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among the Lucknow Chamars

R. S. Khare

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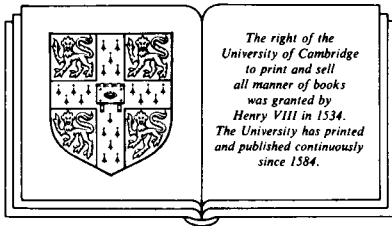
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The Untouchable as himself: ideology, identity, and pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars

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Tohī mohī, mohī tohī antar kaisā

Ravidas

[Between thou and me, me and thou
How can there be a difference?]

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Preface

To study the contemporary culture and condition of the Indian Untouchable is to learn something about the problems and perspectives of those who have been a classic example of social deprivation and oppression. It is to know about those experiences and perspectives of Indian society that only the Untouchable can provide. Although such information most often is swept aside by the dominant caste-Hindu viewpoint, the voice of the Untouchable is neither incoherent nor insignificant. It encourages reflection on certain fundamental issues of self and society. However, such a study requires a careful handling of the diverse Untouchable thoughts and experiences, including those localized and scattered. Unless pursued with care and suitable encouragement, the local knowledge tends to be easily disregarded. It hides behind diffidence. Genuine cogitation is also usually lost unless the local Untouchable thinkers are accorded full, unqualified attention, and without presumptions. As educated urban Untouchables often remarked in Lucknow, they are served better by genuine inquisitiveness and criticism rather than by unqualified pity. Because they think they represent suffering on behalf of a "frail humanity," they claim that they deserve more than mere condescension.

Facing each other, the Untouchable and the caste Hindu exemplify the characteristic relationships of the dominated and the dominant. As the dominant impose their ideas and will on the dominated, they offer a scheme of justification to maintain their position. The dominated, on the other hand, either accept such schemes or refute them in a way suitable to social circumstances. Although this has been the standard social script for the Untouchable, the everyday reality of independent India is altering it in important and unexpected ways. The clear traditional notions of dominance and privilege are becoming blurred as democratic law, politics, and economics release new forces in India. Urban centers usually show this effect more, where the weaknesses of the strong and the strengths of the weak are constantly uncovered in new ways. In this circumstance the dominant feel threatened and the weak emboldened for new reasons. The ground rules of social demarcation and distance are renegotiated, though haltingly and with appre-

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hension. The new phase raises the expectations of the lowest and the fears of the highest.

In this ethos, the Indian Untouchables, especially in the cities, begin to argue that they are much more than their abjectly low status in relation to the caste Hindu reflects. They dare to question the schemes of the Hindu social precedence. They insist that they are not merely “the signified”; they signify as well. Despite their long-standing dependence on the dominant Hindu social system, they offer evidence that they are alert and sensible about themselves and the larger society in which they must live. If they must face numerous concrete problems in everyday life, they seek survival with social dignity. They challenge tradition as they test the promises of Indian democracy. Thus, compared to the first decades of this century, much has changed for them – more than ever before perhaps; but compared to what they should have in a democratic society, these changes are hardly enough.

The issues of positive self-image, social fairness, and practical effectiveness engage the contemporary Untouchable in India. The changing politics of culture, especially in this century, shape his expectations and strategies. To survive in today’s political culture, therefore, the Untouchable must have not only a positive cultural ideology but also an ideological voice; he must have an effective cultural reasoning and not merely a tenacity for daily survival. The urban Untouchables studied here display such a tendency. Their resentment of traditional deprivation and dependence finds a sympathetic ally in democratic politics and its version of social justice.

A fundamentally positive ideology and assertive identity are therefore indispensable to the contemporary Untouchable but, as this study shows, they are much harder to achieve, except in ideas and values. Yet as certain civilizational categories provide genuine value formulations, the categories do not stop there; they also evade static value oppositions to raise a truly Indic – holistic and cosmological – *lexis* and *praxis*. As Derrida has said, “To deconstruct the opposition is first . . . to overthrow [*renverser*] the hierarchy” (quoted by Spivak in Derrida 1976: lxxvii). The construction and deconstruction of differences actually go hand in hand in indigenous thought and experience; each must not only culminate in the other but also transcend itself and the other. As I indicate in the text, a Derrida-style erasure, dispersal, and indeterminacy may help capture the presence and meaning of such “differences” within the Indian scheme. Obviously all such interpretations refer to a configuration of critical Indic notions (i.e., *dharma*, *karma*, *māyā*, and *saṃsāra*) that guides the recognition and passage of all distinctions and differences between the self and society.

The Indian Untouchable, though increasingly estranged from the caste Hindu, continues to share this civilizational framework. But it produces wrenching paradoxes for him in independent India. His radicalism begins to dissipate before it can take a clear direction; his ambivalence becomes

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confounding; his political assertion harbors self-doubts. Traditionally, this is how the Untouchable has sublated his own existence. Still, the present story does not stop there. Actually, the most important sociological developments appear when the Untouchable is found comprehending and responding to this deeply rooted framework in the context of this century's initiatives for social reform and democratic change. Throughout this new turbulent phase, the educated Untouchable wants to be sensible and intelligible and expects the caste Hindu to be unprepossessed and just in response.

Larger questions frame this picture of the Untouchable. For example, how do the severely deprived symbolize? To know how they use the given symbols is useful but not enough. We should know the changes as they occur in cognition and symbology under severe and prolonged deprivation. How do the deprived compose a tenable, coherent voice from within their dependent culture? How do the Untouchables forge viable relationships between "self-grounding," "self-assertion," and social odds? Moreover, how do they view "self-worth" with changing social reality and employ it to expand their practical reasoning to take up the matters of comparative social evaluation and accountability? There is a further question: How do the Untouchables transform social dependence into a strategic political resource, claiming compensatory social justice and inalienable self-worth not only from the caste Hindu but also from Indian society and humanity at large? But, then, how far can they proceed toward such objectives by controlled alienation (i.e., by following the civilizational values of moderation and tolerance)?

Such conceptual questions are at present embedded in a social paradox. As contemporary Untouchables stake claims for social improvement, their dissatisfactions mount alongside those of the caste Hindus. This is because the democratic premise of "free and fair play" clashes with the traditional concept of karma-dharma, of "cosmic fair play." Hence, whatever the Untouchables gain threatens the established notions of caste privilege and justice. More dilemmas must appear, however, when tradition and democracy bare their own intrinsic weaknesses in the heterogeneous social reality, leaving each disillusioned and insecure.

Such a situation escapes any simple theory, any clear social classification, and any essential structuralism. Yet all is not confusion. Ideas and actions interrelate in new ways, with new significance. In the Untouchables' case, speech, writing, and action instigate each other by the force of the abject social dependence. If their speech and writing often have originated in social crisis, and have been very poorly preserved, they also have helped germinate the idea of individual and group search for redress. The Untouchables' speech and writing do not only mean action; they are complete acts in themselves, especially for the reformer. Seeded with an innate sense of moral justice in the cosmos, such acts must yield the intended consequence, argues the reformer, "sooner or later." This cultural axiom of the Untouchable thinker energizes

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ordinary Untouchables in their daily struggles; it also offers a perspective for understanding social differences.

At present both Untouchables and caste Hindus concentrate on their social differences, each for separate reasons and in separate ways. Each repels the other for fervid politico-economic reasons. Yet both remain ambiguous and uncertain beyond a point; they depend on each other by civilizational constraints and human geography. They have yet to discover ways to move beyond these forces. Still, both have changed significantly in this century. Thus if there is the conceding Hindu on the one hand, there is also the Untouchable consolidating a *positive* self-grounding and social worth on the other. The latter must refute and reject the assigned social difference and engage in his own individuation. Issues of self-definition confront him more directly and urgently than perhaps any other Indian group. To reconstruct self for him means to realign social presence and responsibility from scratch. Sri Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, the Untouchable thinker, repeatedly underscored this point in his interviews and writings. For example, he concluded his account of Achchutananda by quoting a Buddhist sutra:

*Attā hī attāno nātho attā hī attāno gatī,
Tasmā samyattānam assam bhadrām vā vaṇijā.*

(You are your own master; you are your own destiny. Therefore keep yourself as restrained and ready as a trader keeps his beautiful horse.) Achchutananda called self-reliance (*ātmanirbhartā*) the climax of reformed ideology; he emphasized self-respect, self-assurance, and self-reliance as the bases for all political and economic improvements.

Though this study has considered several interrelated themes of Untouchable thought, many remain unexplored. Some obvious contributors to the contemporary ethos also remain unaccounted for, especially the women. During the course of this inquiry, their critical role was repeatedly evident. Some Chamar women, like men, had an acute awareness of, and clear opinions on, changing social circumstances. I met women who were interpreters, dissenters, skeptics, and imperturbable housewives. In most cases both men and women helped me understand what social dependence meant to them; what “loss of face” is for the “faceless”; and what self-reliance means when social conformity and consensus give way to endemic conflict. Obviously, of what one learns in the field only a small segment gets reported in print. However, my appreciation of those I studied (and of those who, in turn, studied my efforts) is abiding, for they helped me learn something both as an anthropologist and as an Indian.

My systematic work on the Lucknow Untouchables, especially the Chamar (traditionally a leatherworking north Indian caste), started in the summer of 1974. However, in 1972 I came in contact with Sri Jigyasu and a whole range

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of reform literature. I met some local Chamars in 1974 with the help of a young anthropologist, Mr. Nadim. Several initial encounters took place during this summer to help me formulate the stance of the present inquiry. If the Chamar youths reflected a social restlessness the reformers took me to their *mohallās* to listen to a wide range of opinions, and to meet diverse people. Such exposure was critical to enable me to reach Chamars of diverse backgrounds, whether a shoeshop owner, a politician, a teacher, or an ascetic, who made me aware of their immediate and ultimate concerns. They also freely stated their doubts, concerns, and apprehensions – sensibly insisting on anonymity – often by context and issue. They sought my assurances as I sought their understanding. Consequently, I have tried to honor their wishes for anonymity as carefully as I could.

My acknowledgments must start with these anonymous informants, friends, and commentators. This is a study done *with* them, not of them. Considered alongside the ordinary Chamar and the reform literature, they often lighted up the known issues in a new way and put me on the road to a civilizational perspective. The critical contributions of Jigyasu, Achchutananda, and local thinkers are evident throughout this study. To them my sense of gratitude is deepest. The late Sri Jigyasu was that rare intellectual bridge who ably connected the national with the local, the ancient with the contemporary, and the profound with the popular. He was a reformer, thinker, and critic all rolled into one. Next, I am most appreciative of all the local leaders and reformers of the three Lucknow neighborhoods; they were reasonable even when time treated them unkindly. Dr. Agney Lal of Lucknow University, the priest and the associated officers of the Ravidas temple, and certain political leaders also gave me the benefit of their advice and comments. The local libraries and archives helped me collect and verify empirical information on the Lucknow Chamar, giving me access to records at short notice.

Several institutions and individuals facilitated this research from my workplace. The American Institute of Indian Studies awarded me their senior fellowship to support my fieldwork among the Lucknow Chamar during 1979–80, and the American Philosophical Society gave me a grant-in-aid in the summer of 1976 to conduct interviews on religious and ritual aspects. My summer trips of 1974, 1976, 1978, and 1981 were partially supported by the Center for Advanced Studies, Summer Grants Committee, and the Center for South Asian Studies, all of the University of Virginia. A Sesquicentennial Award of the university supported my stay at Wolfson College, Oxford University, during the spring of 1980, when much of the preliminary writing was done. Among all these sources of help the consistent support of Dean W. D. Whitehead, also director of the Center for Advanced Studies, stood out. As an academic administrator Mr. Whitehead does best what matters most: He fosters faculty development with a truly catholic view of human knowledge.

Aspects of this study were discussed at the Institute of Social Anthropology,

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University of Oxford, and during colloquia and seminars on the Indian Untouchable and asceticism at the University of Virginia. Two anonymous reviewers with Cambridge University Press helped me improve this study in several ways, but without forcing their own views on the analysis. Susan Owen read the penultimate draft for clarity with her usual keen eye. As before, when all else failed, Sudha, Manjula, and Gopal came through as helpers, and much more. Always caring and near, they are my “little India” in America.

The book would defeat its sense if it were dedicated to any other idea than the intensional “us,” a notion integral to an Untouchable saint like Ravidas, and a conception critical for anthropology of social differences.

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Note on transliteration

Although almost all Sanskrit and Hindi words in the text are transliterated in a standard style, the book must also accommodate rural Avadhi, Hindustani, and Urdu, as well as Persian words currently used in everyday language in Lucknow. Consequently, transliteration is not uniform for all non-Sanskrit words. Some words are characterized by the context of usage (e.g., *sāhēb* and *sahib*), whereas others are distinguished for clarity (e.g., “Brāhman” for the caste member and “Brahman” for the Absolute). Common words such as Chamar and achchuta retain their anglicized form throughout the text. “Ravidas” rather than “Raidasa” is used to reflect Chamar reformers’ preference. Most of the vernacular terms are spelled phonetically (with a minimum of diacritical marks). Further, most of the Hindi or Sanskrit proper names, and those words found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, are also spared transliteration. In this way the reading becomes less forbidding. To facilitate comprehension of the names of Untouchable authors and their works, I have supplied appropriate diacritical marks in Part A of the Bibliography.