

Ambedkar' s Alternative Philosophy towards Caste Discrimination and Economic Deprivation of Dalits

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Abstract:

This paper tries to throw light on how Ambedkar unearthed the age old problems of Dalits in India, and advocated a new philosophical outlook to emancipate Dalits from the clutches of dominant caste and feudal landlords of this country. Monopoly of all privileges were in the hands of the upper caste and all sufferings to the lower caste Sudras was a significant feature .To overcome this situation Ambedkar suggested alternatives to the existing social order.

Dr. Ambedkar says, "The first condition which I think is a condition precedent for the successful working of a democracy is that there must be no glaring not be class which has got all the privileges and a class which has got all the burdens to carry. Such thing, such a division, such an organization. If a society has within itself the germs of a bloody revolution and perhaps it would be impossible for democracy to cure them". The Social justice through protective discrimination is not a privilege given to some aliens by somebody out of mercy or magnanimity but it is rather the rights of those who had not either realized or raised their voices so far but were exploited and deprived off for many centuries.

While many practices of untouchability still continue consciously or unconsciously because they have become part of the

'common sense' of everyday life, over time there have occurred many changes in the system as well. As the above factors change, they create a dynamic tension between Dalit and non-Dalit. In some areas, practices of untouchability are being erased, while in other spheres, new forms of untouchability are being invented. Therefore efforts to document various forms of untouchability always lag behind the new adaptations and innovations in its practice.

The media itself offers proof of the 'creative' practices of contemporary untouchability and the stubborn resistance of the dominant caste groups to accept change .For example massacre of Dalit was triggered in Chundururu, Andhra Pradesh, allegedly because a Dalit youth sat with his feet up in the local cinema hall and accidentally touched an upper-caste youth sitting in the seat in front of him. Although this was only the flash –point for already simmering caste hatred, it is interesting that popular accounts of this incident cited variations of the 'feet-up' allegation as an adequate explanation for the mini-pogrom.

Untouchability is not a trait defining particular people, but a relationship between people. One of the distinguishing features of this relationship is that it requires the continual reproduction of public signs proclaiming the 'inferiority' of those marked as 'untouchable' relative to the rest of society. Thus, the institution of untouchability is partly sustained by the imposition of discriminatory sanctions on behavior in public –sanctions which make it incumbent upon Dalits to behave in ways that herald their low status and, as a corollary, underline the 'superior' status of the upper castes. Upper caste society is extremely sensitive to violations of this public, highly visible code, and any transgression immediately invites retribution.

Key words: Ambedkar, Caste Discrimination, Economic Deprivation, Dalits

*The root of untouchability is the caste system; the root of the caste system is religion attached to Varnashram; and the root of Varnashram is the Brahminical religion; and the root of the Brahminical religion is authoritarianism or political power - **B. R. Ambedkar***

The routine practice of humiliating persons born into particular caste, and the social sanction that practice has gained,

potentially affects every aspect of social life, mental and material .For the purpose of this study ,we have divided the forms and sites and which untouchability is practiced into three main spheres: i) the 'secular' public sphere ,which also include non-state public services and restrictions on public behavior ,(ii) the religious – cultural and personal spheres ,and (iii) the economic sphere.

In attempting to document the practices of untouchability in contemporary rural India with the understanding that the concept of untouchability is rooted in economic and political inequality and reproduced by the ideology of caste hierarchy .As an ingrained attitude, untouchability is expressed in a wide variety of forms, which change in response to the social context of the Dalit-non-Dalit relationship. This relationship is itself is determined by arrange of both materials and non-material factors. These factors include (i) economic and political relationship between different social groups (ii) competing cultural values (iii) resistance to discrimination by Dalit (iv) legal prohibitions on untouchability and perceptions about whether the law will actually be enforced: and (v) the degree of social legitimacy that particular practice command. While many practices of untouchability still continue consciously or unconsciously because they have become part of the 'common sense' of everyday life, over time there have occurred many changes in the system as well. As the above factors change, they create a dynamic tension between Dalit and non-Dalit .In some areas, practices of untouchability are being erased, while in other spheres, new forms of untouchability are being invented. Therefore efforts to document various forms of untouchability always lag behind the new adaptations and innovations in its practice.

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Untouchability in the ‘secular’ public sphere:

In this section we considered the practice of untouchability in the ‘secular public sphere’. The phrase refers to that area of public life that is neither directly associated with the state or with religious –cultural or purely individual aspects of community life. Within this general area, we are also excluding the specially economic aspects of rural life (which are considered separately). The main aspects included in this section are issues like access to water sources, public thoroughfares, modes of public (but not state – owned) transport, other village-level amenities like teashops, the services of barbers and dhobis, and so on. This section examines both access and discrimination in the secular public sphere.

Residential segregation:

The most visible and long-standing form of caste discrimination in rural India, and also the most taken –for-granted aspect of untouchability in their public sphere, is the residential segregation of Dalit households. Caste segregation neighborhoods tend to be the rule rather than the exception in Indian villages, and dwellings are usually clustered by caste. However, Dalit neighborhoods are unique in the sense that they are subjected to specific and very severe sanctions that are not imposed on other castes.

The starkest form of location sanction is the social banishment expressed in palpably physical spatial terms of Dalit settlements to beyond the boundaries of the village. This form of 'out casting' of the Dalit *wada* or *cheri* or *basti* or colony is quite common and is found all over the country. There are often explicit customs about which particular direction (relative to the 'main' village) the Dalit settlements can or cannot occupy. While these customs are not always enforced or followed very strictly, their existence is indicative of the deep seated nature of untouchability. Residential exclusion from the village, while common, is not the rule and many villages have Dalit neighborhoods located within the village ,but these neighborhoods too are subjected to severe sanctions.² It is interesting, but also worrisome, to note that even government programmes for Dalit housing are unable to escape the spatial segregation directed by upper caste 'tradition'. Such discrimination had been reproduced by the government and NGOs in their post-2001 earthquake rehabilitation programmes in Gujarat.³

Denial of access and discriminatory treatment in basic public services:

The different forms of untouchability that deny Dalits access to basic services that may not be directly related to the state. A brief regarding the polluting effect of Dalits is strong in relation to drinking water sources. It is therefore not surprising that persistent conflicts are reported with regard to drinking water. While complete denial of access to a particular water source (well, tank, tube well ,etc) designated as upper caste is quite common ,what is even more common in the imposition of deferential treatment on Dalits. For instance, Dalit have to wait for non-Dalits arrive; the practice ensures that Dalits wait to one side ,and that their vessels do not touch those of the upper-caste persons who are drawing water or waiting for their

turn .It is hardly surprising that continual friction on this score leads to major fights ,and force Dalit to seek alternative water sources whenever feasible. ⁴

Two-Glass System in Mahabubnagar District:

The problem of untouchability is an age old one with manifold social, economic, and political implications. Untouchability is a byproduct of the Hindu caste system. Due to its ancient origin the evil has deep roots and manifests itself in a variety of overt forms. While the overt practices of untouchability can be curbed and even eradicated with the aid of the state, well, thought out and concerted multilevel efforts are needed to root it out from the source that is the human mind. ⁵

“Yes, we do have separate glasses for Harijans in my hotel. Here, all the tea shops and hotels do the same, and how can we let them drink from the same glasses as used? That would not be proper.

Meet Sai Reddy. Proprietor Reddy hotel. He is quite open about discrimination against the Dalits here, in Sangambanda village. He is also accurate on its extent. The “two-glass ”system is pervasive in villages across Mahabubnagar and some other districts of the Telangana region more known for its radical traditions.

“We would rather close shop then serve Harijans in the same glasses that we use “says Sai Reddy. He points of four glasses that line a sill .The scheduled caste residents of the village are served tea in these, if they drink it here .Reddy would prefer they took it through the metal bars of the window. The glasses kept clearly apart from any other vassals in the hotel. The segregation is at once a message to upper caste clients and Dalit customers. To the former, it is an assurance of “purity “for the latter, a reminder of their inferior status.”⁶

Discriminatory restrictions on public behavior:

As has been amply demonstrated by scholars, untouchability is not a trait defining particular people, but a relationship between people. One of the distinguishing features of this relationship is that it requires the continual reproduction of public signs proclaiming the 'inferiority' of those marked as 'untouchable' relative to the rest of society. Thus, the institution of untouchability is partly sustained by the imposition of discriminatory sanctions on behavior in public – sanctions which make it incumbent upon Dalits to behave in ways that herald their low status and, as a corollary, underline the 'superior' status of the upper castes. Upper caste society is extremely sensitive to violations of this public, highly visible code, and any transgression immediately invites retribution.

But it is not only on such special occasions that Dalits must display publicly the signs of their subordination. In fact, being Dalit in rural India involves internalizing a repressive regime of self-control and servility in everyday life. The closest parallel here is with the explicit and implicit restrictions on public behavior faced by women in our patriarchal society. As everyone knows, women are supposed to behave differently from men—just as girls are taught to behave differently from boys. They are continually under surveillance for the way they dress, how they walk or talk or otherwise conduct themselves. In an analogous fashion, all Dalits, not only women, must constantly restrain themselves in public and ensure that they do not violate the norms of caste hierarchy.

In concrete terms, these norms of behavior cover every conceivable situation where Dalits and non-Dalits come into public contact, and constitute a deeply oppressive regime of everyday life. For example, Dalits must stand in the presence of upper-caste men, especially if they happen to be older; they must not make eye contact with members of the upper caste but stand with head bowed. They must not laugh too loud, point

figurers or wave their arms about. They must not stand erect, or walk with a swagger, or appear to be strolling (instead of scurrying about their business). In short, they must not do anything that might make the upper castes feel that they are getting 'purity'.

Apart from physical behavior, this regime also involves a strict dress code. Since the upper castes considered them dirty and unclean, it is up to the Dalits to ensure that this upper-caste image is not contradicted in other words, Dalits must not wear very clean, good or 'bright' clothes. Urban middle class- and upper-caste-Indian may find this difficult to believe, but such sanctions are routinely imposed on Dalits. There are upper caste neighborhoods and thoroughfares where Dalits are still expected to take off their footwear and carry it in their hands or dismount from their bicycles. They may not walk through non-Dalits areas with their umbrellas unfurled. Dalit boys and men must not be seen wearing sunglasses or fashionable clothes of the sort sported by upper-caste youth. Violations of these codes invite humiliating reprisals, including violence. It is or should be a matter of grave concern that such practices are reported from between 10 and 20 per cent of the villages surveyed.⁷

Untouchability in the religious cultural and personal spheres:

As is well known, the practices of untouchability derive its strongest support from the dominant interpretations of Hindu religion and scripture. It is only to be expected, therefore, that its mostly widely practiced forms are prominent in the religious-cultural sphere, and relate to those aspects of individual behavior most closely influenced by religion and cultural tradition. It is an indication of the strength of these traditions that many Dalits themselves internalize beliefs about the religious basis of untouchability and voluntarily

acquiesce in this practice. However, despite stubborn resistance from the upper castes, things are changing.

It is noteworthy that almost every aspect of religious practice has been transformed in accordance with the changing realities of modern life. Public pujas now include loudspeakers, electrified decorations' and recorded music, often mimicking film songs; Prasad is commonly distributed in polythene packets, and the clothing worn by devotees has changed dramatically. Yet, the caste system and caste prejudice has been relatively slow to change. Caste has been directly related to power relations- reform has been most visible and most effective in situations where Dalit resistance to untouchability has been strong, of the law of the land, which, of course, banned untouchability more than half a century ago.⁸

Denial of temple entry:

The popular belief that untouchability is endorsed by dominant interpretations of religion and religious practice is supported by the findings of our study, where we observed that the extent of discrimination is greatest for entry into places of worship and access to burial and cremation grounds. Denial of entry into upper-caste temples is in fact the most widely prevalent form of collective public untouchability, since it requires something more than just individual initiative on the part of the non-Dalits. It is appalling that this practice is reported from almost every state; that it ranges from 47 per cent in UP to 94 per cent in Karnataka; and that the rate of prevalence for the 11 states together is as high as 64 per cent. It is even today so widely practiced, despite the fact that this aspect of untouchability has been most strongly resisted, over which numerous famous campaigns have been fought, and which has been repeatedly outlawed by the central and state legislatures. This shows just how deeply ingrained the institution continues to be.⁹

Dalits have responded to their exclusion from mainstream Hinduism in many ways. The most common response is one of struggle, where concerted attempts are made to gain entry to the fold, sometimes at the cost of accepting lower status among the members of the faith. In the past, continued resistance from caste Hindus to the participation of Dalits in religious activities has prompted many to convert to other faiths. Conversion to Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam for these reasons is well documented in the literature. However, as is reported in our study as well, conversion has not brought any relief to Dalits. The continued presence of untouchability despite conversion is documented by our researchers in the states of Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

Dalit conversions to other religions from Hinduism have always attracted the ire of Hindu nationalists, leading to communal tensions and even riots. The presence of Christian missionaries in adivasi areas and, more generally, in southern India, has attracted violent opposition from aggressive right-wing Hindu organizations who accuse them of forcibly converting Dalits and adivasis.¹⁰ Yet when Dalits offer devotion and respectful worship to Hindu deities, they are rebuffed by caste Hindus caste Hindus. Such exclusion reveals the hypocrisy of Hindu nationalists who oppose the conversion of Dalits to other faiths. One would more inclusive and egalitarian Hindu practices so that Dalits are encouraged to stay within the Hindu faith, but such logical consistency is conspicuous by its absence. In fact, from the evidence collected by our researchers, it appears as if the deeper the expression of Dalit devotion, the stronger the caste Hindu backlash.¹¹

The refusal to allow Dalits into non-Dalit homes and their exclusion from food –sharing is so ubiquitous that it is reported from every single state studied. We came across particularly striking incidents teaching untouchability quite successfully. But outside school as well, both Dalit and non-

Dalit children are being inculcated into the ways of caste prejudice, as is shown.¹²

Economic discrimination:

Under the traditional framework of the caste system the economic rights and obligations of each caste-including the right to property and the right to practice and occupation are fixed and binding. The caste system, therefore involved the forced exclusion of all other castes from the designated occupation(s) and rights of each caste. Although such occupational segregation may appear to be a neutral division of labor, equally binding on all castes, in practice it was highly iniquitous and unjust because the more remunerative, secure and prestigious occupations were reserved in perpetuity for the upper castes. Dalits the rest of society, and explicitly denied access to almost all the sources of livelihood available to other castes. They had no prospects of economic improvement or upward mobility. Economic discrimination against Dalits has been an all-pervasive and systematic mode of subordination, operating on multiple planes across most spheres of the economy and reproduced across generations.¹³

Amartya Sen (2000) draws a useful distinction between forms of economic discrimination. There are situations where individuals or groups are excluded (kept out or left out) and those where some may be included, even against their will, in economic relations and transactions on highly unfavorable terms. Sen has described these situations as *unfavorable exclusion and unfavorable inclusion*. Unfavorable inclusion with unequal treatment may have the same adverse effects as unfavorable exclusion. For instance, confining and compelling a Dalit or a woman to perform low-paying, menial jobs forms of economic discrimination allow participation in or access to work and employment, but with unequal treatment and on unfavorable terms.

Considered in this way, the practices of economic exclusion and discrimination against Dalits would include:

1. Denial of the right to participate on equal terms in the markets for jobs; factors of production (like agricultural land, non-land capital assets, and various inputs); consumer goods; social services like education, housing and health; and in collective arrangements for accessing common property resources (such as water sources and grazing land), etc.
2. Denial of the right to change occupations: This may take that form of either the imposition of traditional caste-based occupations (see the chapter on Unclean Occupations), or of exclusion from alternative occupations enforced through the discriminatory working of the capital market. That is, Dalits may not be allowed to invest in (or to take up) occupations formerly associated with other castes.
3. Being forced to pay or receive differential (i.e., discrimination) prices in various markets, depending on whether they are sellers or buyers. This may relate to the price of factor inputs, and consumer goods, such as wages for labor, price of land or rent on land, interest on capital, rent on residential houses, charges or fees for services such as housing, water and electricity. In general, Dalits may be forced to accept lower-than-market higher-than-market prices for the products\services they are selling, and\or pay higher-than-market prices for the products\services they are buying.
4. Exclusion from participation in specific categories of jobs, and from the sale and purchase of specific consumer goods because of beliefs regarding pollution and purity. Dalits may also face discrimination and exclusion in the use of public services like water, electricity, health services and other services.

Within the limitations this clearly shows and the nature and magnitude of exclusion and discrimination suffered by Dalits in the labor and other markets, and in various village-level economic services.¹⁴

Discrimination in other input market: Irrigation and agriculture land:

Discrimination against Dalits is not confined to the condition of labor but operates in other economic spheres as well. Their access to agriculture land and public and private irrigation is also severely constrained. While our survey constrains some statistical evidence on access to irrigation. We able to collective only anecdotal evidence regarding access to agricultural land ownership. Nevertheless, even this limited and selective evidence gives a glimpse into the repressive and hostile conditions of production that Dalits generally confront as they attempt to make a livelihood.

Table-1 Market Discrimination-Access to Work and Resources

From /site of Untouchability practices	percentage of villagers where from is practiced	percentage of villagers where from is not practiced	Total surveyed villages
Labour Market			
Denied work as Agriculture labor	35.5 (158)	60.0	445
No touching when Paying wages	37.1 (174)	59.7	469
Paid lower wages for The same work	24.5 (119)	70.8	486
Dalits not employed In house construction	28.7 (152)	62.0	529
Input market			
Denied access to Irrigation facilities	32.6 (152)	59.4	466
Common property resources			
Denied access to grazing / Fishing grounds	20.9 (76)	71.7	364
Consumer market –sale and Purchase			
Not allowed to sell to			

Milk cooperatives	46.7 (162)	48.1	347
Prevented from selling			
In local markets	35.4 (165)	54.9	466
Not allowed to buy from			
Milk cooperatives	27.8 (100)	59.2	360

Notes: (Forms/sites pooled data from 11 states). Figures in brackets are number of villages where from is practiced. Villagers where status of practice is ambiguous are excluded from both ‘practiced’ and ‘not practiced’ categories. Total surveyed villagers excluded villages where relevant institution/site is absent.

Table 1 shows that in slightly more than one-third of the villages, Dalits were denied access to water for irrigation fields .In Punjab, those Dalits who cultivated some land reported that they were denied access to canal water, forcing them to use groundwater from wells powered by diesel pumps .Since ground water is more costly to extract, Dalit farmers end up bearing higher costs of production. Such discrimination is also reported in Dalits’ access to tube- well irrigation. ¹⁵

In this case of agricultural land, there is evidence from some states that illustrates the hostile and aggressive attitude of the high castes towards Dalits who try to own and cultivate agricultural land. This is particularly true in the case of public land (i.e. government land allotted to Dalits; see Box 2.12).A similar opposition is encountered when public land is used to build housing colonies for the Dalits. Because of its potential for giving Dalits a modicum of economic security and prosperity, Dalits access to and control over land has been a deeply contentious issue, often sparking of violence confrontations resulting in atrocities n Dalits. The denial of productive resources also extended to the leasing of agricultural land to Dalits. Dalits tenants generally cultivate land belonging to high-caste land-owners on unfavorable term and conditions.¹⁶ Encroachment on Dalit land under the protection of state police:- In Andhra Pradesh, upper-caste village Mopidevi Marnemaiah, Vaddi Sanker Rao and Peethala Narasaiah, belonging to the Agni Kula Kshatriya caste along with some Kammas, occupied 30 acres of land owned by Dalits. The Dalits

were threatened with dire consequences if they dared to enter the fields. When some Dalits protested, they were assaulted. The police, instead of registering the complaint of the Dalits and taking action against the Kshatriyas, advised the Dalits not to fight. The police brokered a compromise and fixed the price for the land, forcing the Dalits to sell their prosperity .The Dalits landownership got Rs 800 per acre from the Kshatriyas. The police took Rs 200 as commission for each acre from the Dalits for finalizing this deal. Thus a total of 30 acres of land was alienated by the upper the protection of the police.

Dalits attacked and killed for land:

In 1980,100 Dalits families and 108 Yanadi families erected huts by the roadside on unoccupied public land in a village in Nellore district, Andhra Pradesh. Furious at this encroachment, the upper castes dragged our Dalits and Yanadis and beat them mercilessly. Women and children were also not spared .Four Dalits/Yanadis women and children died in the attack .Most of the men were grievously injured and were admitted to the hospital. Some ran away from the village.

Dalits discriminated against in leasing of land:

The normal lease price for an acre of land in Bodapadu village, Andhra Pradesh, is Rs 10,000 per year, with the money paid in advance by the tenants. But there is a difference between Dalits and non-Dalit tenants. When Kammas lease our land, they take no advance from Kamma tenants, but insist on advance payment from Dalits.

Consequences of economic discrimination:

Through various forms of discrimination, Dalits are placed in a disadvantageous position in their relations with other economic

actors. As discussed, Dalits make up a disproportionate share of those living in poverty. This poverty is directly linked to the inequality and exploitation that they contend with in their everyday lives. Denying Dalits jobs, paying them lower wages, refusing to allow them to sell their products are among the many upper-caste techniques for profiting through Dalits vulnerability. Lacking access to productive assets, and excluded from even common property resources, most Dalits lack the capital to invest in improving their situation .The little that they own is also at risk of being seized by the upper castes. Our investigations also show that a non economic but nonetheless crucial dimension of such economic relations is the systematic humiliation to which Dalit workers are subjected .Surely the right to work entails not only fair wages but also human dignity.

The widespread prevalence of untouchability in different spheres of everyday life in rural India is a distributing remainder of how far we are from achieving the goal of equity and justice set down in our Constitution. ¹⁷

The second demand that Ambedkar emphasized was to bring about equality of opportunity for the Dalits. He held that the absence of equality of opportunity was the cause of misery and poverty of the Dalits. Ambedkar argued that the Dalits in the village and towns could not sell vegetables, milk or better which denied them alternative means of livelihood and sustenance to a vast number of Dalits in the country.¹⁸

Thirdly, Ambedkar emphasized the need for social intercourse in order to establish closer association between the caste Hindus and the Dalits. 'Only a common cycle of participation can help people to overcome the strangeness of feeling which one has, when brought into contact to other. Nothing can do this more effectively in my opinion that the admission of the depressed classes to the houses of the caste Hindus.' To effectively implement these three demands he suggested the establishment of regular enforcing agency.¹⁹

However Gandhi ignored Ambedkar suggestions and continued with his 'temple entry' and the activities of the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

Most of the atrocities particularly in the remote rural areas went unnoticed and even those that were reported by the national dailies received scant positive response from the police. Most of the few cases that were registered ended in 'compromises', as the economically improvised and illiterate Dalits were coerced with fear of retaliation by the dominant upper castes. After this, the compromise clause was amended in 1976. Nevertheless, even after this the same set of socio-economic pressures worked, and under pressure from the upper castes (in the form of social and economic boycott) the witness turned hostile and the culprits managed to escape punishment, was a sharp contrast between the higher judiciary, which upheld the right and dignity of the Dalits, and the activities of the lower courts and the local policemen.

The lack of commitment on the part of the local enforcing authority was visible in the case of the Karamchedu massacre of 1985. In Karamchedu village an upper caste boy bathed at the steps of the water tank of the Dalits and directed the dirty water into the tank from which they collected their drinking water. A lame Dalit youth and young Dalit women protested against this. The upper castes retaliated by killing six Dalit men and injuring more than 25 men and women. The police field cases against the main accused in the massacre, but the culprits were not sentenced as 'no clear cut reason behind the masscare' was found.

The Karamchedu massacre (Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh) prompted a nationwide debate on the role of the state in protecting the life and property of the Dalits. After long deliberations, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes prevention of Atrocity Act was passed in 1989. This Act made punishable 14 specific offences against the Dalits with up to five years of imprisonment. Within a few months after the

passing of this Act the Bodi riots shook Tamil Nadu. In these riots the police actively protested the perpetrators of violence. These riots proved that such Acts alone could never provide protection to the Dalits.

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