

Consider the argument that untouchables hold alternative views of the caste system which challenge and reject those of higher castes.

In Indian literature there is a natural system of social organization, which can bring about a peaceful society where everyone is happy. This system is described as Varnasrama dharma (Caste System). The caste system was created so that people of all merits and positions could make spiritual and economic advancements in life. The perpetuation of the caste system however was a result of many influences. The two main reasons both derive from the majority religion, even today, in India, Hinduism. The first point is Samsara (reincarnation), was one factor that contributed to the continuity of the caste system. The second was karma (the sum of merits of a person at any given time in their life). These two factors alone may be the only reason the caste system has endured so long in Indian society.

The castes, which are the elite of the Indian society, were classified as high castes referred to as 'Brahmins', separation of these Brahmins from other classes is one of several indications of social status. For the higher classes, caste was determined by birth - you fell into the same caste as your parents, and there was almost no way to change it. The caste system dictated your occupation, choice of spouse, and many other aspects of your life. If you did something outside your caste, you could be excommunicated from your caste. That would cut you off from doing any work to support yourself because you could only do the jobs allowed by your caste. Members of the other caste system could not strive in any form to be placed higher or be considered as a different caste. Being a Brahmin was almost like taking the role of priests and to be born into this category was considered godly, and of virtuous status.

Rules are guided by and determined by the Brahmin caste. For example, "one can rank the high castes in order on the basis of whether the Brahmin will accept water, fried food, or boiled food from them; and one can rank the low castes in descending order on the basis of whether their contact pollutes water" (Dumont 80). It's as though the Brahmins set the dietary eating habits for others. A Brahmin eats alone or in a small "pure" square.

He must bathe, and his torso is bare. Usually an image of a deity is brought to the kitchen for offerings before eating can be started. If a Brahmin sees an impure woman, child, or person of a lower caste, food is then considered not edible (139). "Food, accordingly, continues to be the mainstay of daily orthodoxy and rituals" (Khare 103).

The communities that were classified as lower castes or lower classes, from which the Brahmins kept their hierarchy distance, included communities of the untouchables. These untouchables call themselves Dalit, meaning depressed. The untouchables in Hindu society were the people who worked in what were seen as unhealthy, disgusting or polluting jobs. Untouchables live separately within a sub cultural context of their own, outside the inhabited limits of villages and townships, made pariahs in every sense of the word. No other castes could, or would, interfere with their social life since untouchables were lower in social ranking than even those of the shudras. The distribution between pure and impure does not account for all the distinctions or segmentation of caste" (Dumont 45). The separation of the caste system is shown by the impurity of the Untouchables. The Untouchables may not use the same wells as the others, access of Hindu temples was forbidden until the Gandhi reform, and many other numerous disabilities (Dumont 47). Other means of impurity are, hygiene, death, and the menstrual cycle. The Brahmins do not bury their own dead; instead persons of a lower caste do the work. In India the washer man takes care of bedding soiled by the events of birth and menstruation (48). Untouchables were subservient, almost always illiterate, and usually poverty stricken (Schulberg 142). The Untouchables basically led a life of long humiliation, where higher caste members inflicted some of this humiliation upon untouchables. These inequalities among castes are considered by the Hindu faithful to be part of the divinely ordained natural order, and are expressed in terms of purity and pollution.

However many believe the caste system began as a form of subjugation of local populations by the Aryan peoples who invaded and settled India. The Aryans were in the higher castes, and they put the native peoples of the subcontinent into the lower castes. The system favored those at the top economically, so they were motivated to maintain the

status quo. Both Buddhism and Jainism sought to reform the caste system, but were unsuccessful.

While the caste system is not explicitly religious, the Hindu religion has played a large part in maintaining its structure. Hinduism preaches a cycle of birth and reincarnation, in which a person's soul is reborn into a new form after death. Your actions in this life determine your fate when you are born again. If you are faithful and dutiful in this life, next time, you'll get a better lot. The caste system fits well with this belief. Lower-caste people believed that if they lived a good life, they could be reborn in a higher caste in the next. But to sustain current life within their caste system, did not mean that they were to be treated like the dirt of the society. Surely, untouchables served a submissive role within society so why should they be hated. This view often challenged the views of the upper class system; of playing the roles they were given to show society of your identity.

However to eliminate these views and to allow the untouchables to be acknowledged in society, Mahatma Gandhi wanted the society to view the untouchables in a different light, to be accepted. It was only until the late 1980s that he termed them Harijan, meaning children of God, who were serving the higher castes, and cleaning their duties as servants. Mahatma Gandhi was an untouchable himself, who wanted to eliminate discrimination among the untouchables, allowing them to move to different caste systems in terms of their individual success, abolishing untouchability; a class perhaps created by the upper class for exploiting purposes through the use of hierarchy. This opposed the views of the higher castes, from the belief that being able to move to other classes was something that was not possible in society as it went against the teachings of the Brahmins. But Gandhi wanted to break down the barriers that were raised upon the untouchables giving them a sense of justice, rights they deserved and a better life for their coming generation.

Dumont's major work, *Homo Hierarchus*, takes caste in India as a unique system, intimately connected with Hinduism. He views it as the supreme example in the world of the recognition of hierarchy as a fact of social life, and in its shifting levels and logics of purity/pollution, encompassing/encompassed, the extreme purity of the Brahmins at the

top requires as its antithesis the extreme pollution of the Untouchable at the bottom. In insisting on this core role of Hinduism in defining caste, Dumont in fact has much in common with Ambedkar.

Ambedkar like Gandhi, Born into a poor Untouchable community; spent his life fighting against the system of Hindu untouchability and the Indian caste system. Breaking the laws of untouchables, Ambedkar became one of the first "untouchables" to obtain a college education in India and taking a step in creating education institutions for untouchables, waging a social battle against the upper caste Hindus. He was made the first Law Minister in Prime Minister, Nehru's rule; Ambedkar provided millions of untouchables an alternate religion where they find dignity, compassion and equality. And it was then when he publicly renounced Hinduism and accepted Buddhism.

This period of Shudras came to a serious crisis, when Buddha began to reject the entire doctrine of the Veda's and preached equality as against caste. It is one of the great events of human history when the people of most parts of India were converted to the preaching of Buddha, in his own lifetime. Later his teaching spread to most other neighbouring countries. And it was only then untouchables felt that this was the only escape out of their caste class. The period of revivalism of Hinduism was marked by great tensions between the low castes and Brahmins. The Brahmins tried to establish their hegemony as the superior caste and to have their position accepted by all. The Low Castes rejected this. This internal struggle had determined the characterisation of untouchables even by the colonial officers of the British Empire. The distinguishing features of untouchables, according to a census circular issued by Census Commissioner in 1911, are these: "they deny the supremacy of Brahmins, do not receive Mantra from a Brahmin or otherwise recognize Hindu Guru, deny the authority of Vedas, do not worship Hindu Gods, are not served by good Brahmins as family priests, have no Brahmin priests at all, are denied access to interior of Hindu temples, cause pollution (a) by touch, or (b) within a certain distance, bury their dead and eat beef and not reverence the cow."

Thus while the Shudras period was marked by the imposition of Veda's doctrine and at least considering Shudras as lower in the ladder of Hindu caste structure, the

untouchability resulted in creating the total outcasts. Physically this meant ousting the untouchables even from their habitats and pushing them into a ghetto. Ambedkar called them, people of the Indian ghetto. All forms of contact were forbidden by the use of rules of untouchability.

Proponents of the caste system argue that it actually provides many benefits to its followers. It provides humans with the main desires that a religion provides. It gives the people of this religion a social structure that encourages closeness with other members from your class and Jati. It gives the individual a meaning in life, even if that meaning is in the act of being a servant. There is a goal and a purpose. It also dictates what is right and wrong. The caste system has the advantage of laying it right out, and giving people a place in society that no one has to fight for. Though a person may not be able to raise his or her caste within his lifetime, neither can his or her caste be lowered. It enables them to spend their energy doing their dharma to the best of their abilities, to help improve their karma so that perhaps next time they will move up to a higher class. 'Since it is accepted that one's caste is determined by one's past karma, there is no reason to be bitter about one's lot or envy others' (Ludwig, 109).

However, due to the flawed nature of humans, the caste system has not been implemented as the Vedas instruct. The system has come to be a hierarchy wherein the lowest levels, are not given the respect commanded in the religious texts (Embry, 27). The result of the corruption of the original system has been the destruction of the entire social structure in India and the "caste" system, the system is now being used by the rich to exploit and oppress the poor.

This could be one reason why, even with the caste system having been dissolved on the official level by the Indian government, caste-based discrimination continues to be a hardship on lower-casted Indians when it comes to employment, government, and economic upward mobility in general. Today, though things are undoubtedly better for the lower castes, due to the introduction in India of programs similar to America's affirmative action policies, and the offer of free education for all Indian citizens, there is

still a long way to go to ensure complete and genuine equality for those whose dignity suffers under this system.

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Chris McDonaugh class lecture notes on week2, 3 and week4

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