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Approach

The Untouchable symbolizes several critical social dilemmas of independent India.[1] Whatever he is reflects on the larger society and its values. Although he is now more studied and talked about, he himself remains a social enigma. This is so because he is too readily stereotyped by others while he himself often remains remote and silent. His social voice is still too weak. We should nevertheless record the content and character of his voice at this time because it comments significantly on his transforming ideals, social priorities, and practical strategies. Once we prepare ourselves to consider the Untouchable on his own terms, after penetrating certain stereotypes, his arguments for alternative self-evaluation begin to surface. And as we do so, we learn that he displays a piercing seriousness about his social lot, a seriousness often marked by disarming integrity, insight, candor, and humor. We also come to know about the Untouchable's self-image, shaped both by long-standing Indian civilizational forces and by daily events.

The Untouchable for us will be a cultural construct under some circumstances and a concrete social group (the Chamars of Lucknow) under others. The general and the particular, the ultimate and the proximate, the symbolic and the empirical, and the shared and the unique, all will be indispensable for our view of the Indian Untouchable. The Untouchable's varied relationships with the Hindu system, whether of consensus or conflict, or conciliation or alienation, will be important for our study. Though diverse social conditions and regional cultural concerns characterize the contemporary Untouchable, we will converge on that urban, often educated, segment that influences others by its social thought as well as action. The rival counterpart often follows its lead in matters of cultural ideas, changing lifestyles, and political strategies. The educated, urban Untouchables, in turn, try to face and fathom the diverse legal, economic, and political forces that contemporary India and its government release.

We will be interested in a cultural analysis of the ideas and actions of the Lucknow Chamars, an urban Untouchable group, to see how they organize and express their ideology for self-identification and how this ideology is then

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related to some concrete social contexts and conditions. Although our exposition will help show interdependencies between cultural values, symbols, and practical social action, an overall emphasis will remain on explicating and understanding the symbolic ideas and strategies that the urban Untouchables at present pursue to cope with changing social circumstances. The Untouchable's ''symbolic,'' we must clearly recognize, penetrates as well as binds and transcends ''social'' and ''personal'' realities. This enunciation stands at the center of the Untouchable's cultural ideas, perspectives, and expressions. How do the deprived symbolize? How do the symbols work when questions of privilege and justice are concerned? An explication of such questions may be helped by previous studies but they need to be studied and understood on their own terms to derive larger imports. (For references useful to symbolic analysis, see Whitehead 1927; Langer 1974; Geertz 1973; Schneider 1976:197–220.)

The urban Untouchable's symbolic formulations will inform us about certain deeper issues of the hierarchical caste society in India and its assumptions about equality, freedom, justice, and utopia (for a sociological discussion of these concepts, see Dahrendorf 1968; also compare Weber 1963: 95–117; Sigrist 1971: 240–56). We will let the competent Untouchables tell us their own interpretations and arguments regarding these issues, which will allow us to discover their internal sources of knowledge as well as doubt and disaffection. For example, if the classical Indian lawgiver Manu alienates them and Gandhi breeds ambivalence, Ambedkar enlightens as well as revitalizes them. Thus their own sense of moral placement will be as important to us as their perspectives about the dark past, the ambiguous present, and perhaps a better future.

The urban Untouchable that concerns us will often present himself as an active subject. Though obviously a part of the larger, Hindu-dominated social order, this Untouchable is seldom merely a passive, voiceless, and unchanging object of caste domination. He is a product of accelerating social change in democratic India; he strategically exploits the changing socioeconomic constraints as he now translates his past social deprivation into a political resource and seeks an immediate advantage from it.

In general, the urban Untouchable seeks compensatory equality today. He expects it from two sources – Indian spiritual idealism and Western-introduced democracy. This is also his way to challenge caste-ordained inequality in democratic India. Sociologically, an equalitarian ethic is proposed by the Indic ''cosmological'' order, and it is recurrently expressed via ideal, mythical, symbolic, and reformist formulations. For example, one quickly cites in this context the ideal polity of *Rāmarājya* (a condition free from want, deprivation, and dominance); the spiritual equalitarianism (for *ātamika samānatā* and *samadṛṣṭi*) of the Bhakti movement; and the recent liberal reform movements culminating in twentieth-century humanism (*mānavadharma*). Hence, as the Untouchable thinker engages himself in a serious debate with the Brahman, he illustrates a scholarly position of radical revision that is neither spurious nor

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unknown to the Indian tradition.[2] If it remains unconventional, it is no less real or less pressing for him.

Sociologically, the Untouchable thinker hopes that a weakening of the caste Hindu's privileges will automatically mean social gain for the Untouchables in general (Laski 1934). Whether it actually happens this way in India is another matter. But we will not underplay the role of diverse social developments in independent India. Most important, such developments have encouraged the Untouchable to push to acquire a social "voice" for improved self-image and social position. He has been engaged in a cognitive remapping of his cherished values within the immediate surroundings; he is articulating a positive moral (and spiritual) ideology from within the Indian civilization. In doing so, the Untouchable confirms some expected criteria of the sociology of the "nonprivileged."[3]

If such efforts make it necessary that we consider in detail the work of some Untouchable thinkers, even those who claim an Aristotelian *vita contemplativa*, we will do so. We will discuss such a thinker's position in relation to other reformers, protesters, and politicians, examining how he may be revitalizing some symbolic complexes and weeding out others. He might also give some classical complexes (e.g., *ātamika samānatā* and *saṁyama*) new political meanings, to be used as springboards for social assertion and protest. We will examine the effective feedback relationships among these symbolic complexes to show how the Untouchable now revitalizes his thought, speech, and action with help from those cognitive processes that the changing society yields.

We will develop our discussion in terms of three sociocultural processes critical to the Untouchable's contemporary social condition and its characterization. The first process concerns his "articulation" of the contemporary social situation in terms relevant to his immediate needs as well as larger aspirations. Such an expression, his "voice," gives us an idea of the deeper changes in his values, symbols, expectations, and actions. Since his voice concerns both ultimate and proximate goals, it is encountered in a discursive ideological text as well as in the ordinary Chamar's struggle to provide for his family. The second process, called "evaluation," represents the Untouchable's efforts to compare and weigh his present-day social odds as well as advantages. This process works as he recognizes social options, establishes practical priorities among them, develops a strategy for concrete action, and assesses the result (see also n. 7, chap. 4). "Accountability," the third process, concerns the Untouchable's image of self and society as he renders others accountable to himself (and his group), and himself to the society as a whole. We detect that he is developing a sense of relative accountability. He weighs the caste Hindu's rights and responsibilities in relation to his own; he does so by context, as well as on the whole, and seeks adjustments in them until they are congruent with his notions of a fair society. He aims to acquire a genuinely positive social accountability for himself, combating deeply entrenched negative

roots. However, he recognizes that such a change demands a realignment of certain major civilizational values; merely superficial change will not do (see n. 6, chap. 4, and also chap. 9).

Previous Studies

When we examine the treatment accorded to the Untouchable within the scholarly traditions of the Indian subcontinent, two types of studies become readily evident: those in which ''others'' have considered him in the ancient, medieval, and recent past, and those in which he has had something to say about himself – mythical, intellectual, and descriptive. Obviously, the first type predominates. Within India, Hindu thinkers, reformers, and writers have variously ''explained'' the Untouchables' social lot. Ideologically they bring into focus the classical Brahman – Untouchable polarity, yielding version after version of moral justification for why the lowest, exterior position was assigned to the Untouchable. The *Laws of Manu* continues to be a locus classicus – scholarly, mythical, and divine (for the Hindu) – within such discussions. What it ordains on the issue continues to influence ordinary caste Hindus. If a modern Hindu criticizes Manu it is only half-heartedly. It is no wonder therefore that twentieth-century Untouchable reformers attack (and sometimes even burn) this book in protest (see Zelliott 1972: 69–95). Manu also may have been variously attacked by some recent Hindu social reformers but seldom totally repudiated in social practice. From the Untouchable's position, therefore, all the powerful waves of social reform, radicalism, and revolt must finally crash within the same old Manu-ordained parameters.

   This study will explore only the contemporary phase of this age-old issue. Although a firm factual ground may be available to us to investigate the issue only during this century (and perhaps in even the last few decades of the previous one), there is, however, little or nothing known with certainty about any of the Untouchable's efforts to protest and reform the situation. For over a century, based often on indirect evidence, one could surmise that the Indian Untouchable has been slowly but surely responding to the British-introduced ''seeds'' of present-day administration, economy, law, and politics. Such developments seem to have received greater attention from those regional and local Untouchable reformers who were literate, and had inherited the broad-minded devotional culture of the medieval reformist heroes, saints, and ascetics.[4]

   In the contemporary period, the Untouchables are increasingly studied by ''others,'' whether the results are poems, novels, research studies, or bureaucratic government reports and statistics. Also, the Untouchables now increasingly write about themselves to raise a polemic, a political protest, or a philosophical and ideological argument. However, the two types of studies seldom communicate with each other, and they tend to pursue their own separate

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analyses.[5] A comprehensive and reliable bibliography usually reveals best the distinct themes and emphases of previous studies. Fortunately, a readily useful bibliographic survey is available to us (see Zelliott 1972: 431–86; see also Rao 1978: 233–43). Several entries in Zelliott's bibliography have repeatedly informed the formulation and conduct of this discussion.[6]

Because this study's aim, emphasis, scope, and conduct will engage us on their own terms, the purpose of an occasional citation of this background literature is mainly to recognize and reiterate some necessary analytic distinctions and to institute suitable precautions. For example, the previous anthropological literature on the Untouchable cautions us to avoid (1) a hasty imposition of any a priori doctrinaire or theoretical schemes of explanation, (2) an uncritical and unsubstantiated acceptance of any exaggerated or extreme social formulation, and (3) a simplistic dichotomy of either practical or ideological constraints in everyday life. Most important, the Untouchable's indigenous thoughts and actions, we are reminded, need careful explication in their own context, and in that of a specific social circumstance.

This requires us to approach a specific group like the Lucknow Chamars from up close, allowing them to surface as fully and uninhibitedly as their own cultural ideas and social experiences will permit. We will study them for what they symbolically express and what they do as a part of their daily social life. Both of these frames of reference will be helpful to us. If the social frame views the Lucknow Chamars as belonging to a specific household (*ghara*) of a particular lane (*galī*) located in a particular neighborhood (*mohallā*), the symbolic frame offers schemes of shared ideas, images, and representations. The Chamar ideologist thus easily puts on the face of the Indian Untouchable and begins to speak on behalf of the whole. He then draws upon a whole range of conceptions, experiences, and personages representing different symbolic aspects of the Indian Untouchable.

The Lucknow Chamar will similarly also present to us two more faces at once, one old and the other new, one frozen within the massively institutionalized caste order and the other congealing with encouragement from Indian democracy. The two faces of the Chamar currently interact as symbolizations of the past and the present, and of a possibly hopeful future. A preindependence description of the Indian Untouchable, even fictional (e.g., Anand's *Untouchable*) could be helpful as a comparative background for deciphering the cultural significance of what one encounters today within such a group as the Lucknow Chamars.

These urban Chamars will offer us several deftly interwoven portraits of educated as well as uneducated leaders, heads of households, prominent residents, and ordinary members of the community. The young and the old, the successful and the unsuccessful, the achievers and the failures, and the happy and the oppressed all will illustrate a range of ideas and experiences. Their language will at once express their social hope and frustrations mostly in relation

to the pre-Ambedkar and post-Ambedkar developments (for a comparable sketch, see Miller and Kale 1972: 317–59). Not unlike "the man inside," the burden of Beatrice Miller's (1972: 361–73) sensitive account of the Mahars, the Lucknow Chamars will be found matching values, ideals, expectations, and emotional responses "*to communicate with other members of their society*" (p. 361; Miller's emphasis).

One of our main purposes in approaching such data will be to discover the Untouchable's general "lexicon of signification." We will recognize how the Lucknow Chamars put distance between themselves and the caste Hindu by distinguishing between what we shall call the "Indic" and the "Hindu," that is, those civilizational configurations of values of which the Hindu is only a part. Thus the Chamars may identify themselves as ideologically different from the Hindu on the one hand, and yet control the resulting cultural divergence with centripetal civilizational forces, on the other. This property is rooted in certain Indic philosophical perspectives; it also resonates with subtleties captured within *différance* (a concept of Jacques Derrida, the French linguistic philosopher; see, for example, this study's Conclusion; see also Culler 1979: 154–80).

The Untouchable thinker often presents his case this way: He considers his group to be simply neither Hindu nor outside Indian civilization; neither merely consensual nor entirely alienated. He claims a positive and different civilizational place for his kind essentially on the same lines as did the Buddhists and the Jains. Recently he has illustrated the two positions available to him; first as neo-Buddhists (an Ambedkar-led option), and the second as a distinct community of the *ādi*-Hindus (i.e., the original Hindus of the subcontinent). Such points about self and society are critical for the Untouchable's ideological position.

Assumptions and stipulations

We will devote the first part of this study to a discussion of the Untouchable's cultural ideology, concentrating on its cultural principles and constitution. We will analyze the version of this ideology that the Untouchables themselves offer, keeping its internal cultural symbols intact and its logical relations undisturbed. Our method will consist of a series of steps: It will distinguish a fundamental axis of cultural categories, illustrate its alternative orders of arrangement and significance, draw upon the explicit and implicit messages that these orders release, and culminate in ideological reformulations and practical strategies.

We will further assume that the Untouchable is innately as capable of responding to his social conditions as any caste Hindu. Both are now subject to intensifying secular social forces and both learn by trial and error. There is no evidence to support the premise that the Untouchables, even when given the chance, cannot learn from or respond to changing social aspirations and

conditions as quickly as the caste Hindus can. After over thirty-five years of
political, economic, and civil involvement in independent India, the
Untouchables show repeated signs of conscious social estimation and decision
making. This social acquisition, often unconscious and informal, is neither
merely incidental nor limited to a select few (e.g., see the cases cited in chaps.
7, 8, and 9). Secular democratic forces are challenging their passive approach to
social deprivation. Newly acquired social ideas and actions are being discussed.
Many urban Untouchables now challenge and attack their social disadvantage,
rather than unquestioningly accepting it as a social given.

However, recognition of this widely shared awareness does not demand that
we disregard the specific empirical differences among the Untouchables. Thus,
though it is necessary to recognize that the Indian Untouchable, despite his
social deprivation, carries the same basic *potential* for rational action as a caste
Hindu, not every Untouchable is a philosopher, a saint, or an adroit politician.
Although only a few can be any of these at any one time or place, most others are
ordinary (yet reasoning) people. Finally, those who are leaders still show
divergence among themselves in their stated aims and concrete actions, and in
promise and performance.

This social heterogeneity means that the Untouchable must be examined from
several interrelated vantage points – from symbolic and empirical, and from
near and afar, from above and below, and from side to side. Such steps are
necessary to complete the Untouchable's picture from those directions the
predominant caste-Hindu system hides or obscures. Such a stipulation might
help reveal the overshadowed, correct the distorted, and restore the misplaced
structures of significant relations. Thus anthropological procedures, when
studying the Untouchable's case, have to examine not only the dominant
social viewpoint, but also the countervailing, the spontaneous, and the
resurgent. They must be alert to the subtle and subliminal biases usually
embedded in the dominant Hindu system.

Such a perspective demands, most of all, that we examine carefully the
indigenous schemes of cultural categorization, construction, and interpreta-
tion. The indigenous categories should be considered for their multiple mean-
ings and interrelationships, whether classical, popular, or conjectural. (For
example, see n. 1 for a discussion of the term ''Untouchable.'') The
Untouchables' ideological schemes will be especially appropriate for such an
exercise, since their approach to asceticism and to the ascetic-Brahman
contrast posits different distinctions and helps reinterpret certain classical
cultural categories for wider sociological significance (e.g., see chaps. 3 and
4). Properly handled, these categories need not breed noncomparability and
obscurity. The categories a study converges upon most must also reflect the
conceptual focus of the study.[7]

Simultaneously, the Untouchable's categories and conceptions rarely ex-
hibit an unconditional and unequivocal opposition to the caste Hindu's. This

is obviously because the Untouchables ordinarily absorb so much of the Hindu, and are so dominated by the Hindu, that their recent politics of reform and emancipation remains ambivalent in thought as well as deeds. The nature of this ambivalence will be repeatedly evident here. But now it is not without a polarizing rhetoric and an increasing demand for separate but equal social status in relation to the caste Hindu.

For identifying the Untouchable's ideological categories, it is crucial that a distinction be maintained between "the Hindu" and the earlier "pre-Hindu" roots of Indian civilization. The pre-Hindu (i.e., the Buddhist, Jain, and other ancient ascetic traditions; for an overview, see Bhagat 1976) categories are indispensable for the Untouchable thinker. We will call this segment of the civilization "Indic," distinguishing it from the "Hindu" (i.e., the later *smrti* versions) and from the "Indian," which would embrace all major indigenous and foreign contributions to India's heterogeneous culture.

Finally, we urge caution in passing quick judgments on the Untouchable's present initiatives. The final outcome is still unpredictable; the current situation shows widening social gaps and rising conflict between the caste Hindus and the Untouchables. Thus though the caste order resists all structural change, it must now face unremitting social pressure from democratic forces. However slowly and reluctantly, it must strike compromises with the changing social reality. And as such leeways appear, the Untouchable discovers a ground from which to consolidate his positive self-definition. A positive cultural ideology and identity are always very precious gains for the socially deprived. The more pronounced the deprivation, the more socially sensitive, coveted, and contested are these gains generally.

The context and range of data

I have so far mostly employed the general type, the Indian Untouchable, to contextualize my formulations. I do so purposely to offer a generalizing picture that my data sustained and also that a review of Untouchable writings corroborated. However, now we can be empirically specific: The people under study in this book are almost exclusively the Chamars living in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, a state in northern India.[8] I have called them Lucknow Chamars. However, only three neighborhoods of the Lucknow Chamars were studied through intensive fieldwork, where each neighborhood followed a weakening traditional organization by *thoks* and *ṭāṭs*.[9]

A count of these traditional clusters was usually mentioned when asked, though the Chamars' lane- and *mohallā*-oriented social life was more important to them on an everyday basis. Identifiable further, and much more relevant to us, were the informally named *galī*s (lanes and bylanes) within a named *mohallā* (an informal urban "neighborhood"). Though seldom coextensive

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with any administrative city ward, a neighborhood had several lanes, named either for a prominent resident or on the basis of numerically dominant occupations (e.g., Ram Prasad *ki galī; Mehetron kī galī*). At the level of the lanes, the Lucknow Chamars usually offered several tightly knit clusters of houses within the city. A *thok*, in comparison, rarely forged a stronger residential bond, and its members usually showed declining traditional cooperation and interdependence. A *ghar-galī-mohallā* cluster nurtured their everyday social life, including daily problems, secular aspirations, and political activism.

The empirical data on which this study is based are drawn from three different Lucknow neighborhoods. One neighborhood was at the center of the "new city," virtually under the shadow of the state legislative assembly buildings, and the other two were in the "old city." One was located along the two sides of a 25-foot-wide bricklined open drain, and the other was on the western fringe of the old city, linked to villages of the area. These three neighborhoods reflected distinctly different cultural profiles, an aspect of central concern to this study. These Lucknow localities represented the cultural diversity of the contemporary Chamar. They also presented a reasonably wide-ranging and heterogeneous occupational picture of these people in independent India and exposed the social processes of their everyday struggle in the practical world.

Since these aspects will claim more of our attention than a plain enumeration of the ranked social relations and the details of the *jāti* praxis, the three urban localities, selected after a search during the summer of 1974, will yield ethnographic data on the changing Lucknow Chamar.[10]

Our attention was on the ordinary, as well as the active (or the "awakened") Chamars, whether an illiterate shoe-making "commoner," an educated thinker, a hero, a leader, or a militant. However, since only with considerable perseverance did I shed my own upper-caste blinders allowing the Chamars to present themselves uninhibitedly, this exercise was for me much slower and harder than I had expected. My learning increased as I was exposed repeatedly to self-effacing as well as radical Chamars.

In the "new-city" neighborhood lived that Chamar who was often literate and who invariably sought employment in urban surroundings, whether in factories, labor gangs, small vending businesses, or government offices. With accessible schools and colleges, and with government subsidies and encouragement, this Chamar neighborhood was populated by, among others, a prestigious railway driver (earning in four figures every month), a high-ranking postal employee, a state assembly leader, a poet, a fully qualified physician (of Western medicine), a university-educated philosopher, an engineer, a draftsman, an architect, a photographer, a three-star hotel employee, a chef, a chauffeur, and a contractor. Members of thirty-five of the two hundred households in this neighborhood were found to have decidedly "prestigious" work, that is, employment that *both* Chamars and caste Hindus would consider a

"good placement." This proportion significantly increased when mechanics, car drivers, and small "businessmen" (i.e., shopkeepers, vendors, masons, and painters) were included. As it represents a "better-off" Chamar locality, this neighborhood will be called "Modernganj," a pseudonym but one that aptly reflects the overall cultural ethos.

The second neighborhood, spread along a major old-city drain, was bleak by comparison. It had more Buddhist householders, several reformers, and a visible group of radical ascetics. We will call it "Baudhabagh," because its prominent residents repeatedly longed for urgent reform along the views held by Ambedkar as a Buddhist. These people were also often those most visible and vocal. They were partly a legacy of a group of earlier reformers (Chamars and others, including a nonresident Buddhist monk) and political (including the Republican party) leaders, and were partly shaped by the need to express their acute social and economic discontent. The daily wage-earning laborer, the leather worker, and the vendor of small items dominated the neighborhood. They could not make the local municipal functionaries protect their (tin-covered or thatched) dwellings from the easily swollen open drain, which in the past had swept off houses with loss of life, health, and property. They complained that the local officials and politicians, even those from their own community, had turned their backs on them. Radical rhetoric and protest, often a safety valve against open militancy or violence, were therefore easily generated by the gathering discontent.

As this neighborhood represented a brink, it also graphically embodied the enormous strains and dilemmas of the deprived Chamar (see Chaps. 5–7). Wanting ever more but unable to change or move away from the "exploiting social order" (as they put it), these Chamars encapsulated the ethos of a dispirited neighborhood. The reforming, radical Chamar, whether a follower of Ambedkar or Ravidas, found here ample grist for his mill. Modernganj, being smugly content, had turned away from genuine change, according to this Chamar. The Baudhabagh radicals argued that they could "liberate" themselves only by discovering the true nature of caste-Hindu exploitation, and by combating it every day.

The third neighborhood, practically a hamlet, almost villagelike on the western outskirts of the city, was still different. It was, as we shall call it, "Karampura." The accomplishments of Modernganj and the Baudhabagh rhetoric of an inevitably radical reform faded before "the givens" (i.e., the karma of the Chamar) emphasized in this settlement. Gusts of the *shahrī havā* (urban "ethos") were intruding into several homes, however, as evidenced by handpumps, bicycles, electricity, radios, cameras, tape recorders, motorcycles, and even a scooter. The urban employed, about a dozen in seventy-five households, pulled Karampura toward the city. This group was also drawn toward the new, the "reformed," and the glamorous, whereas the rest, as field laborers, saw themselves as struggling within the given unfavorable social lot.