CHAPTER 3

Caste and Subaltern Consciousness: The Ideological Foundation of Untouchability
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After having discussed the social context of Dalit History and analysing the course of Dalit movements and contrasting styles of Gandhi and Ambedkar’s leadership it is pertinent to discuss the caste prejudices based on its ideological foundation. The institution of untouchability has been legally abolished but in practice it still continues to affect the society as Dalits are still subjected to inhuman treatment. They are still not allowed to enter temple, have an access to water and denied access to public places. There have been several incidents of dalits being harassed, discriminated and subjected to atrocities of the worst nature even after 60 years of India’s independence. The question of untouchability however, is linked with the hierarchical gradation of individuals in a caste-ridden Indian society. In order to understand the evolution of untouchability in India we must have some idea about the nature of social inequality. As a matter of fact social inequality has been a general problem of all contemporary societies.

The literature on social inequality of different societies present before us situations varied in nature and substance. While historians have tried to understand the nature of inequality at macro level over time and space, sociologists have pointed out its distributive and relational dimension. The distributive aspects refer to the ways in which different factors such as income, wealth, occupation, education,
power, skill etc., are distributed among population. Second, that is relational aspect refers to the ways in which individual differentiated by these criteria are related to each other within a system of groups and categories.

When we examine the question of untouchability keeping in mind both the distributive and the relational dimension, we find that the manner in which the practice of untouchability was prevalent in India, it constituted both these dimensions.

**Nature of Social Inequality**

While sociologist’s distinction of distributive and relational aspect of social inequality might find justification for empirical research, the historians by and large tend to have an integrated perspective on nature and substance of social inequality. Despite this we must make a distinction on the notion of inequality in at least two respects: First, we must distinguish between inequality of natural capability and those of social position; second, we must make a distinction between inequalities that do not involve any evaluative rank order and those that do. R. Dahrendorf has talked about four types of inequality by combining two approaches mentioned above and they are: (a) natural differences of kind in features, characters and interests and (b) natural differences of rank in intelligence, talent and strength (c) social differentiation or positions essentially equal in rank and (d) social stratification based on reputation and wealth and expressed in rank order of social status. Obviously when Dahrendorf talked about the stratification based on reputation and wealth and
expressed in rank order of social status he perhaps had in mind the nature of institutionalised inequality i.e., the inequality of the sort that gives legitimacy to socio-political character of the society. It seems it is the institutionalised character of inequality that has attracted the attention of the scholars like Karl Marx and Max Weber who discussed its from and character in the development of industrial society. Rousseau, a noted political thinker had also made distinction between natural and social inequality. First he calls 'natural' or 'physical' and second, he calls moral or political. It is the second type of inequality conceived by him that is, of political and moral type that has some relevance for us when we historically examine the genesis and ideology of untouchability.

Amratya Sen in one of his writings on, 'Inequality Reexamined' first published in 1995 has analysed two central issues for ethical analysis of equality and they are: (a) why equality? And (b) equality of what? While addressing ethical issues concerning inequality he observes, “inequality in terms of one variable (e.g. income) may take us in a very different direction from inequality in the space of another variable (e.g. functioning ability or well being)... The relative advantages and disadvantages that people have compared with each other can be judged in terms of many different variables-income, wealth, utilities, resources, liberties, rights, quality of life and so on.” ³ Thus the plurality of variables on which social inequality can be evaluated may vary from society to society. The problem of the choice of the evaluative space in terms of what Amratya Sen calls
'focal variables' is crucial to analysing inequality. In view of the traditional caste based Indian social structure it is pertinent to examine here the Dalit's status in the social hierarchy where caste may be identified as the focal variable.

The relevance of Ambedkar's perspective lies in the fact that he questioned structural principles in which the caste system had justified inequality. By virtue of the fact that he was born in a low caste group (which were subjected to unprecedented inhuman and discriminatory treatment), his experience and observation on the question of untouchability sharply brought into focus the dubious grounds on which a particular group was singled out and made to lead a degraded life. It was not a question of destiny but a question of sinister human designs that made them suffer form centuries.

Unlike Ambedkar, Gandhi had witnessed the racial discrimination in South Africa and after his return from Africa in several of his public speeches, statements on the subject he described untouchability as a sinful excrecence upon Hinduism. As a reformer and imbibing saintly virtues he appealed to the caste Hindus to do penance, to purify themselves and Hinduism, while urging the untouchables to observe cleaner habits. The ideological precept of Varnashrama dharma was so deep set in the minds of Gandhi that he considered it a healthy division of labour recognised by birth. However, he questioned the veracity of treating people polluting by birth.
Principles of Varnasramadharma

Ancient Indian Society was governed by the principles of varnasramadharma. So far as the principle of Varnasrama is concerned it was supposed to have prepared a ground for general norms of conduct which recognised class differentiation. Rightly observed A. L. Basham when he stated, "This thoroughgoing recognition that men are not the same, and that there is a hierarchy of classes; each with its separate duties and distinctive way of life, is one of the most striking features of ancient Indian Sociology".

The dictum of Varnasramadharma dominated the organisations of groups and classes within ancient Indian society. The reference of untouchables within the scheme seems to be shrouded in mystery. Therefore, Louis Dumont (1972: 72) examined the extension of Varna scheme at two levels; One at empirical level and another at the level of ideology. However, at both the levels situation is so varied and the social standing of the groups so complicated that no definite view about the explanations offered in the traditional religious texts can be accepted as the only explanation for the genesis of untouchability in India. In order to have a proper understanding of the origin of Untouchability both in empirical and at the cognitive level i.e., at the level of ideology and systems of belief, we propose to examine the question of the genesis of Untouchability by providing a sociological analysis and relevance of Ambedkars’ perspective on it. The present chapter is divided into two sections. First section deals with the reviews of historical explanation offered for underlining the genesis of
Untouchability both at empirical and at the ideological level. And the second section deals with the views explicitly expressed by Ambedkar on the origins of Untouchability.

**Genesis of Untouchability**

According to the traditional historical source regarding the genesis of Untouchability in ancient times, it is believed that traditionally mixed castes were enumerated as Untouchables. According to R. S. Sharma such groups (namely – Nisadas, Ayogavas, Medas, Andhras, Cuncus, Madgus, Ksattrs, Pukkanas, Dhigvanas and Venas) were required to live outside villages. He further stressed that these untouchables lived outside Brahminic settlements. He observed: “Food vessels used by them were discarded forever. Their sole property consisted of dogs and donkeys; they took their food in broken dishes used ornaments of iron and clothes of dead people and wandered form place to place. They were not permitted to appear in towns and villages at night where they could work only during the day. They could not enter into any transactions with other regarding marriage, debt, loan etc... members of the higher Varnas should not give them even grain with their own hands”6

Referring to the divisions within the **Varna** scheme historians are of the opinion that the untouchable’s position was even lower than the Shudras. Rightly observes A. L. Basham: “Shudras were of two kinds, ‘pure’ or not excluded (anirvasita) and excluded (nirvasita). The latter were quite outside the pale of Hindu society and were

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virtually indistinguishable from the great body of people later known as untouchables.\textsuperscript{7}

Historian's standard argument about the origin of untouchables is to see them as the condemned lot of tribal people who were condemned to the position of untouchable by the Brahmins which accounted for their seclusion from the rest of the people. A noted historian has also provided an explanation suggesting that the Nisadas signified aborigines in general rather one particular tribe with separate groups entity.\textsuperscript{8}

According to N. K. Dutt, Nisadas belonged to a pre Dravidian stock who remained unabsorbed by the Dravidians. Noted social anthropologists D. N. Majumdar, H. H. Risley and J. H. Hutton have all pointed out Nisadas having affinity with aboriginal groups.

R. S. Sharma has also pointed out that in a somewhat limited manner the Brahminisation process started and this was a process of taking them back into the Aryan fold. N. K. Dutt maintains that they were slowly assimilated into the Brahminical society as a fifth caste. Thus theoretically speaking the Varna scheme did not recognise fifth Varna explicitly but reference of Nisadas signifies the fifth order of Vedic society.

Yet another argument advanced by the historians suggests the origin of untouchables by accepting the explanation of Dharmasutras. According to Dharmasutra the humble position of Untouchables referred to the violation of the caste norms. It was the inter-mixture of caste through marriage that accounted for the humble position of the
untouchables. R. S. Sharma points out that the “marriage with women of lower caste was permissible the Dharmasutras show great aversion for connection of the reverse type... It is mostly of such marriage and connections that the early law books trace the origin of about a dozen mixed (Varanasakara) castes”. Gautama pointed out that a son begotten by a shudra on women of unequal caste was regarded as patita. The issue begotten by a Shudra as women of the Kshatriya Varna is known as Ksattr and the one begotten on a female of the vaishya caste as a Magadha and the son of a Shudra by a Brahmin woman is branded as a Candala and son of a Brahmin by a Shudra woman is called a Nisada. R. S. Sharma points out that in the “opinion of the Dharmasutras anuloma (in regular order) and pratiloma (inverted order) connections between the shudra and members of the higher Varnas were regarded as the most plentiful source of the origin of the mixed castes. Many of whom were relegated to the position of untouchables. Most of these mixed castes were nothing more than backward tribes, who were annexed to the four original and recognised Varnas by giving them a wholly arbitrary genesis”.

The theory regarding intermixture is also viewed in the context of Nisada. Referring to the different sources namely the Dharmasutras of Baudhayana, Gautama and Vasistha, the Arthasastra of Kautilya, the Smritis of Manu, Vajnavalkya, Narada, Usanas and Vaikhanasa and the Anusasana Parva, V. Jha advances three different theories. First he calls Nisadas – to be a cross between a Brahmina
and his Shudra wife. Second that is Gautama assigns the birth of the Nisada to a Brahmin father and a vaishya mother. Third source i.e. the Anusasana Parva, attribute Nisada origin to be associated with Kshatriya and Shudra parentage. Thus, it is the hypergamous association of anuloma type which may account for the Nisada origin but theoretically genesis of this sort remains a pure legal fiction. That means over time such groups must have been forced down the social scale and they were relegated to the position of Untouchable.\textsuperscript{10}

Manu categorically mentioned that there were only four \textit{Varnas} which implied the mixed unions being put under Shudra Varna. Distinguishing the Brahmins from the rest it recognised the loss of Brahminhood if a Brahmin had intercourse with Shudra. And in case it is done deliberately he gets their status. Finally R. S. Sharma concludes: “it seems that the mixed castes and the untouchables were being absorbed as inferior Shudras who were distinguished from the ordinary shudras by their separate habitations, backward culture and primitive religious beliefs”.\textsuperscript{11}

G. S. Ghurye has attributed the origins of untouchability by relating it to the theoretical impurity of certain occupations.\textsuperscript{12} The question i.e., worth considering here is why certain occupations were regarded as impure. Manu’s suggestion that untouchable castes are recognised by their occupations recurs in the Anusasana Parvan. And that is the reason why Candalas were employed in the work of cleaning streets, working in the cremations grounds, executing criminals and tracking down thieves at night. Fa-hian narrates that
because of their low occupation they were treated as despised classes and therefore, on approaching the gate of a city or a market place the candala were required to strike a piece of wood to give prior notice of their arrival so that men may not know about them and avoid them.

Tracing the tribal origin of Untouchable caste R. S. Sharma observed: “one of the reasons for the origin of untouchability was a cultural lag of the aboriginal tribes who were mainly hunters and fowlers, in context to the members of Brahminical society who possessed the knowledge of metals and agriculture and were developing urban life”¹³

Providing a plausible materialistic explanation of the Varnashrama scheme R. S. Sharma stated that in a well established agricultural society when families came to acquire resources which they are unable to exploit on their own, they usually procure labour power by force of arms and perpetuate its supply by force of law and custom. To this they add the compulsion generated by religion and ideology. “Such a tendency has been a dominant course of change in many society but the saliency of Indian society is perpetuating graded inequality in a systematic fashion over time lies in the fact that these “different elements of compulsion, physical and ideological were interwoven into a social structure called the Varna System”¹⁴

Further the contrast in material life was accentuated by the spirit of contempt growing in Brahminical society itself. The spirit of contempt saw the gradual withdrawal of the twice-born caste groups from the work of primary production. It tended to be hereditary in
their positions and functions. It later developed contempt for manual work and extended it to the hands that practiced. Rightly observed R. S. Sharma when he stated: “against the background of a very low material culture of the aborigines the increasing contempt for manual work continued with primitive ideas of taboo and impurity associated with certain materials produced the unique social phenomenon of untouchability”

A review of historian’s views on untouchability makes it amply clear that there existed groups below the Shudras called untouchables, outcastes, depressed classes or the Scheduled caste. Their relation with Dwija castes were spelt out by specifying the nature of the opposition between the two extreme categories i.e., Brahmins and Untouchables in particular was quite pronounced. Normative literatures i.e., the literature of the Dharma or religious law treat purification as the main theme.

**Notion of Purity and Pollution**

According to Harita, the purity i.e., called external is of three kinds: having a bearing on the family (Kula), objects of every day use (Artha) and the third one is linked with the body (sarira). Family impurity is the most important and is of lasting nature. Therefore, Louis Dumont has also talked about two main types of impurity i.e., temporary impurity and permanent impurity. For example, a menstruating (or pre-pubertal) woman may not mount her husband funeral pyre; she must wait for four days and after having final bath. A marriage ceremony may be postponed in case of death. But the
impurity associated with birth was treated to be of permanent nature and untouchables were condemned to the lowest ranks in social hierarchy.

Radcliffe Brown has pointed out two major features of caste systems; the first is ‘separatism’ limiting social contact of members. The rules of endogamy prohibit marriage between castes. There are caste rules restricting acceptance of food and drink. The second is ritual inequality—man born as a Brahmin is holy and at the other, lower of the scale are the people now called ‘untouchable’ leather workers, sweepers and so on, who are by birth ‘unclean’ or polluted and with whom contact produces pollution in the members of superior caste.

Pointing out the contrasting nature of relationship, M. N. Srinivas talks about the sanskritic and no sanskritic rituals and beliefs. According to him it is the Sanskritical and non sanskritical elements of rituals and beliefs that distinguished the Brahmins and untouchables into two opposite sections. He observes “the hierarchical system, with the barahmins and untouchables at either end represents fusion of sanskritical and non-sanskritical system of ritual and beliefs.” R. S. Sharma has also stressed upon the element of purity and impurity as a predominant feature of distinction not only between Dwiza and Shudras but also within Shudras. He writes, “the theory of the origin of rich caste through hypergamy (pratiloma) was cleverly used to create a hierarchy of degraded shudras caste, separated by ideas of purity and pollution from one another. The division between the pure
(Sat) and impure (Asat). Shudras become marked from Gupta’s time.”

Subsequently the nature of impurity defined the scale of social distance. According to Murphy a scale of social distance by Radha Kamal Mukherjee gives the following degrees of social avoidance (in ascending order): (1) against sitting on a common floor; (2) against inter dining; (3) against admission in the kitchen; (4) against touching metal pots; (5) against touching earthen pots; (6) against mixing in social festivals; (7) against admittance in the interior of the house; (8) against any kind of physical contact.

While in the social life the relationship between the untouchables and the high castes were reinforced by the normative orders of purity and impurity. At the cognitive level three points emerged sharply: “(1) in people’s consciousness all the criteria of distinction appear as so many different forms of the same principle (2) all permit the operation of an overall dichotomy of the society; (3) this is really the hierarchical principle of which the linear orders of castes from A to Z is in any case only a by-product” Further Louis Dumont has cited six classes contact that can be prepared in order of intensity of contact viz touching your children; touching you; smoking from your pipe; touching your brass utensil; serving you fried food and serving you boiled food.

**Religion and State**

Going by the above explanation of historical and sociological facts regarding the origins of untouchability it is clear that the practice
of untouchability cannot be understood without a proper interpretation of religious texts. An element of mystification surrounding Varna Dharma scheme of organising society provide both socio-legal and religious justification for recognising the class of untouchables and Brahmins. A socio-historical interpretation of Untouchability enables us to develop deep insight into the empirical and juri-dico-political dimensions underlying the relationship between the Brahmins and Untouchables.

There are ample examples to show that segregation of a section of the Hindus resulted into their being precluded form elementary rights and form all practical purposes they were treated as out-castes of the Hindu society. Accordingly social privileges to some and denying it to others on the grounds of castes and religion was the salient features of the most inhuman forms of social oppression practiced through untouchability. Therefore, at the level of system of ideas and values Abeee Dubois thought that caste was a conscious creation or legislators of time past. A. R. Desai rightly observed : "Hallowed with tradition and sanctified by religion, it continued to exist in all its barbarous vigour for centuries"

It is also pertinent to note here the role of State in maintaining the social order of the day by legalising the practice of untouchability. The ancient Hindu philosopher thought that State was an indispensable institution for the orderly existence and progress of society in the imperfect world as known to us in historic times; a country without Government can not exist. State and the king were
described by the Hindu Thinkers as the champion of Varnashrama. It contended that Varna Dharma of the caste system in particular is based upon iniquitous principles: it exalts the brahmins and confers just divine honours upon him while it reduces the shudras and chandalas almost to the position of slaves, denying them the most elementary right of ordinary citizenship. The shudras were prevented from holding property and they were subjected to heavier punishments than those meted out to the Brahmins for identical offences. The chandalas were treated worse than dogs. When the state became a champion of Varnasashramas, it becomes a party to all these iniquities.25

It is important to bear in mind that the British came to India as traders and conquerors and not as social reformers. By the early 19th century their rule and administrative hold began to widen covering all the parts of India. They chose a policy of non-interference. That means they were willing to allow existing social order to continue. Non-interference in due course of time proved elusive for whatever they did by way of effecting policy had its impact on social order. Non-interference however, implied doing what rulers in India had always done i.e., actively upholding and supporting the caste order. Marc Galanter wrote, “... the course were reluctant to interfere with the disciplinary powers of caste against violators of received etiquette of inter-caste relations.”26 Cohn pointed yet another interesting fact when he observed, “the upper caste maintain their economic position, their knowledge of the course and the intricacies of the law and better
access to officials have thwarted attempts to change the position of the lower castes in the village society and economy." Most of the new opportunities and government services were grasped by members of high caste. Ghurye noted that, "Government service was staffed by higher castes and that their traditional attitude to lower castes carried over into govt. work. Marc Galanter pointed a case of Mahar boy who was denied admission to a govt. school in 1856 and his appeal to Bombay Education Dept. was turned down on the ground that it might go against "the great mass of natives." Even after the Bombay govt. declaration that schools maintained by the govt. shall, "open to all classes of its subjects without distinction." Galanter writes, "In regular schools the few untouchables children were subject to invidious segregation – being forced to sit away from others on the Veranda was a typical experience."

The first effort to assist the low castes had come at mid century writes Galanter. He further observes that it came under the auspices of Poona reformer, Jyotiba Phule, who wanted a programme of education and self-help with a thorough going attack on caste. Conversion as a solution to escape the degrading practices of caste stirred Dayanand Sarswati, founder of the Arya Samaj to preach purified Varna and attack caste exclusiveness in its degenerate form. In 1895 Justice M. G. Ranade also took lead in social reform of the untouchables on Hindu Society. As the nationalist movement picked up momentum the caste associations fell into bad repute and caste was blamed for disunity, weakness and lack of civil spirit. Thus the
reversal of Indian National Congress’s long standing policy of excluding social reform from its programme was one of the major gains of national movement. It received further impetus under the leadership of both Gandhi and Ambedkar. The first strings of concern about the untouchables in the 19th century initiated in the form of evangelical approach exemplified by Arya Samaj and Jyotirao Phule. While discussing the contrasting approach and ideological implications of Gandhi and Ambedkar’s approach to untouchability Galanter observes, “If Gandhi personified the evangelical approach, the secular approach was personified by the most gifted and wide ranging spokesman to appear among the untouchables, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.”

Perpetuation of iniquitous Varnadharma was rendered possible because state had its socio-legal and political apparatus to create it. It does not mean that the customs and traditions did not change in ancient India but the change did not bring about any revolutionary shake up in the existing social organisation. The change came through silent operation of social approval and disapproval existing and operating within the broad framework of Varnashrama dharma. The purity of birth continued to bestow all the honours and on the other hand a person born in a shudra family continued to suffer without having any right to resist against the tyrannical setup.
subsequently put pressure on the state to initiate proactive measures to alleviate the conditions of untouchables. The fourth and fifth chapter deals with the views of Gandhi and Ambedkar to evaluate and assess their understanding of caste and untouchability and efforts made by them to do away with this discriminatory and inhuman practice.
Notes and References

10. Vivekanand Jha, op. cit., p. 73.
15. Ibid., p.146.
16. While talking about Varna scheme Louis Dumont also talked about caste system as an extension of Varnas scheme.
17. M. N. Srinivas, Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India, (1952), p. X.
18. Ibid., p.213.
25. Ibid.,p.49.


30. Ibid., p.29.