

# Rethinking Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar's Notions of the Caste System in India

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**Abstract:** Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar is revered as the messiah of the Dalit cause because he created the counter narrative against the hegemonic caste system through various rational conjectures and even through actions. The caste had its foundation in ancient hegemonic scriptures of smriti, which was put in place for the eternal subjugation of the so-called antyaja (one who is born last) or the untouchables. Dr Ambedkar repudiated such a form of graded inequality and challenged the infallibility of the Vedas. Throughout his entire lifetime, he gave his heart and soul to reforming age-old traditions which were codified through subjugation and religious obscurantism. In due course, his ideas reformed the contours of Indian traditions, which is evident in the current context. This article seeks to revisit Dr Ambedkar's purview on caste-related discourses and his view on the process of annihilation of caste. His ideas are still relevant even in the current 21<sup>st</sup> century and thus need to be revisited to accrue a larger picture of the social process.

**Keywords:** Annihilation, Untouchability, Caste, Broken men, Neo-untouchability

## 1. Introduction

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous scholars tried to answer the origin of the caste system through various approaches and Dr Ambedkar was the foremost individual who gave a well-articulated definition of the genesis of the caste system in India. In social sciences, such a form of caste-related studies was pioneered by Ghurye, Srinivas, Dumont and many others (Guha, 2017). But Dr Ambedkar's view differed from their perspectives particularly when it comes to his actions. Furthermore, he was the student of Alexander Aleksandrovich Goldenweiser of Columbia University, who was the protégé of Franz Boas (Chairez, 2021). In this vein, he was influenced by the concepts of endogamy, isolation and social endosmosis (Chairez, 2021). All these concepts formed the groundwork for his works related to caste in his entire lifetime. He was against the prevailing caste system in India and challenged its validity on various grounds and even in diverse forums (Omvedt, 2004). He believed that India could not progress on the values of ancient scriptures, which validated the subjugation of masses based on graded inequality. In due course, various actions such as eradication of the Khoti system, Mahar satyagraha, constitution of Independent Labour Party and many others played the role of traditional reforms put forward scrupulously by Dr Ambedkar (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002). All these in synergy aided Dr Ambedkar in securing his dream to create a society that is moulded through equitable social justice for all.

## 2. Methodology

This article seeks to revisit Dr Ambedkar's purview on caste-related discourses and his view on the process of annihilation of caste. In the current context, his ideas are still relevant and need to be reassessed to accrue a larger picture of the social process in times of growing intolerance amongst communities, secessionism, religious obscurantism and so on.

This article is based on the secondary analysis of available books, journals, articles and even government sources in relation to Dr Ambedkar and his view on caste. All of these are analysed through content analysis to generate a new synthesis of ideas that can be applied in the current context to realise and negate the graded hierarchy based on identity, a form of ascribed status.

## 3. Analysis and Discussion

On the basis of the analysis of his writings and actions we found following domains of Babasaheb's notions on the caste system in India.

### Study of Caste

The term "Caste" has its genesis from Hispanic roots i.e., "Caste" which means "Lineage or Race". It is derivative of the Latin terminology "Custus" which means "Pure". These terms emerged in French academics in the mid and late 1700s. This was utilised for the mixed breed of European, American and Negroes. In the case of India, the term was utilised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hiwrale, 2020).

Babasaheb's renowned work "Caste in India, their mechanism, genesis and development (1916)" created a paradigm shift on the notions of caste in India. He observed that endogamy is the only distinguishing feature of caste. The overlapping of endogamy on exogamy means the concept of caste. Numerous scholars, Senart, Nesfield, Risley, Ibbetson and so on, have provided their own versions of caste as an institution (Kannabiran, 2009). Babasaheb refuted their arguments, as per him, "they have taken caste very lightly as though a breath had made it" (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002). He demystified the notions of the religious and stylistic genesis of caste, and the role of *Manusmriti*. According to Dr Ambedkar, the notion of caste was prevalent post facto Manu's scriptures. Manu, in his *Manusmriti*, arranged all the prevailing codes and systematised them for preaching (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002). He contemplates that exogamy is the reason for the

continuance of the tribal system; totem is the equal of the Indian gotra, and the individuals who belong to the same *sagotra* or *sapinda* are consequently of a similar clan. The graded inequality aided Brahmins to create lacunae, and others followed such norms due to “the infection of imitation” (Kannabiran, 2009). Babasaheb trailed Gabriel Tarde’s work and was of the opinion that the propensity towards insertion among the non-Brahmin castes, was in consonance of two laws of imitation. Firstly, that imitation drifts from the higher to the lower, the foundation of imitation relishing prestige in the group; secondly, that the degree and concentration of imitation fluctuates in proportion to distance, tacit in its purview (De Tarde, 1903). According to Gabriel Tarde, “the imitation of the adjoining i.e., the minimum distant, elucidates the gradual and consecutive character of the spread of an example that has been set by the higher social ranks” (Ambedkar, 2020). In similar veins, the caste-based social order located “nearest to the Brahmins have imitated all three social norms...while those furthest off have imitated only the belief in the caste-based code” (Ambedkar, 2020). In the end, the process of social exclusion has the tacit understanding of ex-communication of individuals where they live in plural numbers as a community. The process of endogamy perpetuates the method of social exclusion, and its deviance leads to violation of social mores, which is punished through social isolation, thereby increasing the numbers of the so-called untouchables. Thus, the unity of society is concluded to be a reality, i.e., castes cohabit only in a plurality of demography (belonging from the majority or minority populace of a particular region).

### Broken Men Theory

Babasaheb’s greatest work, “The Untouchables: Who were they and why they became untouchables (1948)” tried to look into the issue of the origin of the caste system in India. This work was recently excerpted into a facsimile version titled “Beef, Brahmin and the Broken Men (2020)”. The book is based on a chapter that deals with the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism and how it led the Brahmins to despise the meat of the bovines and then turn into a group adhering to vegetarianism. Dr Ambedkar observed that the reverence of the holy cow was instigated by the differences between Buddhism and Brahmanism and with the reverence of the holy cow was employed by Brahmanism to ensure its authority over Buddhism. In the book “The Untouchables (1948)”, Babasaheb proposes the notion of Broken Men, whom he labels as follows:

In ancient times, tribes were always at war with each other, and a tribe in its place of being completely defeated was directed in small groups. In many cases, a defeated tribe became broken into small groups. As a result of this, there was always a group in ancient times who were a moving populace comprising clusters of Broken tribesmen migrating in all the adjoining regions. He also makes the hypothesis that “Untouchables are Broken Men belonging to a tribe different from the tribe encompassing the village community.” Babasaheb’s third hypothesis is that “Broken Men were the followers of Buddhism and did not care to return to Brahmanism when it became dominant over Buddhism” (Ambedkar, 1948).

After carefully studying ancient scriptures, Babasaheb observed that this new model obtains theoretical backing from the Hindu Shastras. The Veda Vyas Smriti encompasses a verse that postulates the groups counted in the category of *Antyajas* and why they were so-called so. Thus, Babasaheb said, “The Charmakars (Cobbler), the Bhatta (Soldier), the Bhilla, the Rajaka (washerman), the Puskara, the Nata (actor), the Vrata, the Meda, the Chandala, the Dasa, the Svapaka, and the Kolika—these are known as *Antyajas* as well as others who eat cow’s flesh” (Ambedkar, 2020).

In general, the *Smritikars* never thought to elucidate why and how their religious doctrines work. But in this case, it is an exemption. In this context, Veda Vyas does elucidate the source of untouchability. The clause “as well as others who eat cow’s flesh” is very significant (Ambedkar, 2020). It demonstrates that the *Smritikars* recognised that the genesis of untouchability is to be instituted from the notion the consumption the meat of the bovines by certain group of people. The maxim of Veda Vyas must bring an end to this particular argument. Babasaheb’s approach in the search for the genesis of untouchability revealed two sources of the genesis of untouchability. One is the general ambience of scorn and contempt spread by the Brahmins against those who were Buddhists, and the second is the habit of eating the meat of the bovines practiced by the Broken Men during that time. It has been said that the first circumstance could not be adequate to account for the dishonour of untouchability ascribing itself to the Broken Men. The disrespect and disapproval towards the Buddhists disseminated by the Brahmins was too wide-ranging and affected all Buddhists and not just the Broken Men.

Thus, the cause why Broken Men only turned out to be untouchables was because, on top of being Buddhists, they continued their tradition of consumption of the meat of bovines which gave supplementary ground for wrongdoing to the Brahmins to carry their afresh and veneration towards the cow as a rationale.

### Annihilation of Caste

The origin of the work “Annihilation of Caste” can be drawn from the cancelled speech of Babasaheb on the occasion of the yearly session of *Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal*. But the organising committee censored his speech due to the radical ideas posed in the speech, his opinion of the Vedas, and his inclination towards *dharmantar* (conversion). He was asked to change some points in the speech, but replied that “he wouldn’t change a comma”. So, it was revoked, but it later was made in book form in 1936.

The book contained contentious rhetoric against the hegemonic Hindu traditions, but he failed to redress the sufferings faced by the untouchables. He only provided examples of how the untouchables were bereaved from education and various vocation and were subjugated to do stigmatised labour-intensive works, all ensuing in them nearly towards serfdom, and how they were isolated and stripped of their fundamental rights of human dignity such as drinking water even from public wells, they were not allowed in temples, and so on. Apart from all these, Babasaheb stressed the special importance of the fallibility

of Vedas and the dogma of *Chaturvana* (four-fold varna system). According to him, *Manusmriti* was the bulwark that hindered the upliftment of Dalits into mainstream society (Ambedkar, 1936). *Manusmriti*, as a hegemonic scripture, dominated the Hindu traditions for a long time and subjugated the so-called untouchables. To counter this, Babasaheb publicly burned *Manusmriti* to mark the Mahad satyagraha. In this context, he and his cohorts of 2, 500 individuals marched to the Chavdar tank to drink its water (Omvedt, 2017).

In his book, Babasaheb conscientiously demolished the idea of defence of caste in India as posed by Mahatma Gandhi (Barua, 2018). Babasaheb rejected the defence of caste on the basis of division of labour and contended that it was not only a division of labour but a division of labourers. The previous one was an intended task that depended upon an individual's choice and ability and, consequently, rewarded competence in a particular sector. The last one was a forced one which was caused due to graded inequality or social hierarchy. Furthermore, he argued that caste could not be safeguarded on the foundation of purity and pollution implemented through the traditional authoritarian system (Ambedkar & Rodrigues, 2002). Thus, Babasaheb opined that the caste as a valid scientific system has no evidence to support it apart from pre-imposed social mores/norms. Furthermore, the notion of caste altered the sense of ethics and morality.

Nonetheless, Babasaheb envisioned two means of annihilating caste system in India (Ambedkar, 1936). These two solutions are mentioned below in a very brief manner:

- 1) Inter-caste marriages: As per him, inter-caste marriages desecrate the sanctity attached to the age-old caste system which was enforced through Shastras and Vedas in Hinduism. Dr Ambedkar observed that higher caste Hindus were against inter-caste marriages because they were not trying to protect the purity and sacredness of their blood. But in reality, they were opposing it because they feared that they might lose their social control and political power over individuals of the lower castes (such as Shudras and Untouchables) graded below in the social hierarchy.
- 2) Sacrilege of ancient religious textbooks: In 1927, Babasaheb publicly burnt *Manusmriti* for being responsible for perpetuating social injustice. Further, he added that any other shastras, including Vedas and Puranas, should also be burnt. As because these books promoted social injustice in Indian society.

In this context, Mahatma Gandhi appreciated Dr Ambedkar's approach in Harijan (newspaper). Gandhiji also added that Dr Ambedkar selected the worst example to outline Hindu shastras. In his reply, Dr Ambedkar criticised Gandhiji's observation that individuals follow Gandhiji for his caste. He also argued that if Gandhiji opposed the notion of the caste system, he might have lost his political space in Indian National Congress (INC). After 74 years of Independence, though the situation has vastly changed, there have been numerous incidents of caste-based discrimination in various parts of India though we observe due appreciation from the government of the day for those who lead the

deserving and meritorious by battling their lower strata in the social hierarchy.

#### Putting forward the notion of Neo-untouchability

The notion of social distancing is not new in origin if we look into the context of untouchability. Even though untouchability in the Indian context is banned under article 17, untouchability is still practised in both rural and urban India, by upper castes and lower castes. These hegemonic practices of social distancing are not only limited to the Dalits but also are apparent among the Tribes. Nevertheless, the Indian Constitution does not explain "untouchability," nor is it clear what constitutes its "practice in any form" or "a disability arising out of 'untouchability'". The term "untouchability" is of relatively contemporary usage; it's very first appearance in published format was in the early 1900s when it gained wide traction in the Indian academic sphere (Paul, 2022).

Untouchability in essence is a state of mind (involving preconscious and unconscious minds) that is prevalent among the so-called upper castes/elites. The upper castes think that individuals belonging to the lower castes are polluted (that is they are physically and/or ritually unclean). Hence, they should never be allowed to enter the kitchen (a sacred place) or use the utensils that the upper-class household members use for consuming food. This is the basic difference maintained through the notions of kaccha (raw) and pakka (cooked) food, along with educational prohibitions. All of these are still prevalent in the 21st century in form of "neo-untouchability" even after so much inoculation of social awareness, governmental legislations and so on.

The "neo-untouchability" sustains its manifestation in Indian society through name-calling, educational gradation, land grabbing, socio-economic sanctions, etc. these are controlled and monopolised by the upper castes. The aforesaid NCRB data showcase the issues of persisting neo-untouchability among the marginalised sections. In general, there are two India which is implicitly divided. The first one is where the citizens follow the de jure Indian Constitution. And, there is the second one wherein hegemonic social practices of graded inequality are ingrained into the minds of individuals. The Manusmriti (or the Laws of Manu) is one such de facto constitution whose fundamental faith is the inescapable inequality based on the prescription of ascribed status during the birth of an individual. This is where the achieved status is considered to be of lesser value in terms of the ascribed status of an individual perpetuated through the caste system. Thus, under such a socially discriminated system, education and the pursuit of business are assigned to certain castes specifically, and not to the marginalised individuals which creates a lop-sidedness for the downtrodden sects (broken people).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar developed the concept of the Broken Man in his seminal work "The Untouchables" (1948). As per Babasaheb, due to the unremitting tribal social conflicts which was the normal life of the tribes. Thus, in a tribal war, it often occurred that a tribe as an alternative to being totally annihilated was conquered to some extent. In some instances, the beaten tribe became segregated (or broken)

into small bands. As a result of this, there always existed in primitive times nomadic/semi-nomadic populations consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions. In terms of social organisation, the ancient members of a society were fundamentally tribal in nature. Herein, every individual in primitive society belonged to a tribe. And, outside the tribe, no individual had any existence. Moreover, the tribal organisation is based on common blood and common kinship an individual born in one tribe could not partake in an alternative tribe and become an affiliate of it. So, the broken men (or broken people) had, to live a nomadic lifestyle.

The aforesaid summary of the unilineal evolution (from savagery to barbarism to civilisation) of simple society exhibits that there was a stint in the life of ancient society when there were two groups i.e., one group consisting of settled tribes faced with the problem of finding a body of men who would do the work of watch and safeguard against the raiders belonging to Nomadic tribes, and the other group consisting of broken men from defeated tribes with the problem in searching of clientele who would provide them with basic amenities (such as food and shelter). However, the notions of terming our ancient societies as primitive seemed to be derogatory. In due course, the term primitive society was altogether dropped from the academic sphere across the world. And, in a contemporary context, the term broken men which were coined by Babasaheb can be altered to broken humans/peoples to refer to both the male and the female from the OBCs, SCs and STs. The notion of broken men was severely critiqued by numerous scholars, but the theoretical abstract still holds some value. This can be seen with the issues that are still now persisting among the members of Gadia Lohar communities residing in the states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and so on. The social issues faced by the members of Gadia Lohar are what neo-untouchability is all about in the era of Cocacolonisation and McDonaldisation (see Ritzer, 1996). In this vein, such historically marginalised communities can be definitely redressed by specially tailored governmental schemes and programmes. Furthermore, Nomadic/Semi-Nomadic communities should be brought under the reservation criteria by the government of the day, so as to provide necessary social benefits to socially integrate such communities into the mainstream populace.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be observed that Babasaheb's notion of caste brought out the true demon from the shadows, i.e., the prevalent discrimination faced by Dalits which is even persistent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reforms Babasaheb Ambedkar introduced in Hindu traditions render him to be a "traditional reformer". But in reality, still, now our Indian society is engulfed in tumultuous casteism in various aspects of life and most western thinkers cannot think of India without its unbalanced casteism (Kannabiran, 2009).

The notions proposed by Dr B. R. Ambedkar on caste cannot be truly negated from a socio-scientific point of view. The presupposition that the lower castes imitate the upper castes despite being repetitively subjugated by the higher castes by itself does not present the ground reality. In this context,

Gail Omvedt (2017) observed that the vehemence of the upper castes and the methods of exclusion cohabit with a utopia, a whole dissimilar world that Dalits have built-in unambiguous contrast, both on the ground through skirmishes and in the revelations of Dalit academics. And, with the thought of the theory of imitation would alter the present situation, ensnares them in a perpetual vicious cycle of subjugation which is evident through caste-based dominance. The proposed annihilation of caste is yet a dream which can be fulfilled through the propositions created by Babasaheb Ambedkar. Casteism is still a burning issue in India, an ever-evolving entity that is fuelled by some individuals for political benefits. The latent nature of neo-untouchability is still widespread in our society that needs to be further studied anthropologically. However, there have been some minute social changes in our society, but the entire reformation is yet to be seen. So, the need of the hour is to revive caste-based studies and to look for new ways to dismantle such an ignominious system of subjugation and traditions.

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