though legally banned, is still practiced because it

is deeply rooted in social prejudice. When an individual is engaged in an impure occupation, it is understood on a comprehensive basis that their personal appearance will also be likely impure. This untouchability is also extended to personal interaction as inter caste marriages are strictly prohibited or often face societal backlash since they are seen as an attempt to pollute the upper caste.

More than 88% of the participants hold the perception that caste distancing and untouchability is more prevalent in rural areas in comparison to urban spaces which provide for the breaking of spatial barriers of caste. However, this perception is not completely true and can be labeled as a misconception which is widely held. This is backed by the fact that almost 40% of the participants, all of whom reside in urban areas, agreed to the fact that their house had separate utensils for domestic workers.

Apart from this, 45.7% of the participants strongly agreed that they or someone in their family would vouch for a law against intermarriage between 'upper' and 'lower' castes.

Tactile exclusion is clearly manifested in the hierarchical arrangement of physical affinities. In this sense, as observed by Ghurye, a case study of Bihar clearly illustrates how certain groups can and cannot exist in certain physical proximities according to their position in the hierarchical arrangements of the caste system. Here, the Kurmi people, though not placed very high in the caste hierarchy, could stand much closer to the Brahmin as compared to people belonging from the Dom and Chamar castes.

The prevalent practices in most rural areas of north India clearly denote that a person lower in the caste hierarchy could not wear a pagadi (a marker of societal respect) in front of a man higher in caste to him. Thus subordination was also practiced through dress and attire. Another example of necessitated humiliation through markers of caste identity. BR Ambedkar, in his groundbreaking work *Annihilation of Caste* illustrated how people from scavenger communities were instructed to carry a broom around their waist and to perform their caste duties of cleaning wherever possible.

### **Clean And Unclean:**

Central to the caste system is the concept, or rather, the dyad of purity and pollution which is deeply rooted in the traditional Indian society and manifests itself in the ideation of concepts like clean unclean. This is majorly responsible for untouchability as a practice and are often regarded as crucial. Therefore, concepts of purity and pollution are one of the significant factors highlighting the prevalence of untouchability within the country. Sometimes, uncleanliness is conceived of as a personal state, not subjected to fears of contagious. For instance, touching a dead body would make one impure but touching a person who had touched a dead body would not. Similarly, though a menstruating woman is considered impure, touching a menstruating woman would not make one so.

Another form of uncleanliness specific to women is associated with childbirth.

According to the North Indian tradition, it takes 6 days to remove the impurity of childbirth. Tradition penalized childbirth as unclean due to the belief that the fetus is formed out of menstrual blood. Thus, the unused menstrual blood from the creation of the fetus is the blood spilled during childbirth. Srinivas, in his work on religion and society of the Coorgs notes that behavior, beliefs and language are all associated with the ideas of purity and pollution. By beginning with the language of "purity" and "pollution," he acknowledges that language has a special place among all the codes used in human social life: it is the only code that can be, and is, regularly used to communicate about other codes. For example, in the past, Coorg women, like most Indian women, had to live apart from other people during their menstrual periods.

Hence one can argue that the ideating forces providing the basis of the practices of untouchability can be

found in the concept of what is considered clean and what is not.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude all the arguments provided above the deeply entrenched caste practices throughout different time periods are perhaps most clearly manifested in the practice of untouchability. The paper is an attempt to explore the historical roots of the caste system and how sense of hierarchies evolved over time. Therefore, the study encompasses an interdisciplinary approach to understand the complex interactions between sensory experiences and caste discrimination that have implications for both academic research and social change efforts. 60% of the participants denied any involvement in an initiative which stood up against caste hierarchy or involvement with an organization which did so. This reflects the absence of agency as well as concern against caste discriminatory practices. Apart from this analysis of experience also noted that almost 49% of the participants had never witnessed or even heard of any successful instance of legal action being taken against untouchability.

Overcoming the legacy of social discrimination needs efforts to dismantle oppressive structures and systems, promote social cohesion and equality, and ensure equal rights, resources, and opportunities for all people regardless of caste affiliations. We can work for unity and equality by acknowledging and opposing the challenges of discrimination.