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## Is There Still Untouchability in India?

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# Is There Still Untouchability in India?

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Untouchability has always been a key problem of Indian anthropology; but like many other issues, it has been treated as an abstract concept that existed outside time (Thomas 1998). The first theoreticians of caste had no first-hand knowledge of Untouchables, and tended to base their theories on sacred Hindu texts that had little to do with contemporary life. They stressed the integration of Untouchables into Indian society. Later on, the first village studies concentrated on multi-caste settlements and approached the Untouchables' reality in the presence of high-caste villagers. They were again biased towards a harmonious view of the problem. Srinivas himself was honest enough to recognize that his knowledge of the Untouchables was on the whole unsatisfactory: "Though I knew several Muslims and Harijans well, I did not know these two sections of village society as intimately as I wanted to. I would have obtained a new angle on the village if I had spent more time in their areas" (1976: 49). Those first ethnographers largely confirmed the views of the theoreticians of castes and Sanskritists, who emphasized the rather harmonious character of village society and the perfect integration of Untouchables into the social organization.

Then came a new generation of scholars, who studied the Untouchables for themselves. In a famous study, Moffatt (1979) made an important – though largely unnoticed – point: he notices that these scholars were on the whole quite sympathetic to the Untouchables, and wished to emphasize the distance between the latter and the rest of society. Psychologically, this is quite understandable. Researchers wish to show that their study has contributed something new, and, in this particular case, they set up what Moffatt calls "models of separation," in other words models that implied a great distance between Untouchables and the rest of society. There was thus a tendency to foreground the persistence of discrimination.

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This was particularly true of studies led by Westerners, since Indian anthropologists were much more preoccupied with social change and the way untouchability was – slowly but surely – disappearing. Unfortunately, the numerous studies entitled *Social Change in India* did not always match what one could expect from modern anthropological research, and they tended to be neglected in a debate that, in the West, remained largely dominated by structuralist considerations, caring little about social change. Yet, those studies made some important points: they assumed firstly that Indian society was changing, and secondly, in a very post-Independence fashion, that untouchability had to disappear sooner or later.

As I said, the problem of those studies was that they often relied upon inadequate evidence, very often tables compiled from a simple, even a simplistic, questionnaire. That is perhaps one of the reasons that explain their lack of impact. Yet, their assumptions were right, as they were concerned with a changing reality. Having devoted a great deal of my time to the study of Untouchables, I now think it is time to stop considering things as if caste and untouchability were unchanging institutions. For instance, it seems pretty obvious to me that social realities are no longer what they were (or what they were supposed to have been): high castes have changed, Untouchables have changed, the society at large has changed and castes, in particular, have also changed. I would go further, and claim that, fifty years after Independence, Indian Untouchables have come a long way and made remarkable progress. True enough, the vast majority of them remain poor; but poverty is an economic, not a caste, condition. The problem of poverty in India cannot be reduced to caste, and one finds poor people basically in all caste groups: according to the various estimates, between 30 and 60 per cent of the Indian population live under the so-called “poverty line,” whereas Untouchables are only 15 per cent. In any case, the question of ritual pollution no longer plays a major role in maintaining them at the bottom of society. Finally they form less than ever a homogeneous social category: owing to the State’s protective measures, but also to their own dynamism and courage, many among them have climbed the social ladder. In other words, they cannot be depicted as if their condition was similar to what it probably was in the eighteenth century. In some cases, they have been able to take advantage of their traditional skills to work as municipal scavengers, leather factory workers, etc. In other words, they increasingly resemble the rest of society.

When they meet opposition today, it is perhaps more due to their social ascension than to their traditional status: their worst enemies may well be the castes that are structurally close to them, whereas the traditionally pure (higher) castes, such as the Brahmins, are no longer much concerned with their ascent up the social ladder and many of them may even be in favour of it, since they are not directly threatened by it.

#### PALLARS AND VALAIYARS OF ALANGKULAM

The village of Alangkulam where I conducted some research in the early 1990s is located in the Pasumpom Muthurama Linga District of Tamil Nadu. This is a quite

backward, dry and poor area of Tamil Nadu. The village is probably a recent settlement and was still in expansion at the time of my fieldwork. As a result, of its recent history, the village is an atypical sociological unit since it is not a “traditional” (?) multicaste village but the vast majority of its inhabitants belong to two castes only, both of which have a very low status. Even though the village is rural, agriculture is not the main activity of the villagers, and there is basically no family whose income depends solely on land. In many cases, however, land is used for secondary activities.

The two main castes of the village, the Pallars and the Valaiyars, put an important sociological question: actually, the former caste (the Pallars) is officially recorded as a Scheduled Caste that is to say they are recognized by the State as an untouchable caste. On the contrary, the Valaiyars are a caste whose ritual and economic status is very close to that of the Pallars; yet, the Valaiyars have not been classified as a Scheduled Caste, and, therefore, we could say that it is not an untouchable caste – or at least that it is not officially registered as such. We thus have a clear example of how official categories not only can shape social realities by determining the constitution of social groups but also the consciousness of the actors. Social categories are not neutral, and in this particular case, they have contributed to the transformation of fluid, ill-defined categories into closed groups, the frontiers of which become unbridgeable. To be untouchable or not has always been a relative matter, depending upon the context, the people and easily transformable: now it has been fixed by the Scheduled Caste category.

The government must have had more or less good reasons to classify Pallars among the Scheduled Castes and to leave the Valaiyars outside the category. The ritual status of both castes does not succeed in explaining such a choice. The traditional occupation of the Pallars is ill defined: they could be gravediggers and their name could derive from the word *pallam*, which means “hole.” However, most Pallars are before everything else agricultural labourers, and it seems to have been like that for a very long time. In the early twentieth century, Thurston already had defined them as such. Even if we accept a link between their caste and death, we should then notice that the Pallars do not remove dead bodies. On the other hand, Valaiyars are hunters; they mainly hunt small game and their name derives from a small net (*valai*), which they use to catch their prey. They are said to hunt and eat all types of inferior food such as rats or frogs. In other words, if we accept a definition of untouchability in purely ritual terms, the Valaiyars are by no means superior to the Pallars. Their caste name is derogatory and today they prefer to be called Muthuraja, Muppannar or even Amblakarrar.

This variation in names denotes a greater social heterogeneity of the Valaiyars, and perhaps a greater mobility of some of their sections. We can assume that the Valaiyars were allowed to own land long before the Pallars. The latter had to fulfil the slave tasks (*adimai tozhil*) whereas the Valaiyars were probably less dependent upon the high castes. Some of them, or at least some regional sections, had access to land. In the neighbouring village of Kalkuruchi, for instance, the Valaiyars, though not actually wealthy, form a kind of “dominant caste” as defined by Srinivas (1971: 10). Similarly, the only family of washermen who lives in the

village claims that they accept to wash the clothes of the Valaiyars but not that of the Pallars, at least in the context of traditional links (payment in kind). However, they mostly work for the inhabitants of the neighbouring town of Manamadurai where the washermen wash cloth for cash, and do not make any caste distinctions. Besides, it must be said that even within the village, the Valaiyar privilege does not mean much for the Valaiyars are not wealthy enough to take advantage of it, and mostly wash their clothes themselves. It must be noted that the Valaiyar myth of origin is typical of a very low caste and is also told by the Paraiyar untouchables:

Lord Iswaran was giving his blessing (*asservatham*) to all people and distributed sacred ashes (*thiruneeru*). The Koonars came up with a big pot and thus a lot of ashes fell into the pot. They were very blessed and that is why today many people among them are well off. Other people came with their hands and they were also blessed; today they are also well off. The Valaiyars were fool enough to come with a *valai* (net) and thus when Iswaran gave the ashes most of it fell on the ground. Only a few particles remained on the knots of the *valai* and the Valaiyars were little blessed.

We cannot speak here of a proper myth of origin as it considers the caste which comes in front of the divinity as already constituted. However, the myth also explains the difficulties of upward mobility encountered by the Valaiyars, and derives those from a kind of congenital stupidity. We could argue that this is the reproduction of a social stereotype current among the high castes to explain the inferiority of lower social sections. Nevertheless, what matters here, is that the Valaiyars are associated with the lowest castes, and tell this story to account for their low status. It is also typical that the Koonars, a caste of herders, are presented as a socially advanced group whereas they are not traditionally considered as a very high caste but have only recently undergone some kind of mobility.

On observing the social relations within the village, there is basically no analytical tool to distinguish the Valaiyars from the Pallars. A quick observation of daily life events would not reveal a single feature which would allow us to decide who is a Pallar or who is Valaiyar, when we ignore the identity of a man or a woman. A further enquiry might reveal some features, but they remain minor. For instance, we might notice that the Pallar owners of brick factories who employ Valaiyars workers would not use derogatory terms towards the latter. This example is of course very significant for it, first of all, shows that Pallars have gained some economic status and act as employers. It must also be added that, nowadays, the use of disrespectful language towards lower castes is becoming less common and less tolerated by the low castes. We will still find people using terms such as *poda* or *wada* but this is becoming less frequent today and might lead to problems.

As for the dress, the food, the religious practices or any other cultural items there is not a single element, which would allow us to distinguish a Valaiyar from a Pallar. I do not think that the sociological closeness between the two castes explains everything – and I would rather argue that in most respects, Pallars and

Valaiyars do not differ from other rural castes. I would now hesitate to speak of a real “culture of poverty” which would be specific to the sole caste at the very bottom of the social ladder. The cultural features, which are specific to them, are too few to allow us to speak of a culture or even a subculture. It is true that many cultural traits are not sanskritised but these are shared by most rural castes, whether high or low.

Pallars and Valaiyars from Alangkulam drink water from the same source, either a well or a hand pump. They eat together, go to each other’s houses and there is not kind of hierarchical relation that divides the members of both castes. Economically, the villagers are poor, but they are also dynamic and strive to improve their lot. Some of these bear fruits but in this respect we cannot point to a clear difference between both castes. Progress in education or in job mobility is more or less the same, and it is quite remarkable to note that the system of reservations does not play any significant role here as the measures of reservation are mostly turned towards public employment and university education. The villagers, on the contrary, are mostly employed in manual labour, which is by no means supported by the State. The only job that the Pallars could easily claim is that of the municipal sweeper but none of the villagers is actually employed as such, unlike people from the lower untouchable castes such as the Paraiyars and the Sakkiliyars.

The system of reservations, thus, hardly touches the Pallars of Alangkulam and their upward mobility is mostly due to their own efforts. The Valaiyars are recognized as a “backward class” but this category includes so many castes (including quite a few which are by no means “backward”, at least according to Indian standards) that they are socially too weak, to take advantage of any reservation benefits. This system of reservations, as we have seen, has had important social consequences. It has transformed reality by fixing the identities; it has certainly reinforced caste by ignoring class, and has weakened class-consciousness. Caste, and not class, is increasingly playing a role in the process of power and economic mobility. This fact is particularly striking when one considers the fact that about 15 men from the village work as coolies in a nearby industrial area. These coolies have formed an association, and every lorry, which enters the area, has to be loaded or unloaded by a member of the said association. The latter functions as a kind of trade union and includes members of several castes, including both Pallars and Valaiyars, without any kind of caste problems. We could therefore speak of some kind of class-consciousness among the coolies. The same thing is true of most industrial workers who belong to various labour organizations that have little to do with caste. At the same time, this process is somewhat counterbalanced by the emphasis on caste which is now put in by politics and the system of reservations. Besides, the collaboration between Pallar and Valaiyar workers does not prevent both castes from being quite separate in most other matters, and caste remains an extremely significant unit here.

This does not mean however that, in this context, caste has still much to do with purity and ritual pollution. It seems to me that the notion of relative purity is no longer very significant in the constitution of social relations. Of course, they

continue to explain the historical and ideological foundation of caste, but we must start by arguing that they have never been completely cut out from relations of power and wealth: in other words, the radical impurity which characterized social deprivation went always along with measures of submission and economic poverty which were as much part of the group's identity as their relative purity. A rich and powerful untouchable is no longer really an untouchable, and as soon as they have gained power or wealth, untouchables lose a great deal of their social stigmas. The opposite is not exactly similar: a high caste man who is very poor does not necessarily suffer from all kinds of discrimination which fell upon untouchables, especially so in the past. But in today's Alankulam, the discriminations based on ritual pollution are few and I fail to see a clear example of them. The fact that two Valaiyar families work as cooks, preparing feasts or weddings for people from all castes in the region, is ambiguous: we could think that Pallar would not find many patrons if they launched such a business; but at the same time, this case shows that a very low caste indeed is now accepted to prepare food for higher castes, even in semi-ritual circumstances. This is most probably a quite recent phenomenon that clearly bears witness to the weakening of the rules of ritual pollution.

The observation of social relations, thus, points to a serious weakening of the ritual foundations of caste. As stressed above, this does not mean that caste has lost all significance in the process. We could even argue that caste remains very significant and continues to guide many of the social relations within the village. In other words, caste continues to divide the population of the village but there is a significant change here: castes are less and less dependent upon each other and increasingly competing. Furthermore, caste membership is now very significant in the political and economic spheres. We could speak of a kind of ethnicisation of caste: due to their classification inside or outside the Scheduled Caste category, the Pallars and Valaiyars have now divergent, if not contradictory, interests. A new rivalry now divides the two groups since one of them can claim some legal advantages, which are forbidden to the others. The villagers, being poor and quite powerless, do not benefit much from positive discrimination but this does not prevent a kind of division between them. More specifically the significance of caste within the village prevents the class solidarity found among workers in their exchange relations from extending to village networks.

The *panchayat* elections were dominated by caste rivalry. O. Alagar, a Pallar man and candidate to the presidency for the Congress party was not supported by the Valaiyars who backed a candidate of their own caste from the neighbouring village. The campaign soon degenerated into some violent disputes. They remained minor, but this shows us how a problem easily takes a 'caste form.' Generally speaking, villagers prefer to gather with their own caste people and the religious ceremonies mostly unite people of a single caste. In other words, caste solidarity is stronger than village solidarity, and we can assume that this tendency was reinforced during the last decades. The rise of *dalit* consciousness and the increasing awareness, militancy and even aggressiveness of the Scheduled Castes members further widens the gap between both castes and increases the frustration

of Valaiyars who are both poor and unprotected. The fact that the Pallars are today as well off as the Valaiyars is resented by the latter as an injustice.

#### THE CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY

The case of Alangkulam leads us to some fresh reflections about untouchability. In order to do so, I will first recall a few general facts about untouchability in general.

There has been a strong tendency within the field of Indian studies to represent India as a timeless, fundamentally static and traditional society, in which there was no place for kings, merchants, social change, violence and economic development (Assayag 1997: 234). Social anthropologists, especially in the West, have been influential in building up this image of a civilization dominated by tradition and religion. By becoming an autonomous, academic discipline, social anthropology has cut itself from history and the historical explanation in order to concentrate, in the twentieth century, on the study of social systems (Layton 1997: 6). This separation has been a major source of difficulty, even of confusion; and this was particularly true in Indian anthropology. It led us to consider India as an immutable civilization, the essential features of which it was our task to discover.

Our propensity to conceive society as a system naturally led us to speak of caste in terms of "system," i.e. as a set of components with a strong coherence and well-established boundaries. The idea of a system also implies that the social order is imposed upon the individuals, who are seen as rather passive agents hardly existing outside their social framework. Caste was not only the major institution of Indian society; it was moreover all pervading, it permeated all types of relations within Indian society. In a rather typical way, Parry wrote, for instance, that in India the ideology of hierarchy encompassed every sphere of social life, and the relations between man and woman, senior and junior, men and gods, wife-givers and wife-takers were seen in terms of hierarchy and purity (Parry 1979: 6). Such a view led to the everlasting emphasis upon the difference between them and us, the unbridgeable gap between India and Western society. It is no wonder that the uncountable number of books on social change in India were mostly written by Indian scholars. The great majority of Western scholars were so very busy with debating theoretical issues that they failed to see that Indian society was flexible and undergoing drastic changes. To my knowledge, among the classical theories of caste, there is not a single one that attempts to adopt a diachronic perspective. As a theory is valid universally, this must also be true of the theory of caste. Therefore, everything went as if those theories represented some sort of pure pre-colonial system that persisted more or less unchanged to the present day. This is particularly striking since at the very time when those theories were being committed to print, not only was Indian society undergoing all sorts of changes but castes, in particular, were showing their extreme flexibility, and their capacity to adjust to changing conditions whenever the opportunity occurred. While caste was showing



itself remarkably adaptive, it was being described by scholars as fundamentally static.

As soon as it became possible, most of the lower castes fought tooth and nail to improve their status and their position within society. To take but one famous example, the first Census of the Indian population was the cue for endless petitions and demands from all sorts of castes that wished to improve their names or their status. This was soon followed by many low-caste movements as in, for example, the breast-cloth controversy, the creation of caste associations, the fusion of sub-castes, the numerous changes of caste names, the Sanskritisation process, religious conversions, economic development, etc. The lowest castes were not the most active ones in this first stage. They were extremely poor, dependent and living in a state of semi-slavery that did not allow them any room for manoeuvre. Yet, they too took advantage of the slightest possibility of becoming involved in a process of upward mobility. Two main avenues allowed them to improve their lots: some became domestic servants of European families, and others joined the police or the army. These possibilities were only open to specific individuals or families, but they encouraged the emergence of a tiny elite which, in some cases, then tried to organize the rest of the caste.

This was clearly the case with semi-untouchable castes such as the Izhavas and the Nadars of South India; but even at the very bottom of society there were also attempts to get organized. For Kerala, one can mention the name of Ayyankali, who fought on behalf of the Pulayas (Saradmoni 1980). Not all castes had leaders of this type, but a much more widespread phenomenon was the refusal to carry on fulfilling the traditional polluting duties. Little by little, Untouchable castes started refusing to remove dead cattle, to play drums at funerals, to clear away night soil, etc. At the same time, they also gave up some ancestral practices such as eating carrion. In other words, people soon started to rub off all the marks of the traditional pollution attached to them. However, in the places where they were still dependent, they did not always have the opportunity to do so, and the process was slower.

Meanwhile, the rural economy was undergoing a process of monetization that contributed to severing the traditional links between master and servants. Whenever a problem arose, the farmers refused to maintain their labourers and the hereditary links between their families were cut off (see Epstein 1973). Very often, this resulted in economic hardship for the labourer; but it also meant greater freedom. The political circumstances were also favourable to such a change: the formal abolition of slavery, the spreading of democratic egalitarian ideas within the Indian population, Christian ideology, and nationalist ideals also combined to give the Untouchables more independence, helped them to assert their rights and made them realize that their oppression was not natural. The religious legitimacy of untouchability was also called into question by social reformers, Gandhi being the most famous among them. Leaders and movements slowly developed.

It has become fashionable today to reject Gandhi's action in favour of Untouchables. Nevertheless, the *mahatma* had much more influence than is now claimed by some people. Among other things, he made untouchability a central

issue within the Congress Party, and all Indian nationalists were soon aware that the removal of untouchability was a condition for the constitution of a truly democratic society. The nationalists were well disposed towards the demands of Untouchables, and Untouchables were granted several kinds of advantages. It is quite remarkable to note that Dr. Ambedkar, who was not a member of Congress and even an enemy to it, was nevertheless elected, thanks to the Congress Party, as a member of the constituent assembly and became law minister in the first Nehru cabinet (Kamaji 1992: 103), all this in spite of severe electoral defeats that showed that the immense majority of Untouchables supported the Congress Party, and not his Republican Party. This open-mindedness of the Congress allowed Ambedkar to be as influential as he was in drafting the Constitution of Independent India, and he was, thus, able to secure the whole system of reservation in favour of the Untouchables. Even though untouchability persisted, it is undeniable that large sections of the middle classes were genuinely against caste discrimination; in the first decades after Independence, people said that caste had to go altogether.

All these elements combined to transform the struggle of Untouchables. This is what Parry called "the Koli dilemma." The first generation of assertive leaders were very keen to adopt the status symbols of the higher castes: they advocated vegetarianism, and the wearing of the sacred thread, and some went so far as to forbid their widows to remarry (a practice common among the high castes). Generally speaking, they fought on the grounds of ritual pollution, claiming that they did not deserve to be considered as ritually impure. The myths of origin of the untouchable castes expressed this same ambiguity by each claiming that the status of their own caste was undeservedly low; but at the same time they did not reject the basic idea of ritual pollution (see Deliège 1993). When the state started to grant advantages to those who were socially backward, the strategy of upward mobility had to be changed, and it became necessary to claim very loudly that one was deprived and poor. The younger generations cared less and less about older symbols and wanted to get jobs, loans, land, in one word, to improve their material condition.

At the same time, independent India has markedly weakened the practice of untouchability. From 1936 onwards, the year in which the temples of Travancore were thrown open to all castes, most temples became accessible to Untouchables. In independent India, the formal practice of untouchability was rendered illegal and punished by law. These formal, legal measures were not always applied, and they did not mean the sudden and total end of untouchability. Nevertheless, they had important consequences: Untouchables could go to school, they could go to the temple, they could take a bus and a train like any other citizen, they could enter a restaurant and ask for some food, they could dress properly, they could walk on the road, they could apply for jobs, etc. And they actually did all this. In other words, the younger generation less and less considered the formal practice of untouchability as the real issue. This is quite clear from some attitudes I was able to observe: while most people refused to do scavenging work within the villages, they were all keen on having a job as municipal scavenger; the fact that the latter is as polluting as the traditional duties (perhaps even more) was not relevant to them. A

salaried job with social security was their only preoccupation, and none of the municipal scavengers I met considered his job as ritually defiling. They can even be proud of it (Searle-Chatterjee 1980).

The stigma of untouchability had not disappeared altogether (and it still has not): in the rural areas, Untouchables may still be refused entrance into a temple; some are still insulted; some are still dependent; but on the whole there has been a considerable change, and indeed a tremendous improvement on the previous situation.

## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

In other words, as Parry (1970) or Mines (1984) pointed out, the question of ritual pollution soon ceased to be an essential issue. First of all, to a large extent, the whole ideology of pollution became less and less effective among higher castes: many of the Brahmins became Westernised, urbanised and were influenced by Western democratic ideas; they were less prone to invoke traditional religious ideas to account for social inequality and very few would still claim that the condition of Untouchables is due to their deeds in a previous life (Maloney 1975). At the economic level and in the initial phase, the Untouchables were not rivals to them and therefore did not constitute a threat to their position within society. This was very different from the case of middle and low non-untouchable castes, which were much more threatened by the upward mobility of the lower castes. It is thus no surprise to hear that the "atrocities" committed against Untouchables are increasingly conducted by those castes that fear competition from the Untouchables. As Mendelsohn and Vicziany have recently argued (1998: 58), many fights are not really caste conflicts but are linked to land control. Those who come into conflict with each other are usually newly rising peasant communities, including Untouchables that are sociologically very close to each other. In other words, people who commit these atrocities are much more concerned about the economic competition from lower castes than traditional questions of ritual purity. Besides, it must be said, that if one had to apply the traditional ritual criteria, these middle castes would not be much purer than the Untouchables: they mostly eat meat, worship the same deities as the very low castes, and live in very similar conditions. They would hardly claim to be the defenders of an orthodox ritual purity. Even in traditional circumstances, Good (1991: 14-15) noted that he had never seen anyone purifying himself after a physical contact with an Untouchable. Generally speaking, higher castes are no longer much concerned about questions of ritual pollution. Some conflicts may still be expressed in traditional ritual idioms; but this hides deeper economic and political realities. I would thus claim that the question of ritual pollution is no longer what people are ready to fight over.

The people among whom I worked were quite aware of this. They were mostly poor people, from backward areas. Yet, they were little concerned with the practice of untouchability. People would endlessly tell me that their main preoccupation was economic, and they kept telling me of such-and-such medical doctor who was

an Untouchable – and also well off – met no discrimination whatsoever. Again and again, I was told that untouchability was a problem of the past and that it was now almost completely forgotten. This was not always supported by the facts and I could soon discover some cases of discrimination. Yet, this was never the main preoccupation of the people. Their main problems, universally, were education and employment. They wanted to be educated and have a good, well-paid job. In other words, their main concern was about their material condition, their poverty.

I could observe many instances that showed that the question of ritual pollution was not fundamental. Untouchables took water from the same wells as the higher castes, members of the latter drank water given to them by Untouchables and went into their houses, and generally speaking most of the traditional instances of untouchability either had disappeared or were less and less observed. People did not suffer from this, but they viewed their plight solely in terms of economic and cultural deprivation. One could argue that their economic situation is largely the result of their traditional destitution at the bottom of Indian society, which is of course very true. Yet, there are many other castes that live in conditions that are very similar to those of the former Untouchable castes, and I argue that the gap between them is becoming narrower. The reservation policies in favour of the Scheduled Castes have certainly contributed to improving their lot.

## THE SCHEDULED CASTES

Today, untouchability is largely a problem of the past. As such it remains interesting to the sociologist or the historian, but it retains little real practical existence. The whole issue has been transformed by recent historical developments, and today's "Untouchables" are very different from their forefathers. To a large extent, they can no longer be considered as "untouchable" in the strict sense of the term.

The Scheduled Castes are a recent *avatar* of the former Untouchables. They are the outcome of the protective measures in favour of the lower classes. These measures have undoubtedly had some effects. First of all, they have contributed to creating a new category of people, to transforming a relative and open social category into an absolute and closed one. Whereas in the past the frontier between Untouchables and non-Untouchables was ill-defined and even fluid, the constitution of the "Scheduled Castes" category radically altered this; one is now either within or outside the Scheduled Castes. If you are within, you are entitled to protection from the State. If you are outside, you have to rely on yourself.

This has quite drastic consequences: what is, for instance, the difference between an agricultural labourer from a Scheduled Caste and another from a non-Scheduled Caste? Both earn similar wages and live in similar conditions. It may well be that the member of a Scheduled caste is insulted from time to time; but his life is not really affected by this. Besides, the other man may also be despised, even if no derogatory caste names are thrown at him. Furthermore, this man will be given fewer opportunities by the government to improve his lot or that of his

family. In other words, all other things being equal, it is better to be member of a Scheduled Caste. This kind of situation does not favour class solidarity: as I said above, caste clashes tend to involve castes that are structurally very close to each other. The Valaiyars of Alankulam village, which I have studied, are quite resentful towards the Pallars, who live in similar conditions but are members of the Scheduled Castes. The strategy of “divide and rule” that was once used by the British to strengthen their power has now been used to divide the most backward classes. It has not even succeeded in creating some sense of solidarity within the Scheduled Castes themselves: if one takes caste as “the” criterion for socio-economic assistance, then caste will remain a major issue.

The reservation policy has had some positive results, and has certainly contributed to create a small, but significant, elite among the Scheduled Castes. One could, of course, wonder about the social identity of the beneficiaries. However, we shall not deal here with the question of the “creamy layer.” True enough, the people among whom I lived bothered little about medical colleges or the Indian Administrative Service, and would certainly prefer some help to send their children to the primary school or to get a loan in order to buy a bullock cart. Most people, besides, had never received any help from the government. Yet, they kept making efforts to better their lives: they became masons, factory workers, brick makers, bullock cart drivers, etc., all this without any kind of help at all. The official policies are mainly oriented towards government jobs, and do not stimulate private initiatives.

Generally speaking, we may say that the reservation policy has had some impact on the constitution of an elite among the Scheduled Castes. Inasmuch as this was effective, it partly filled up the gap between the Untouchables and the other rural castes. This is only true from an economic point of view. While doing so, as we have seen above, the very categorization of the Untouchables as Scheduled Castes strengthened the differences between them and the rest of the population and, therefore, cut them off from the rest of society. This is quite paradoxical: while the economic gap had narrowed, the socio-political gap had widened. This is the outcome of fifty years of protective measures. As many former forms of discrimination disappeared, new problems emerged, such as resentment against the people who are considered to be overprotected by the government. In other words, while the system of reservations aimed at bridging the gap between two categories of the population, it has only partially succeeded in doing so and it has also created new forms of separation. A system that is based on the recognition of caste cannot lead to its suppression.

## DALITISM

It has become a well-known fact that some sort of discrimination has persisted within the most modern sectors of the economy, for instance in medical colleges or within the civil service. However, I would rather call this a new form of discrimination than a persistence of the former type, and as such it is more a consequence of the frustration that the protective measures have inevitably

provoked within the majority of the population than a traditional form of discrimination; in any case, it has little to do with ritual purity. On the Untouchables' side, this new type of conflict led to the formation of a class of intellectuals, who were mostly beneficiaries of the system of reservation. They started to adopt a much more radical position and called themselves *dalits*, "the oppressed," even though many of them could not be considered as oppressed, at least, if we compare them to the rest of the Indian population. Among the *dalits* who write to the newsletters, one finds doctors, engineers, editors, chairmen, commissioners, directors, professors... all titles that testify to the progress made by some people who can hardly be labelled "oppressed."

This emergence revealed another set of paradoxes: first, people started to become much more assertive and even aggressive at a time when the overall condition of Untouchables had improved or at least when the question of untouchability had had lost much of its significance. Secondly, those militants were by no means the worst victims of society. On the contrary, most of them were the beneficiaries of its system of reservation and, so to speak, constituted an elite. In spite of these facts, the *dalit* activists depict the condition of the Untouchables as if it had not changed for centuries. It is part of their strategy to claim that the condition of their brethren is worse than ever. They not only tend to minimise the importance of the economic problem but, on the contrary, to read the whole Indian reality in terms of caste and caste struggles. Sometimes they may adopt some kind of Marxist terminology; but again it is applied to castes or caste groups: Brahmins are the exploiters, *dalits* the exploited. Yet, this kind of Manichean dichotomy corresponds to nothing. Brahmins can by no means be equated to a homogeneous class group and secondly the *dalit* militants are mostly drawn from economically privileged social strata and, in purely socio-economic terms, could not be considered as exploited, nor even as underprivileged. That is probably why they prefer to speak in caste terms: caste identity prevails over everything else. If I am born in a low caste, that will be enough to be considered as oppressed whatever my income and my occupation. This is part of the tendency of democratic societies to encourage everyone to be a victim (Bruckner 1995). Furthermore, when we claim that a man firstly exists as member of a caste group, we thereby will eclipse other realities: if all members of a caste group are oppressed whatever their material condition, then real economic disabilities will somehow become secondary.

The *dalit* ideology does not seem to be oriented towards the annihilation of caste or poverty but towards the constitution of a society that recognizes their own caste groups and guarantees them some privileges. They reject the consensual view of society that was advocated by the leaders of the nationalist movement; on the contrary, they wish to be recognized as a caste and sometimes they are more caste-minded than the most orthodox Hindus. To them, the whole society is nothing but an amalgam of castes fighting against each other. As they claim to be oppressed, they can speak on behalf of the whole community and are extremely vocal.

Although most new groups use the label *dalit*, there are strong differences between them. Yet, they are mostly intellectuals and put forward a strategy of confrontation between themselves and the rest of society. They have adopted a new

type of discourse, advocate a dichotomistic us/them view, see society as made up of enemies, and do not hesitate to use abusive terms to refer to all those who do not support their views. This derives from their Manichean conception of society and it allows them to present themselves as the spokesmen of the Untouchables. The very claim that one should now use the term *dalit* instead of any other is a good illustration of their strategy. The vast majority of people had never heard of that word; and yet, they are now told that it is how they should call themselves. This terminology is not neutral, and tends to promote a more conscious, militant and aggressive view of society. In other words, this ideology is perhaps more a way to create differences than a reflection of current problems. The idea behind it is to maintain a deep gap between the Untouchables and the rest of the population in order to claim further protective measures and privileges. The recent attempts to promote a “*dalit* theology” or “*Dalit* Human Rights” exemplify this attempt to conceive the *dalits* as one people and one culture. They also rewrite history in a way that could be labelled “*dalitocentrism*”: the Untouchables are described as the first rulers and landowners of the country, who have been dislodged by foreign invasions. Or, they view themselves as true Buddhists who have been forcibly converted to Hinduism... Although, this is purely rhetorical, and even mythological, this kind of new history is repeated again and again.

## CONCLUSIONS

The *dalit* ideology is one of confrontation, if not of hatred. To what it will lead is still dubious: if it succeeds in spreading its influence to larger sections of the population, it might exacerbate violence. There is however a chance that it will die out as people are more concerned with bread-and-butter matters. The Untouchables know perfectly well that they belong to Indian society, that they have no culture of their own and that they share most of the values of the people among whom they live. Most of them know that untouchability is a problem of the past and that their future lies in a better integration within society. Meanwhile, the current militancy of a tiny elite is worrying, as it tries to influence vulnerable, poor, illiterate and sometimes frustrated people. What is, for instance, the meaning of being converted to Buddhism apart from trying to insult the Hindus?

The problems that people at the bottom of Indian society have now to face are not caste problems. Discrimination based on ritual pollution has perhaps not totally vanished but it is on the wane. On the contrary, the mechanisation of agriculture, for instance, is likely to lead to the unemployment of more and more agricultural labourers – whatever their castes. Of course, members of untouchable castes will be the first to suffer from this; but this is in spite of their caste. In other words, all agricultural labourers will be affected and some will have no affirmative action to protect them. The effect of the liberalisation of the economy on the lowest sections of the population is still a matter of debate; but again, it will not be linked to caste identity.

The fact remains that caste tends to play a growing role in contemporary India. However, this situation is perhaps less the continuity of tradition than a recent outcome linked to the post-Independence situation. In modern India, it is not relative purity that lies at the basis of caste struggles. Castes now fight because they have to compete for limited economic and political resources. This is also true of Untouchables, who may become a major force within Indian politics.

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