
UNIT 4 EMANCIPATION OF UNTOUCHABLES

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit would enable you to understand:

- The social category called the untouchables;
- The concept of untouchability;
- Different perspectives on untouchability;
- Struggles of Untouchables against untouchability; and
- Emancipation of Untouchables.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian society is considered unique because of the following:

- The largely traditional joint family system,
- The self-sufficient village community, and
- The highly rigid caste system.

Of all these, the rigid caste system needs special mention here because the institution of 'untouchability' comes within its framework. Woven into the very fabric of caste system, untouchability is a feature that has brought a lot of disrepute to the Hindu social organisation. Sociologists and social anthropologist have long known that social stratification is a ubiquitous phenomenon found in all societies and to that extent caste system is no different.

The traditional caste system divides all members of society into four hierarchical categories called varnas with Brahmins at the top and Shudras at the bottom:

- Brahmins,
- Kshatriyas,
- Vaishyas
- Shudras.

All castes can be classified into one of these four varnas. The membership of one's caste is ascribed by birth and one's progeny also by default falls into the same caste category.

There is a social group that falls outside the varna system and is called avarnas. They are different from savarnas, who belong to the chaturvarna (four varnas) scheme mentioned above. Shudras, despite being a lower varna, belong to savarnas and are therefore considered better than avarnas. Being outside the varna scheme, avarnas do not enjoy any privileges, which are otherwise available to rest of the members. In caste hierarchy, they are considered lower even to Shudras. Avarnas were considered outcaste people and traditionally they were not permitted to have any social ties with members of the mainstream society and were also not allowed to own any resources. They used to live on the outskirts of the village and, with no means of production or employment, they used to depend completely on savarnas for their survival. This was the group that was traditionally called the untouchables.

4.2 WHO WERE UNTOUCHABLES?

In 1931 Census, untouchables were covered under the term "Depressed Classes." In 1928, the Depressed Classes Association was formed which functioned up to 1942 (Louis 2003). The term, however, was contested by Dr Ambedkar in 1932 because the term created an impression of these communities as helpless and lowly. In 1935, the term "...Scheduled Caste was coined by the Simon Commission and embodied in the Government of India Act, 1935. In 1936, for the first time Government of British India published a list of Scheduled Castes" (Louis 2003).

The social category of Scheduled Castes is today a common denominator of those castes whose earlier generations were once considered untouchables by the traditional caste order. Since 1970s, the preferred term used for the erstwhile untouchables is Dalits, which gained currency in literature and social sciences. The term Dalit in Hindi implies 'the oppressed' and its adoption by the Scheduled Castes reflects the political aspirations and activist mode of the community. The term implies a conscious recognition by the oppressed community of its unnatural condition of deprivation and marginality created by social, historical and political forces of the dominant Hindu social order.

Let us understand how in Indian context a community was differentiated and stigmatized as untouchables. Despite some significant changes observed in the last two centuries, it remains an enigma how a group of people ended up being in such deplorable condition. There are broadly three theoretical perspectives that try to explain the emergence of untouchable community.

4.3 PERSPECTIVES ON UNTOUCHABILITY

The three dominant perspectives explaining untouchability are the following:

- religious
- racial
- economic.

The religious perspective emerges from the cosmogony explained in the religious texts of Hinduism.

The Purusha Sukta hymn of Rig Veda explains how the four varnas were created from the four parts of the Primeval Being:

- Brahmins from the mouth,
- Kshatriyas from the arms and shoulders,
- Vaishyas from the thighs,
- Shudras from the feet.

This scheme of origin of mankind laid the foundation of caste system in India where these four varnas were not merely mentioned to have been born from different part of the Primeval Being but also segmented into an hierarchical order on the basis of their mythical origin. Brahmins, being born from the mouth, were regarded as superior, followed by Kshatriyas, being born out of arms and shoulders, followed by Vaishyas who were born out of the thighs of the Primeval Being. Born from the bottom-most part of the Primeval Being, the feet, Shudras were accordingly considered the lowest in the varna hierarchy and were ordained to do nothing except serve the upper three varnas.

This being the word of God for the Hindus, it was difficult for them to distance themselves from the discriminatory character of caste system where people born as Shudras were for once and all relegated to a subservient category and assigned servile position vis-à-vis other caste groups. The hymn talks about the four varnas only, which indicates that the fifth varna became part of the Hindu social order at some later stage. As mentioned earlier, it is believed to have emerged around second century AD out of the existing set of varnas.

Another major text of Hinduism, Manusmriti, gives a detailed account of the laws governing the Hindu social order. The text provides an elaborate set of prescriptions and prohibitions for Hindus.

Another perspective that explains origin of untouchables is based on the race. According to this theory, the Indian subcontinent was raided and invaded by a tribe from central Europe called Aryans. During the invasion they subjugated the autochthonous communities called Dravidians or Dasyus. The Aryans enslaved the aboriginals and exploited them by assigning them the most menial tasks. Their contempt for Dasyus ensured that there was no inter-mixing and no social intercourse with them. Having been subjugated by Aryans, all their resources were taken away from them and they were treated like slaves. The aboriginals ousted from mainstream society and relegated to extreme levels of subjugation were reduced to the status of untouchables.

This perspective, however, was questioned by Ambedkar who believed that there was no racial difference between Brahmins and Dravidians in India and also there is no mention in Vedic sources of any invasion of India by the Aryans. He also affirmed that the following:

The distinction between the Hindus and Untouchables in its original form, before the advent of untouchability, was the distinction between the tribes – men and Broken Men from alien tribes; it is broken men who subsequently came to be treated as untouchables (Bhat 1954).

Ambedkar believed that the Broken Men were not Hindus but Buddhists. Since they were dislodged by Hindus and then subjugated, they never emulated the Hindu way of life. Due to their innate difference with Brahminic Hindu society, these Broken Men never adopted the Hindu way of life and therefore the constant tension between the two communities has always remained.

The economic theory is primarily proposed by Marxian thinkers who look at untouchability “rooted in the mode of production” (Shah et al. 2006). As per this perspective, the varna scheme was merely a class social division of labour which became more rigid over a period of time and transformed into a caste division. The surplus labour due to overpopulation made easy labour available for small and menial jobs. With changing modes of production, caste-based relations will also undergo change. They believe that forces of modernization and industrialization will on their own change the caste dynamics and pave way for a casteless society.

The economic perspective, however, fails to explain deep rooted caste-based biases of many even in this age of globalization and modernization. Though it can be said that Indian society is not yet fully modernized and industrialized, in pockets of society where sufficient modernization and urbanization has occurred, caste-based discriminations have not completely disappeared.

4.4 EMANCIPATION OF UNTOUCHABLES

Untouchability has been one of the distinguishing features of Indian society. Though the practice of untouchability attracted special attention of academicians after the advent of British rule in India and the spread of education to masses, the practice has been a common practice in Hindu society. However, untouchability did not go unchallenged down the history. The institution of caste system, which formed the foundation and justificatory principle for untouchability, was initially jolted by Buddhism and Jainism during 5th to 2nd century BC. Untouchability, which developed around 2nd century AD after the revival of Brahminism during the Gupta period, was somewhat discouraged by Vaishnavism and Shaivism which encouraged dropping off caste distinctions (Dahiwalé 2006).

The Bhakti movement starting around 6th century AD had a major role in developing the discourse of equality. It also challenged the hegemony of Brahmins and drew people away from Brahmanic rites and rituals. The movement brought forth some famous saints from the backward as well as Dalit communities; something that was not feasible in the caste-based Hindu social order. Some of the saints that emerged from Dalits and backward communities were:

- Namdev (1270–1350 AD),
- Kabir (1440–1518 AD),
- Ravidas (1450–1520 AD),
- Dhanna Jaat (1415–? AD),,
- Chokhamela,

Tukaram and Meerabai (15th century AD) were saints from other communities who emerged as new symbols of spiritual enlightenment from that period.

Emergence of Sikhism as a movement in 16th century AD directly challenged caste system and started a new religion in the north-west which advocated equality and dignity for all.

Conversion to non-Hindu religions as a strategy to overcome disabilities posed by the Hindu social order was an effective method for Dalits in many parts of India. During the Mughal period conversion to Islam, followed by conversion to Sikhism and later on during British period, conversion to Christianity was opted by many Dalits as a means to come out of the shadow of caste society. Conversion to Adi-Dharma in 1920s resulted in more than 4 lakh people registering themselves under a new religion in the Census Reports of 1931.

An even more significant conversion by Dalits was engineered by Dr Ambedkar in 1956 at Nagpur when more than 55,000 Dalits under his leadership converted to Buddhism. The effect of this conversion can be gauged from the fact that number of Buddhists in Maharashtra in 1951 Census were reported to be merely 2,500 but in 1961 census the figure catapulted to 2.5 million (Jafferlot 2005). Mass conversion of untouchables led by Ambedkar, however, came after a long drawn struggle for equality within Hinduism failed to show results.

4.4.1 Ambedkar and Gandhi

In 1920s, Ambedkar struggled for equal rights for untouchables. In March 1927, Ambedkar organised one of the most popular civic-rights movements. The movement, Mahad Tank Satyagraha, asserted right of untouchables to have access to drinking water from public tank. On 25 December 1927, the movement called for public burning of Manusmriti, the sacred text of Hindus which sanctified caste-based restrictions in society, at Mahad. The act was a symbolic victory of Ambedkar against the caste-based practices in Hindu society.

Ambedkar soon launched another satyagraha for entry into Kalaram temple at Nasik in May 1930. Ambedkar believed that by facilitating access of untouchables to hitherto restricted public utilities and places of worship, caste Hindus will gradually accept untouchables as equals and hence change their social status. He believed these struggles would lead to change of heart among caste Hindus and reform within Hinduism. While these struggles brought forth the reformist zeal in Ambedkar, they also brought into relief his disappointments with caste Hindus.

The more Ambedkar struggled against caste inequalities, the more resistance he received from caste Hindus. One of the biggest resistances for him came from M.K. Gandhi. While Ambedkar constantly attacked caste system and spoke of its annihilation, Gandhi refuted Ambedkar's position on caste. For Ambedkar, caste system represented the most anachronistic social institution in modern times and one of the most oppressive forms of social stratification. For Gandhi, it represented a unique system of division of labour which provided stability and coherence to Indian society. Gandhi believed the caste system to be a unique feature of Hindu society which promoted cooperation among distinct caste groups as against competition and conflict among different social categories in Western society.

For Gandhi the varna system was the basic system of social division in society and all caste must follow the varna scheme. When confronted with the inhuman practice of untouchability in caste system, Gandhi explained it as an aberration that must be done away with. The devout Hindu in Gandhi never allowed him to

denounce caste system per se. Gandhi feared that if the caste system is attacked it would lead to disintegration of Hindu society for which he was never prepared. Gandhi's effort to eradicate untouchability was only to rid Hinduism of its most virulent disease but for him the social organisation of varna scheme remained sacrosanct to Hindu social order.

Ambedkar on the other hand could not accept any justification for caste-based social system and found the varna scheme to be the nemesis of Indian society. Ambedkar soon realized that caste Hindus may at the best become uncomfortable with the practice of untouchability but they could not dare shed the logic of caste system. Ambedkar gradually realized that the logic of caste system is so intractably interwoven into the religious texts of Hinduism that if one condemns caste system one ceases to be a good Hindu and if one wishes to remain a good Hindu one cannot squarely condemn caste system. It was this predicament that led Ambedkar to affirm that the solution of emancipation from untouchability and caste tyranny lies in abdicating Hinduism.

The flashpoint between Ambedkar and Gandhi erupted in 1932 when, through Ambedkar's efforts, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald granted the Communal Award to Depressed Classes. As per the award Depressed Classes were treated as minorities entitled to separate electorates. Gandhi saw the award as a major setback to Hindu society and feared a schism in Hindu society due to the award. Gandhi was ready to concede special status to religious minorities but to permit untouchables be treated as separate minority groups was too much for Gandhi to accept.

In order to quash the Communal Award to Depressed Classes, Gandhi decided to fast unto death. To undo the award, Ambedkar's acceptance was critical. Ambedkar did not yield to Gandhi's demand initially but with rising pressure from the newly developed situation, Ambedkar had to give way. Ambedkar visited Gandhi in Yerawada prison and accepted his suggestion for a panel system rather than separate electorates. The agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar was signed in September 1932 as Poona Pact. As a result of this pact MacDonald's Communal Award for Depressed Classes was abrogated. Ambedkar always felt that through Poona Pact, a historic opportunity for uplift of Depressed Classes was lost and his trust in Gandhi's policies diminished.

After his failed struggle to evince sufficiently honest and radical effort from caste Hindus to eradicate caste system, Ambedkar had set his mind on religious conversion. In 1935 in a conference at Yeola, Ambedkar announced that though he was born a Hindu he will not die a Hindu. At this conference the participants of Depressed Classes resolved to abandon Hindu religion. However, which religion to convert into was to be taken by Ambedkar later on after his long deliberations with members of other religious organisations. The decision culminated in mass conversion of untouchables to Buddhism in 1956, as mentioned earlier.

4.4.2 Untouchability since Independence

After independence, the Constitution of India drafted by Babasaheb Ambedkar declared untouchability as a legal offence under Article 17. To further weaken the institution of untouchability, untouchable castes were identified and clubbed

together under the category of Scheduled Castes and special provisions were made for their upliftment and participation in larger society through policy of reservation in parliament, education and jobs. Through reservation and various democratic processes, Dalits continue to struggle for a dignified life. Dalits today are no more silent bearers of atrocities against them. The Constitution of India aims to achieve through legislation in independent India what had not been done in ages.

Reservation in government services paved way for many Dalits to get into positions of power in government and become part of the administrative machinery of the country. Their participation in state machinery has not only opened new job opportunities for them but also enriched their cultural capital since independence. Inspired by Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalits have participated actively in political arena and carved a niche for themselves. All India Scheduled Caste Federation founded by Dr Ambedkar contested elections in 1951. Later on Ambedkar transformed it into Republican Party in 1956.

The employees in government sector formed BAMCEF (Backward Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes and Minority Community Employees Federation) as a potent formation that actively voiced and defended the interest of the Dalit community. The formation also helped Kanshi Ram launch Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Dalit political parties have shown capacity to take along other marginalized segments of society in their fight against inequality. The political consciousness among Dalits has forced all political parties to address Dalit issues, at least in their manifestos. Dalits today are a force to reckon with which no political party can afford to neglect. The political democracy in India with adult franchise has set in motion political enculturation of Dalits.

Untouchability is a strange notion in contemporary times and many people believe that it is a thing of past and does not exist anymore. Though there has been some remarkable progress in the condition of Dalits since independence, the weight of centuries-old tradition is still too heavy to be lifted within a span of seven decades of independence. Untouchability continues to manifest itself in newer forms and different shades in many places. In their study, Shah et al found untouchability to be a “pan-Indian phenomenon” whose “specific forms and intensity vary considerably across regions and socio-historical contexts” (Shah et al 2006). That untouchability still exists in contemporary Indian society has been sufficiently reported by various studies (Mendelsohn 2000, Louis 2003, Kumar 2001, O’Neill 2003, Shah et al 2006, Sarukkai 2009).

The forces of modernization, urbanization and marketization have somewhat diluted the rigid caste structure. Modern secular education has also played a significant role in weakening the old institution and producing better awareness among Dalits about their basic rights. Education remains one of the most powerful tools of emancipation among Dalits as almost all other resources are controlled by non-Dalits (Oommen 1968), though a study by Shah et al revealed that almost 40 per cent of village schools act as sites “reproducing the hierarchies of caste and untouchability” (Shah et al. 2006). Ambedkar had called upon Dalits to ‘educate, organise and agitate’. The central role of education for Dalits was not merely emphasized by Ambedkar but he also showed way by example. Ambedkar continues to be one of the most formidable symbols of emancipatory zeal among Dalits. He has emerged as an all India icon among Dalits who constantly inspires them to yearn for a free and equal society.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

The chapter tries to discuss various terms used to describe the untouchable communities over the years. Terms like Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Dalits have been used in the last century for erstwhile untouchables in India. The contemporary usage popular among the untouchables and the social scientists is 'Dalit'. The term highlights an enhanced political consciousness among Dalits about their plight caused because of discrimination and speaks of their will to undo the injustice done to them over the years.

A brief look at the history of Dalit community reveals that they have been struggling since beginning to counter casteist forces. The contribution of Buddhism, the Bhakti movement, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and the British rule in weakening forces of untouchability remains significant. However, modern secular education along with legislative support from constitutional provisions against untouchability played a significant role in emancipation of untouchables. Their struggle for emancipation was voiced most concretely and effectively in the last century by B.R. Ambedkar. Though Ambedkar yearned to reform caste Hindus in the beginning, his failed attempts within Hinduism prompted him to opt for religious conversion and seek political rights for untouchables through legislation. The promise of an egalitarian society, however, remains a challenging task given the resistance of dominant communities to cede more and more rights to Dalits.

4.6 QUESTIONS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) What is the difference between savarnas and avarnas?
- 2) What is untouchability?
- 3) What were the main points of difference between Ambedkar and Gandhi on caste system?
- 4) Is untouchability still practiced in contemporary Indian society? Explain.
- 5) What is the role of Dr Ambedkar in emancipation of untouchables?

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