



## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF UNTOUCHABILITY: INSIGHTS FROM INDIA AND JAPAN

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### Abstract:

*Untouchability is commonly perceived as a system of discrimination originating in India. It has long been regarded as a unique form of discrimination within India, deeply entrenched from ancient times with strong religious underpinnings that assign sanctions to individuals based on their birth into specific 'varnas' or 'jatis.' However, untouchability is not exclusive to India. Similar practices can be observed in Japan's historical treatment of 'eta' and 'hinin,' or in modern times, the discrimination faced by the Burakumin community. Moreover, instances of untouchability extend beyond India and Japan, with countries like Korea, Bangladesh, and Nepal also experiencing similar phenomena rooted in the notion of impurity based on ritual pollution. This article delves into the essential conditions defining untouchability as a social phenomenon, exploring its manifestations in both India and Japan.*

**Keywords:** Untouchability, India, Japan, Defilement, Segregation, Comparative Analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar outlined certain essential conditions necessary for defining untouchability by studying the social constructs of primitive societies. In doing so, he identified two fundamental conditions that underpin the concept of untouchability. It is noteworthy that what originated as a formative social structure in primitive society has persisted from antiquity to the modern era as a deeply entrenched social phenomenon,

transmitted through generations as a cultural ethos. The essential conditions for untouchability are: (1) **Defilement:** The concept of ritual pollution, impurity, and contamination. (2) **Segregation:** The isolation of a class of people as a safeguard against defilement.

#### **Defilement: Concept of Ritual Pollution, Impurity, Contamination: India**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the chapter “untouchability among non-Hindus” starts his investigation by asking certain

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preliminary questions: are the Hindus the only people in the world who observe untouchability? If untouchability is observed by non-Hindus also, how does it compare with the untouchability practiced by non-Hindus?

Ambedkar believes it is imperative to know the unique features of untouchability to understand the position of untouchables and study their origins. He does so by first studying what untouchability was to primitive and ancient societies by examining their social life and making a cross cultural comparative study of untouchability.

Drawing inference from his studies Ambedkar claims that Primitive society did not only believe in the notion of defilement but also the belief in that had given rise to a live system of well-defined body of rites and rituals.

Primitive Man believed that defilement was caused by

1. the occurrences of certain events;
2. contact with certain things; and
3. Contact with certain persons.

Primitive Man also believed in the transmission of evil from one person to another. To him the danger of such transmission was peculiarly acute at particular times such as the performance of natural functions, eating, drinking, etc. Among the events the occurrence of which was held by Primitive Man as certain to cause defilement included the following: Birth, Initiation, Puberty, Marriage,

Cohabitation, and Death<sup>1</sup>

**Birth:** Expectant mothers were regarded as impure and a source of defilement to others. The impurity of the mother extended to the child also. Initiation and puberty, marriage and cohabitation: are stages which mark the introduction of the male and the female to full sexual and social life. They were required to observe seclusion, a special diet, frequent ablutions, use of pigment for the body and bodily mutilation such as circumcision.

**Death:** In primitive societies, death was considered the most severe form of pollution. It extended not only to the corpse itself but also to the possessions of the deceased, which were viewed as contaminated."

The widespread custom of placing implements, weapons, etc., in the grave along with the corpse indicates that their use by others was regarded as dangerous and unlucky.

**Purificatory ceremonies:** The sprinkling of water and the sprinkling of blood by the person defiled were enough to make him pure. Among purificatory rites were included changing of clothes, cutting hair, nail, etc., sweat-bath, fire, fumigation, burning of incense and fanning with the bough of a tree. But Primitive Society had another method of getting rid of impurity. This was to transfer it to another person. It was transferred to someone who was

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<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar, B. R. (2015). The Untouchables: Who were they and Why They became Untouchables? P.250

already taboo.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal of defilement as expounded by Manu in Manu Smriti was real and not merely notional for apart from taboos Manu also forbids accepting food offered by the polluted person which could later be seen as established feature of untouchability.

**Segregation: Isolation of a class of people as a safeguard against defilement: India**

Ambedkar also says the rites and ceremonies connected with birth, death, marriage etc do not positively and unequivocally suggest that they were regarded as sources of pollution. But that pollution is one element among others is indicated by the fact that in every case there is segregation. There is segregation in birth, initiation, marriage, death and in dealing with the sacred and the strange.

“In birth the mother is segregated. At puberty and initiation there is segregation and seclusion for a period. In marriage, from the time of betrothal until the actual ceremony bride and bride-groom do not meet. In menstruation a woman is subjected to segregation.

Segregation according to Ambedkar is most noticeable in the case of death. There is not only isolation of the dead-body but there is also isolation of all relatives of the dead from the rest of the community. This segregation is evidenced by the growth of hair and nail and wearing of old clothes by the relatives of the dead which show that they are not served by the rest of the

<sup>2</sup> ibid

society such as the barber, washerman etc. the period of segregation and the range of segregation differ in the case of death but the fact of segregation is beyond dispute.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Dr. Ambedkar the striking features of untouchability of Hindu system which affected the 429 communities considered untouchables as compiled by the list prepared by the government of India in 1935 are:

***1. Isolation without specified reason:***

Dr. Ambedkar says, “The isolation prescribed by non- Hindu societies as a safeguard against defilement, if it is not rational, is at least understandable. It is for specified reasons such as birth, marriage, death etc but the isolation prescribed by Hindu society towards the untouchables is apparently for no cause.”<sup>4</sup>

***2. Defilement:***

“Defilement as observed by the Primitive society was of a temporary duration which arose during particular times such as the performance of natural functions, eating, drinking, etc. or a natural crisis in the life of the individual such as birth, death, menstruation, etc. After the period of defilement was over and after the purificatory ceremonies were performed the defilement vanished and the individual became pure and associable. But the impurity of the 50-60 million of the Untouchables of India, quite

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.253

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 266

unlike the impurity arising from birth, death, etc., is permanent.

The Hindus who touch them and become polluted thereby can become pure by undergoing purificatory ceremonies. But there is nothing which can make the Untouchables pure. They are born impure, they are impure while they live, they die the death of the impure, and they give birth to children who are born with the stigma of Untouchability affixed to them. It is a case of hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***3. Isolation of a class of people:***

Ambedkar says “non-Hindu societies which believed in defilement isolated the individuals affected or at the most those closely connected to them. But the untouchability among the Hindus involves the isolation of a class -a class which today numbers about 50 to 60 million people.”<sup>6</sup>[At present the Scheduled Caste or the Dalits (used synonymously for untouchables of the past) population is 16.6% that is nearly 20.14 crore.]<sup>7</sup>

### ***4. Segregation:***

“Non-Hindu societies only isolated the affected individuals. They did not segregate them in separate quarters. The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the Untouchables and will not allow the Untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters. This is a fundamental

feature of Untouchability as it is practiced by the Hindus. It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage.

Every Hindu village has a Ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto.”<sup>8</sup>

Ambedkar after establishing the concept of pollution in different cultures of the world through the survey of notions of impurity goes on to say that Hindus were no different from the rest of the world or primitive and ancient people and their beliefs of ritual impurity. However, what sets the Hindus apart from the rest of the world is the hereditary untouchability of certain communities.

#### **Concept of defilement, impurity, contamination: Japan**

No mention of Japan’s untouchability has been made by Dr. Ambedkar in his comparative studies on notion of pollution in primitive societies as seen in his comparative survey of different cultures of the world ranging from Todas of India to Polynesians, from Uganda to Malayan peninsula, from Bathonga, Dieri tribes of south Africa to unnamed tribals of Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, from Egyptians to ancient Greeks and Romans were covered. This could imply that he was simply unaware of the problem of untouchability in Japan either due to lack

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup> Census Report-2011

<sup>8</sup> ibid

of scholarship on the topic by indigenous scholars of Japan or due to the secluded and secret and silent nature of Japan not much was known to the western scholarship about it thus disseminating of knowledge did not take place or was lost in translation.

It is the purpose of this article to make cross-cultural comparison of untouchability and its essential features in Japan from Dr. Ambedkar's perspective as seen in the following events: Birth, Initiation, Puberty, Marriage, Cohabitation, and Death

According to John Price, in his book "A History of the Outcaste: Untouchability in Japan," early native religious beliefs of Japan emphasized ritual pollution (kegare), avoidance (imi), and offerings for propitiation (harai) in association with blood and death.<sup>9</sup>

**Birth:** the ritual impurity caused by it could be overcome by separating pregnant women from the household in parturition huts as seen in the Indian counterpart (Gudlu). Those associated with childbirth were considered of very low station. One name sometimes given to outcastes was sanjo-nomono, "people of sanjo," believed to refer either to nomads who occupied abandoned parturition huts or to the special helpers at childbirth, whose occupation was considered unclean.

**Puberty:** Child birth, menstruation, diseases, wounds, dead bodies, and to some extent even simple physical dirtiness

from soil or sweat were defiling, and those associated with them professionally, such as burial attendants for the elite, were considered of very low station.

**Initiation and marriage and cohabitation:** The newlyweds were made to live in nuptial huts.

**Death:** There is evidence that in pre-Nara times the common people would move away from their homes when there was a death in the family, and a new site would be selected for a capital at the death of a chief or an emperor. The Burakumin or untouchables of Japan were historically ostracized by surrounding villages and townships due to a dominant social perception that they were polluted because they engaged in occupations linked with death, such as tanning and burial.

**Purificatory ceremonies:** The ritual impurity that was inevitable in every station of life could be overcome by exorcism and cleansing ceremonies, by separating pregnant women from the household in parturition huts, and by having newlyweds live in nuptial huts. The Shinto concept of uncleanness as the greatest tsumi (things displeasing to the gods) contributed to the development of the Eta.<sup>10</sup>

## DEFILEMENT

There is some evidence that untouchability based on concepts of defilement occurred indigenously elsewhere in Asia, not only in India.

<sup>9</sup> Price, J. p.17

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.17

Nevertheless, Indian culture has had considerable influence on the continued presence of such phenomena throughout Asia, with the influence of Hindu caste on neighbouring peoples and the later spread of Buddhism and its proscriptions on the taking of life and transmission of religious concepts of Untouchability. Religious sanctions condemning groups with polluting occupations were reinforced historically by legal codification in several Asiatic cultures. The Irony being Buddhism which is often thought of as an emancipating ground for Untouchables of India helped further strengthen already existing discrimination in Japan and gave it a religious legitimacy making it hereditary and rigid.

Isolation without a justifiable cause or specified reason: "For over a thousand years it has been popularly held that certain low caste peoples are physically inferior to "ordinary" Japanese. Originally, this inferiority was attributed to the practice of defiling trades and the association with blood and death. By long association with supernatural or ritual impurities the very nature of a man was believed to change. This adverse change not only carried over to a man's descendants but was in a sense communicable. The simple presence of an outcaste or "untouchable" was slightly defiling.

Isolation of a class of people: In the Tokugawa period the outcastes were usually identifiable, at least within their local areas, by their residential

communities, occupations, kinship ties, and often by such additional features as forms of dress, a patch of leather sewn on their kimono, hair tied together by straw, bare footedness, or deferential behaviour. The dogma of ritually defiling trades was still a strong undercurrent, but local variations required additional explanations; whole outcaste communities had not practiced the defiling trades for centuries. Belief in outcaste physical deviance came to involve such things as meat in the diet, particular diseases, extreme inbreeding, and inherited abnormalities. One of the most prevalent theories in the last century for the supposed physical inferiority of outcastes is that they are derived from an inferior race or an animal-like ethnic group."

### SEGREGATION

"The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the Untouchables and will not allow the Untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters. This is a fundamental feature of Untouchability as it is practiced by the Hindus. It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a Ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> ibid



It is interesting to see how one of the unique features of untouchability i.e., segregation of communities to separate settlements had its counter-part in Japan also: the very term Burakumin means people of the hamlet (buraku-meaning-hamlet, min-people). Buraku is short for Tokushu Buraku (special hamlet), referring to the communities in which Buraku people resided. The idea of using the term “Tokushu Buraku” was to negatively distinguish former outcaste communities from other areas.”<sup>12</sup>

John Price while making a comparative study of India, Tibet, Korea and Japan in his work “a history of outcaste: untouchability in Japan” heavily relying on Herbert Passin’s “untouchability in the far east” opines that “In each culture the untouchables were seen as inferior, and as so polluted that their very presence is a danger to normal people. Marriage, eating together, and social visiting between untouchables and members of normal society were disdained. In each culture they were rigidly isolated in ghettos, often actually outside the regular communities, with segregated cemeteries. In each culture evidences of luxury on the part of outcastes, such as expensive clothes, were illegal or severely frowned upon. This segregation from normal society was balanced by autonomy and solidarity within outcaste communities.”<sup>13</sup>

“Things like occupation or a specific

location played a significant part in the discrimination against the Burakumin during ancient times. It has been argued by a number of scholars that the initial source of discrimination towards the Burakumin arose by handling corpses, slaughtering animals or practicing any kind of occupation that had to do with death or was considered unclean. That often meant that because of the uncleanliness, people of that group were not allowed to step inside the actual village and therefore had to seclude themselves several miles away. The act of killing, the notion of bleeding or even giving birth to a child were viewed as pollution by religions such as Shinto and Buddhism and any contact with a person who engaged in such acts, would pollute the community in which they resided in.”<sup>14</sup>

Untouchability as a phenomenon proscribes a section of people by social sanctions in marriage and inter-dining thereby propagating and ensuring caste endogamy. Like the law books of India proscribing human rights to certain sections of people to be eternally doomed as outcastes, Japanese outcastes were proscribed to wear certain clothes and prohibited from wearing certain clothes and marrying outside their community and live in certain ghettos and ascribed occupation from birth by law during the

<sup>12</sup> What is Buraku Discrimination? (2005).

<sup>13</sup> Price, J, p.8.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

Tokugawa era (1600-1868).<sup>15</sup>

It is not widely known that Japan practiced discrimination by segregating a community of people in ghettos by expounding concept of defilement and ritual impurity. By making the cross-cultural comparison between India and Japan on the basis of theory put forth by Dr. Ambedkar we do see that there are more similarities than stereotypical assumptions based on familiar notions of untouchability.

It may be argued that Japan and India did not experience the same caste structure but it is undeniable that they did experience a similar social phenomenon where a class of people outside the four-fold division of caste were treated with utmost disdain and were treated as Untouchables.

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