

Theory, Experience and Politics: An Analysis of B. R. Ambedkar's Ideas on Caste, Untouchability and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to integrate Bhimrao Ambedkar's ideas on caste system, untouchability, caste violence and democracy. It is divided into three sections. The first section includes the critique of B. R. Ambedkar's theory of caste system, the Graded Hierarchy. Through a close reading of Ambedkar's early and later texts the paper identifies two critical components that underpin the generation and operation of castes as a system: generative and ranking functions. It explores how ranking is an essential step in the systematization of castes into a hierarchy. It also explains how and why inter-caste and anti-Dalit violence are an integral part of the stabilization of the caste system as a graded hierarchy. The second section narrates Ambedkar's analysis of the state of Dalits under the caste code in Indian villages which he called the lawlessness of lawfulness. It presents his personal documentation of the discrimination, humiliation and violence Dalits experienced at the hands of caste-Hindus and explains how the punitive complex was tactical in the maintenance of the dominance of latter in the village economy where the former were treated as the hereditary bondsmen of their caste-superiors. The final section explores why Ambedkar pursued political power as a means to solve the problems of caste and untouchability and its larger meaning and consequences to his ideas on democracy as associated mode of living.

KEYWORDS: *Ambedkar, Untouchability Graded Hierarchy, Politics, Democracy*

On the Graded Hierarchy: A Critique of Bhimrao Ambedkar's Theory of Caste

The scholars who are familiar with the corpus of Dr B.R Ambedkar recognize that he did not leave behind him a 'theory of untouchability'. He wrote a history about the origins of untouchability where he argued that Dalits were initially Broken Men who later became Untouchables due to Brahmins' ban on them². A scholar and analyst of Ambedkar's calibre were wont to search for causes. For him, untouchability was the effect of the caste system

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²See Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who were they and Why they became Untouchables?*

which Ambedkar theorized as the graded hierarchy. Untouchability is the natural growth out of caste system.

There are two parts to Ambedkar's theory of caste. The first part was fundamental to the generation of the graded hierarchy which fulfilled the *generative function* in his theory of caste. In 1916, as a graduate student in Columbia University, Ambedkar presented a paper titled 'Castes in India: Their Genesis and Mechanism'. Ambedkar argued that castes grew out of endogamy (Ambedkar 14). To emphasise his point he went on to call caste as endogamy (14). He said that caste formations started when groups developed the rule of exclusion which was necessary to the origin and growth of castes. Endogamy was the practice of the rule of exclusion. It must have been Brahmins, or the priestly class (hypothetical first caste) who began the practice of strict endogamy because the pan-Indian prevalence of caste system could be attributed only to the voluntary adoption by other groups. Drawing on the theories of French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, Ambedkar argued that non-Brahmin groups imitated the practice of Brahmins since latter were deemed the superior (18-20). It was one of the social behaviours of groups to imitate their perceived superiors to gain acceptance and status in society. While some groups voluntarily shut their doors to others, the rest found the doors closed against them. Some groups adopted the rule of exclusion and the practice of endogamy voluntarily and others were forced to practice it because they could not procure spouses for their members from elsewhere.

The second part in the theory of graded hierarchy was the *ranking function*. The fuller picture of the ranking-function arguments emerged in the constitutional interventions Ambedkar made during Round Table Conferences and his work *Annihilation of Caste*. In this he developed his theory of graded hierarchy to explain the structure of the caste system that incentivized castes to perpetuate it even at the expense of their social status. Ambedkar had noted, as did researchers before him, the strength of the caste-system was its ability to survive opposition. The caste-system had distinguished opponents throughout its history including the Buddha, the Bhakti saints, and even modern anti-caste movements during Ambedkar's times. Yet it seemed to have weathered and outlived all opposition and managed to adapt and survive. It continued to inform and influence the cultures and ethics of caste-Hindus so much so that they preferred to mobilize and voted as caste blocs when constitutional reforms were initiated by the colonial state in 1919. How did Ambedkar answer this question about caste-system's continued preponderance? Ambedkar's answer to this question was his formulation of ranking-function in his theory of graded hierarchy.

The caste-system survived because it had instituted definite relations between various castes. Castes were not merely ordered but they were ranked from the most superior to most inferior. The Brahmins were the most superior and deserved the greatest respect and the Untouchables were the most inferior and deserved the biggest contempt.

The psychological aspect of the 'ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt' was an important part of caste-system's ranking function. The caste-system had also established definite relations of privileges and obligations which bound every caste to the other in a chain of competing claims and privileges. It meant higher the position of a caste was in the graded hierarchy greater the number of privileges it possessed against the lower castes and lower the position in graded hierarchy greater the number of obligations the caste owed to higher castes. Thus the castes were ranked in the graded hierarchy.

Since castes possessed privileges against the so-called lower castes these were most jealous about exercising them. The inter-caste rivalry and caste violence were designed to enforce the ranking system of caste and secure the privileges of the higher castes against the lower castes. The relatively lower-castes too were keen to secure their privileges against the lowest castes. Their violence was not merely intended to sustain the ranking of the caste-system and secure the privileges but these were also intended to secure their position in the caste (and often village) hierarchy. The caste-system incentivized itself through graded hierarchy or the ranking function while it reproduced itself through the rule of exclusion and practice of endogamy or the generative function.

Ranking Function and the Stabilization of the Graded Hierarchy

Is there a stronger causal link between generative and ranking functions? A close reading of Ambedkar's texts reveals that it is possible to derive the ranking function from the generative function of caste. The reason lies in Ambedkar's interpretation of Gabriel Tarde's 'laws of imitation'. Ambedkar wrote that after Brahmins adopted endogamy other social groups either voluntarily adopted it to attain greater social status or were forced by the circumstances to do so (Ambedkar 18). However, there is a catch in Ambedkar's reasoning. The Brahmins initiated the caste programme (the practice of endogamy on the basis of the rule of exclusion) to distinguish themselves from the rest of the society and reify the distinction through heredity. The uncontrolled imitation by other groups would defeat the caste programme. The unregulated imitation of Brahmins would render it near-impossible for Brahmins to distinguish themselves from others and the former would be unable to resist the claims to Brahminhood of the 'imitators'. As of yet nothing separated the Brahmins from the non-Brahmins in the outward manners. Therefore, Brahmins (or the hypothetical first-caste) must have introduced 'counter-imitation' strategies. The counter-imitation strategies were a set of tactics adopted by Brahmins to check the uncontrolled imitation by other groups. Thus, the original purpose of ranking was to stabilize the generation and profusion of castes and make it serve its purpose: to distinguish and reify the difference.

The ranking system ordered castes into an 'ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt'. A closer attention to its functioning reveals another feature,

the 'norm of proximity' i.e. the closer a caste was to the Brahmins the higher its rank in the caste-system and greater their prestige and privileges vis-à-vis other castes, and the more distant a caste was from that of Brahmins the lesser its rank and bigger its obligations to the others. In fact, the entire ranking of castes can be interpreted through the prism of consequences of proximity. The Brahmins were not merely the first caste; they were not only primary but the norm.

The castes were not arbitrarily ranked castes but ranked according to the *norm of proximity*, the norm being Brahmins. As Ambedkar noted the pan-Indian prevalence of caste-system was due to its adoption by other groups. A group had to follow these two rules to transform themselves into a caste: firstly, adopt the rule of exclusion and secondly, institute endogamy within a circle of kinship which will become the caste. But the dissenting groups who did not subscribe to these rules could raid the castes' settlements and procure brides and the caste programme would be foiled.

That is why only Brahmins or groups that enjoyed prestige and the power of social status (hypothetical first castes) could have begun the process of caste formation. It ensured that others did not violate the codes of new social formations out of fear and respect. Other groups' imitation of Brahmins ensured that their plan to become a caste was secure because others too had started to identify themselves as castes. It showed that imitation at the earliest stages was essential for the plans of the hypothetical first-caste to succeed but uncontrolled imitation later would bring their plans to nought. Therefore, ranking (as a counter-imitation technique), was aimed at regulating imitation and not its destruction. The Brahmins must have permitted certain groups already close to them or in their interest to keep close to imitate them the closest although not fully. Those castes that had the privilege to imitate Brahmins the most became closer to them and higher in the graded hierarchy. It also meant that these castes owed obligations only to Brahmins and could claim privileges against others. Thus, the graded hierarchy was stabilized by the ranking system.

The ranking function continues to regulate and stabilize the graded hierarchy as is evidenced by the reports of inter-caste rivalry and caste violence. Often the lower castes and Dalits were attacked because they tried to imitate the customs and practices of higher castes. It could be the adoption of a new dressing style or wearing of ornaments or getting enrolled into school—novelties which violated the boundaries of caste regulation on imitation. Ambedkar himself recorded the instances of such violence in his unfinished manuscript 'Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto'³. The annexure he attached

³His writings compared the experience of Untouchables with the experience of minorities in the West especially Jews in Europe and Blacks in the US. For more see Ambedkar, *Untouchables or the Children of India's Ghetto* p.p. 9-18. To read about institutions similar to untouchability elsewhere in the world see Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future*. p.p. 24-25

with his written testimony to Simon Commission recorded numerous instances of caste violence (Ambedkar 447-458). For Ambedkar, at the heart of the untouchability lie the feelings of 'disgust' and 'revulsion' by caste Hindus for Untouchables.

Lawlessness of Lawfulness: Untouchables, Caste Code and the Indian Villages

The fate of Untouchables under Hindu law was summed up by Ambedkar when he called it the 'lawlessness of lawfulness' (Ambedkar 35). The phrase was intended to convey the paradoxical position in which Untouchables lived. Under caste restrictions of Hindu law they were abandoned to a degraded life and when transgressed they were liable to meet horrendous punishments. Being inside the law was as good as being outside of it. The most peculiar feature of untouchability was that it included by its exclusion. It was a state of affairs in which exclusion of groups was integral to the system but so was their inclusion in servile roles. Indian villages were the primary locations of caste-system and caste-economy. The caste-Hindu villagers followed rural caste-codes which discriminated and disciplined Untouchables so much so that any violation by the latter was treated as a matter of severe insubordination.

According to Ambedkar, Indian villages were not a single unit but divided between 'touchables' (dominant, majority) and Untouchables (weak, minority). The Untouchables lived outside villages in separate, designated colonies. The social structure was such that Untouchables existed as the 'hereditary bondsmen' of touchable or caste Hindu villagers (Ambedkar 20-21). The lives of Untouchables in/out of Indian villages were marked by humiliation, discrimination and exploitation. The 'terms of associated life' as Ambedkar was wont to put it, was designed to stamp the superiority of caste Hindus and inferiority of Untouchables. Ambedkar gives the general code of life in Indian villages and the list of 'offences' the Untouchables are warned against committing:

1. The Untouchables must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the Untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation;
2. The quarters of the Untouchables must be located towards the South, since the South is the most inauspicious of the four directions. A breach of this rule shall be deemed to be an offence;
3. The Untouchable must observe the rule of distance pollution or shadow of pollution as the case may be. It is an offence to break the rule;
4. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to acquire wealth, such as land or cattle;
5. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to build a house with tiled roof;
6. It is an offence for a member of an Untouchable community to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments;
7. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to give high sounding names to their children. Their names be such as to indicate

contempt; 8. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu; 9. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village; 10. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to take a procession of Untouchables through the village; 11. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community not to salute a Hindu; 12. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to speak a cultured language; 13. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community, if he happens to come into the village on a sacred day which the Hindus treat as the day of fast and at or about the time of the breaking of fast; to go about speaking, on the ground that their breath is held to foul the air and the food of the Hindus; 14. It is an offence for an Untouchable to wear the outward marks of a Touchable and pass himself as a Touchable; 15. An Untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as— (a) having a contemptible name (b) not wearing clean clothes. (c) Not having tiled roof. (d) Not wearing silver and gold ornaments. A contravention of any of these rules is an offence' (Ambedkar 21-22).

Next were the duties which the Code requires members of the Untouchable community to perform for touchables.

1. A member of an Untouchable community must carry a message of any event in the house of a Hindu such as death or marriage to his relatives living in other villages no matter how distant these villages may be;
2. An Untouchable must work at the house of a Hindu when a marriage is taking place, such as breaking fuel, and going on errands;
3. An Untouchable must accompany a Hindu girl when she is going from her parent's house to her husband's village no matter how distant it is;
4. When the whole village community is engaged in celebrating a general festivity such as Holi or Dasara, the Untouchables must perform all menial acts which are preliminary to the main observance;
5. On certain festivities, the Untouchables must submit their women to members of the village community to be made the subject of indecent fun. These duties have to be performed without remuneration. Moreover, 'to realise the significance of these duties, it is important these duties have to be performed without remuneration' (Ambedkar 21-22).

The caste-violence of graded hierarchy was meted out to them so as to maintain their servility, and the immutability of the graded hierarchy. The servile economic relations tied to the practice of '*begar*' which gave caste-Hindus the right to extract unpaid labour, often

forced, from Untouchables (Ambedkar 55-56). They could not refuse to comply with the orders of caste-superiors and those who did were subjected to humiliating punishments. His recounting of one of these reported incidents is an eye opener for those who advocated for Gandhian approach to eradicate untouchability:

On 29th November 1938, the Jatavs of village Kohana, district Muttra were seriously tortured by the Jats and Brahmins for refusing Begar. The Thakkurs and the Brahmins of this village used to extract Begar from the Jatavs and to harass them. The latter decided not to do Begar and do only that work for which wages were paid. Recently, a bullock died in the village and the Thakkurs and other caste Hindus tried to force the Jatavs to lift it, but they said that they could do that only if they were paid. This enraged the caste Hindus so much that they asked a sweeper to fill the Jatavs' well with excreta and make them not to go to their fields for ablutions and decided to tease them in every way. When the Jatavs prevented the Sweeper from putting excreta in their well, he called the Jats, Thakkurs and Brahmins who were all ready for an attack. They attacked the Jatavs with lathis and seriously belaboured them and also set fire to their houses as a result of which six houses were burnt to ashes and 18 Jatavs were wounded seriously and a lot of their household property was taken away by the rowdies (Ambedkar 56).

Another one was a *punitive complex* which inflicted legal, sexual, physical and psychological and financial torture and humiliation.

Mehraji Kori, a Scheduled Caste woman has filed a complaint in the court of Mr. Mahboob Alam, City Magistrate under Sections 376, 341 and 354-A against Brahma Singh, Suleman and Aftab, constables of Jubi Police post. It is alleged that at about 10-30 p.m. on 2nd May 1945 these three constables, Sumar, Kahar, Kallu Bibis son and some others came and searched her house and then took her to the police station and kept her there for the whole night. In the early hours of the morning these constables took her to a small room bolted it and then all three of them violated her modesty one by one. Then she was removed to another small room where charcoal and pieces of paper were filled in her private part and they put their private organs in her mouth. Her clothes were torn and saturated with blood. The following day her mother was forced to do begar work for the whole day and then both of them were left off at 10 p.m. (Ambedkar 56-57)

This is the experience and ethnography from which might have emerged the most passionate and sophisticated of Ambedkar's political and legal arguments. The twin

contingencies of murder and slavery Dilip Menon wrote about were only parts of even more humiliating complex of experience for Untouchables in Indian villages.⁴

These cases also have striking contemporariness. The ‘atrocities’ of caste violence which combines different aspects of untouchability such as religious, social, economic and even sexual is a peculiar feature of the phenomenon of caste violence which Teltumbde calls ‘atrocities’ (Teltumbde 29-31). In *The Persistence of Caste* Teltumbde writes about Bhotmanges, a Dalit family in Maharashtra who were tortured and killed off in 2006 by caste Hindu village mob because the former refused to accept the dictates of the latter. Khairlanji Murders, as it came to be known, acquired notoriety for more than one reason. Teltumbde argues that one of the emerging features of caste violence in post sixties India is that this violence is ‘atrocious’ i.e. caste violence of recent times is more than violent and it is atrocious. The fate of Bhotmanges is an example of this kind of atrocity. Teltumbde has narrated how father of Bhotmange household managed to escape but wife and daughter were raped multiple times and tortured before being killed off. The son was forced to watch this inhuman atrocity and, before he was killed and their bodies dumped, his genitals were mutilated. Teltumbde is clear on this point: the atrocity of caste-violence in contemporary India is a technique of execution, in which victims are humiliated and tortured because they dared to transgress. These atrocities are part of *punitive expeditions* of upper castes against Dalits to teach them a ‘lesson’ and show them their ‘place’ in the hierarchy. Even ‘crimes’ and ‘transgressions’ as silly as wearing a shirt could be penalised by caste Hindus. In one form or another Dalits are seen to violate the ban of untouchability and be socially mobile which were the monopoly of their masters was in caste system. If we read Ambedkar’s chronicling of Dalit experience, in conjunction with the theory of Graded Hierarchy, it seems that the ‘atrocities’ has a longer lineage than one Teltumbde ascribes.

Caste, Untouchability and Democracy

In terms of ideas, beliefs and values lower castes and untouchables are ritually barred from imitating upper castes in their ritual practices, mode of worship and social existence. The biggest impediment to solidarity or the emergence of an Indian society on democratic grounds was caste because caste-system did not permit the practice of ‘sharing things in common’ or ‘holdings common beliefs and values’. The pervasive spirit of exclusion

⁴ Dilip Menon, in his *Blindness of Insight*, says that the lives of lower castes and untouchable castes hinged upon two contingencies. One was the contingency of their murder at the hands of their upper-caste landlords and second was the contingency of slavery and forced separation from their families and homes. Menon is speaking about the lives of untouchables in Malabar, part of British India, and other Malayalam-speaking princely states. The fates of untouchables were not any different in other parts of India. At the heart of his analysis is the awareness that Dalit experience in Kerala was merely symptomatic of the pan-Indian reality of untouchability. See Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, chap. “Caste and Colonial Modernity” pp. 110-142.

animates the entire structure of caste-system. The caste-system prevents social endosmosis or communication across castes in a society, because every caste is jealous and protective of its privileges and acquisitions. In every way castes are contrary to the principle and practice of democracy i.e. of solidarity in associated mode of life. The lack of channels of communications between castes is deliberate and in-built in the system and Ambedkar hoped that (in the first phase of his career) through re-establishing the channels of communication a democratization of society were possible.

The novelty of Ambedkar's radical politics lies in his proposed primary solution to the problem of caste and untouchability: political power for Dalits. While the elite section of Indian national movement perceived caste and untouchability as questions of social reform, Ambedkar placed it squarely within the realm of politics by demanding the rights of suffrage and safeguards such as reservation and designated electorates. He advocated for and demanded the presence of Dalits in the public spaces and institutions of the country including government schools, bureaucracy, police and armed forces, legislatures and executive.

Ambedkar's advocacy of political solution to the problems of caste and untouchability rested on two grounds: firstly, untouchability and its associated disabilities is singular and unique to untouchables and only genuine representatives of untouchables can effectively articulate them; secondly, the politics will bring caste-Hindus and Dalits, along with other minorities, together into the common space of legislature. Thus, the exclusionary anti-social spirit of the caste system would be broken. This is because representatives of various communities who represent in their persons the interests and problems of their communities will interact and understand each other's problems. The presence and dialogue between representatives of various communities will build mutual trust and better empathy for each other's problems, especially that of untouchables. Constitutional safeguards such as reservations in legislature and executive, designated electorates for Dalits, far from being means of divisive politics, was an instrument of solidarity that could be used to build understanding, empathy and trust between various contending rival factions in Indian society. A demand that was one of assertion was also one of reconciliation.

For Ambedkar, like his mentor John Dewey⁵, democracy was not merely electoral politics but a value-laden system of social life. The democratic way of life was marked by

⁵To read more about the influence of John Dewey's ideas (democracy as associated life and social communication as social endosmosis) on B.R Ambedkar see Mukherjee, "B.R. Ambedkar, John Dewey and the Meaning of Democracy." *New Literary History*, 345-370. For more on Ambedkar and Dewey see Das, "Encountering John Dewey's 'Pragmatism' In an Indian Context: Ambedkar's Critique of War, Violence and Nationalism" *Dewey Studies* 2 No. 3, 125-142. On Ambedkar, Dewey and Pragmatism see Stroud "Creative Democracy, Communication, And the Uncharted Sources of Bhimrao Ambedkar's Deweyan Pragmatism."

its ideal of 'sharing things in common'. Ambedkar repeatedly argued that a democratic society will hold beliefs and values and things in common, that it will be animated by a social spirit. A society that holds common beliefs and values and shares its spaces will be a society of free and equal members. As Ambedkar was wont to say, following Dewey, the democratic ideal is exemplified in the slogan of French Revolution, 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. Likewise, a democratic society is that society where its members are free and equal and have a sense of like-mindedness (fraternal feeling)⁶. A democratic society will be a society of solidarity, that which has commonality and that which is aware of its commonality. Please note that Dewey described democracy in terms of society and the lives of people (or how they lived out their lives vis-à-vis each other). He was not referring to the political or electoral side of democracy. The political aspect of democracy, as played out through elections, were a crucial component of Ambedkar's views on democracy because, unlike his teacher Dewey, he was both a thinker and politician who worked hard to consolidate Dalits and win political power for them.

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⁶ Rudolf Heredia calls this 'solidarity' (xii)

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